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"Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken": Ontological Insecurity in "Game of Thrones" and Other Fantastic Transmedial Storyworlds

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Thesis of
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts
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"UNBOWED, UNBENT, UNBROKEN": ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY IN *GAME OF THRONES* AND OTHER FANTASTIC TRANSMEDIAL STORYWORLDS

A Thesis

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Requirements for the Degree

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Introduction

The summer of 2019 saw one of the most significant televisual happenings of the decade: the premiere of the eighth and final season of HBO's *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*). The premiere episode of the season alone had 17.4 million views across all of HBO's viewing platforms, and 55 million pirated views in the 24 hours following its airing (Gartenberg). Unsurprisingly, the series finale outdid all the series' previous viewership records, with 19.3 million views (Pallotta). As such, the show has left its mark on the U.S.'s televisual landscape, although many fans considered its final season a more negative mark than they had hoped. This collective fan disappointment is evidenced by a fan-made petition titled "Remake Game of Thrones season 8 with competent writers," which drew over 1.8 million signatures and, at the time of writing, is still collecting them (D.).

As a fan of the series, I watched the show diligently, changing my work schedule so I could watch each episode premiere Sunday evenings, refusing to watch with friends for fear that they would speak too much and ruin the experience of first watching an episode, and conscientiously avoiding spoilers on the rare occasion that I hadn't watched an episode by the following Monday morning. It was, in fact, the only show I watched in real time during its run, as my preferred viewing method for most programs was typically binge-watching in bed. To test this theory, I went so far as to catch up on several seasons of each of the CW's Arrowverse one summer, watching every season available of *Arrow*, *The Flash*, *Legends of Tomorrow*, and *Supergirl* in chronological order with the intention of watching each of their upcoming seasons in real time, only to give up shortly after the premiere of each show's new season. As such, *GoT* was the only show of its era that held my attention enough to watch weekly, and few series have since inspired the same devotion.

The *GoT* finale had quite the fanfare surrounding it; indeed, the entire final season was heavily built up to in the two years preceding its premiere and following the previous season. Countless fan-generated theories circled the internet prior to the final season, with fans speculating what might occur based on previous seasons and George R. R. Martin's novels (on which the show is based). The series, however, had long since surpassed the narrative in Martin's published novels by the time season eight rolled around. As such, fan theories were based on Martin's previously published works, which were not yet narratively caught up with the show but had significantly more characters and storylines. Fans were thus able to discuss the seemingly endless possible turns the final season might take, waiting in anticipation as the clock set by show creators D.B. Weiss and David Benioff slowly wound down toward the final season's premiere.

From a production standpoint, HBO also significantly marketed the show's eighth season, from encouraging fan pilgrimages to partnering with Bud Light for a Superbowl LIII commercial (Ellis). Virtually all of the season's marketing revolved around the central theme: "For the Throne" (Beer). The network's strategy seems to have been effective, given the previously mentioned number of viewers who watched the season's first episode. The series' finale was, of course, similarly hyped throughout the season. The eighth season was the shortest of the series, spanning only six episodes when most previous seasons had ten. As such, marketing for both the finale episode and the two-hour documentary, *The Last Watch*, which aired the week after the finale, was constant. Rebecca Williams, author of *Post-Object Fandom: Television, Identity and Self-narrative*, discusses how common it is that show finales become "highly publicized media events" (80). HBO's marketing leading up to *GoT's* finale included an elaborate network of brand partnerships that went far beyond TV spots (think: sneakers,

whiskey, limited edition Oreos, etc.) and fan pilgrimages in the form of scavenger hunts (Ellis). This multimedia approach to marketing the show's final season exemplifies a version of the "complex mediated moments" (*Post-Object* 80) that television show finales can become, according to Williams, although it doesn't seem to have done much for the audience's reception of the finale (or the season as a whole).

Prior to the beginning of the season, I remember diligently planning out my Sunday evenings for six weeks straight to ensure I had the optimal viewing experience for each episode. It became a kind of ritual for my family to watch the previous week's episode that aired just before the new one each week, and we were absolutely quiet for the entirety of each new episode (save the occasional gasp or groan). Led by the marketing and spurred by my friends and family who were as invested as I was for each new episode, my viewing of the final season of *GoT* was an "event" every Sunday. Regardless of whether I enjoyed the turn of an episode or agreed with the narrative choices Weiss and Benioff made, I was on the edge of my seat every Sunday, waiting to see what would happen next. For a finale to be successful, Williams notes, it must be "carefully orchestrated" so both casual and hardcore viewers may be satisfied with the result and feel that "their investment in a series is worthwhile" (*Post-Object* 80). For various reasons, many *GoT* fans (myself included) felt unsatisfied by the final season of the series, and as such likely did not feel their "investment" in the show to be "worthwhile."

In *Post-Object Fandom*, Williams explores the effects of television finales on fans' "ontological security," the definition of which she adopts from sociologist Anthony Giddens. Giddens describes ontological security as "the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (qtd. in Georgiou 4). Williams examines the ways fans renegotiate their

fandom, their self-identity, and their self-narrative during disruptions in ontological security caused by the loss of a beloved fan object (i.e., the object of a fan's affection, such as a television show, musician, etc.). She describes "post-object fandom" as "fandom that continues after the cessation of the fan object itself" (*Post-Object* 28) and she explores the different ways fans engage in post-object fandom. Her focus throughout the text is on fans' ontological security in the wake of transitions and change brought about by the end of a series. In this text, Williams explores "how the television fans examined in the various case studies draw on the texts to perform identity work through points of identification..." and "[focuses] on considering how fans respond to threats that may occur as a result of the loss of favourite [sic] aspects of their fandom, or the loss of the object entirely" (*Post-Object* 21). In order to unpack how fans perform "identity work through points of identification," Williams uses Giddens's description of "pure relationships" and their "rewards" – that is, relationships which "[exist] solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver" with the rewards being "(*Post-Object* 1) the reflection of a desirable and appropriate self-identity and self-narrative" and "(2) a sense of ontological security or 'trust'" (*Post-Object* 20). Working from this definition of pure relationships, Williams argues that we can view "fan-object interactions" as "fan pure relationships" (*Post-Object* 20). In other words, as fans interact with (e.g., watch, discuss, etc.) the objects of their fandom, they are afforded both a sense of self-identity and/or self-narrative related to their fandom and the ontological security inherent when that fan object is continuously present in their lives (as with a long-running television show). Williams examines how fans then negotiate transitions that occur when the continuity of their fan object is disrupted in some way, and in turn their self-identity/narrative and ontological security are disrupted.

As a fan of *GoT* (and other fantasy and sci-fi storyworlds), I can relate to Williams's description of self-identity and self-narrative being tied to a fan object. In my graduate program, I was the resident *Game-of-Thrones-* and *Harry-Potter-*nerd, as the majority of my research explored these and similar storyworlds. I can connect significant happenings in my life to a specific season of *GoT*, or different eras of the transmedial expansion of J.K. Rowling's wizarding world. Similarly, I can relate to the sense of loss many of the fans in Williams's work described at the cancellation or cessation of their fan object. I had been a fan of *GoT* for the better part of a decade, with new seasons premiering almost yearly. If I needed an icebreaker to begin a conversation, my (admittedly unoriginal) go-to during this time was typically, "So, do you watch *Thrones*?" followed by, "What'd you think of [insert character name here]'s death scene?" The show was a staple of my life and a bridge to connecting with others. With the show's pervasive nature, I was usually hard-pressed to attend a social function where this conversation starter did not work. As the show was nearing its close, I prepared by rewatching old seasons, making predictions of how the show would end, and generally had high expectations that the questions that the series had posed would be answered in the final six episodes. As the show came to an end, it shifted to reside in a dormant post-object state; this transition from active to dormant fan object was enough to threaten fans' ontological security. By the time the series finale aired, I had to contend with both the loss of my fan object and my disappointment with how it ended, which resulted in having to confront my own ontological insecurity.

Throughout *Post-Object Fandom*, Williams pinpoints several ways that the progression or disruption of a series can threaten fans' ontological security, although she does not focus on them. Instead, Williams notes throughout the text *how* fans respond to threats to or losses of ontological security, and she notes three categories of fan response: reiteration, renegotiation,

and rejection discourses. Her examination of the relationship between ontological security and fan objects greatly influenced this research project, as her work offers several examples of how fans' and viewers' ontological security is threatened by the popular culture they consume. In the hopes of building from Williams's work with ontological security, I have examined *GoT* and the various ways its producers have potentially threatened viewers' ontological security throughout the series' run, but particularly in its final season. I used Williams's findings and observations as guidelines to highlight potential ontological insecurity caused by the show. Again, while Williams does not necessarily focus on possible threats to ontological security in *Post-Object Fandom*, I found that many of the disruptive elements she mentioned were present in *GoT* (and similar fantasy and science fiction storyworlds), including inconsistent modes of viewing, character/actor recasting, "interim" fandom, and an unsatisfactory ending.

For this research project, I engaged in qualitative research to explore the relationship between a specific "fantastic" transmedial world (Harvey, *Fantastic* 14) and the ontological security (or lack thereof) of its viewers. I interpreted data from *GoT* and the discourse surrounding its eighth and final season in the hopes of "draw[ing] meaning from the findings of [my] data analysis" that would result in "lessons learned" and "information to compare with the literature" in transmedia studies (Cresswell & Cresswell 248). I conducted a case study of the HBO series *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*), supplementing my observations of the show with other "broadly describe[d] as the fantastic" (Harvey, *Fantastic* 14) science fiction and fantasy transmedial storyworlds including, but not limited to *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Using concepts outlined in Williams' *Post-Object Fandom*, I examined various ways *GoT* threatened its viewers' ontological security throughout its run and, in particular, in its final season.

Throughout its run—and particularly in its final season—*GoT* threatened the ontological security of its viewers through: the show's various modes of viewing, author/producer commentary surrounding the show, character deaths and recasting, the "undead" nature of the storyworld (concluded in the television series but unfinished in the novels), and finally, the show's unsatisfactory ending which many fans felt did not adhere to the spirit of the show. These threats to ontological security—which I expand on in my research—indicate the many ways fantastic storyworld franchise producers can cause fans' ontological insecurity, and consequently threaten fans' self-narrative and self-identity. As she builds off of his work on pure relationships, Williams notes that Giddens thinks ontological security offers an "emotional inoculation against existential anxieties—a protection against future threats and dangers which allows the individual to sustain hope and courage in the face of whatever debilitating circumstances she or he might later confront" (qtd. in *Post-Object* 24). In other words, ontological security helps us to feel secure and function as humans struggling with the existential dilemmas of living in a world which is constantly in flux. Williams's work with the concept also indicates that the popular culture we consume affords us much of our ontological security. As such, it is worth noting when popular culture threatens or diminishes our ontological security and in what ways, especially if particular genres or subsets of popular culture do so more than others or if fans' vulnerability is thus exploited for commercial gain. In my thesis, I argue that not only does *GoT* threaten ontological security in a variety of ways (particularly in its final season), but the additional storyworlds I bring in to supplement my claims do so as well. This indicates that threats to ontological security are pervasive in our popular culture—existing beyond a single television show (*GoT*) or television as a medium—especially in transmediated storyworlds, and particularly within the science fiction and fantasy genres.

Review of Literature

While the subject of ontological security, originally put forth by Anthony Gidden, has been discussed in relation to many things, including religious nationalism (Kinnvall), national trauma (Zaretsky), and even transnational television (Georgiou), one scholar has largely dominated its discussion in regard to fandoms and fan studies (Williams, *Post-Object Fandom*, "Replacing," and "'This'"). In her book, *Post-Object Fandom: Television, Identity and Self-narrative,* Rebecca Williams conducts several case studies to examine the various ways television show endings affect fans' ontological security—reframing Giddens' work on "pure relationships" in the process (1)—and the ways that fans negotiate those threats to ontological security and self-identity. While Williams primarily focuses on various fan *responses* to threats to ontological security in periods of "post-object fandom"—here referring to "the specific moment when a fan object moves from being ongoing to dormant, yielding no new instalments" (2)—my research instead focuses on the threats themselves and how they are exemplified in a particular fantasy television show: *Game of Thrones*.

In *Post-Object Fandom*, Williams explores fan behavior and response to the endings of several television shows including *Firefly*, *Lost*, *Angel, The West Wing, Doctor Who* and several others supplementally. She uses Jason Mittell's categories of endings as a framework for the case studies she conducted, articulating which category each show's finale seemed to fall under: "stoppage," "wrap-up," "conclusion," or "finale" (30-31). Williams claims there are typically three kinds of fan responses: reiteration, in which fans articulate their satisfaction with a show's ending by sharing stories about their fandom and their positive memories of the show (80-82); rejection, in which fans assume a "critically distanced or defensive posture" as a negative response to a show's ending (104); and renegotiation, in which fans cope with the loss of their

fan object (in this case, a particular television show) through "discussion of other fandoms...and the notion of multi-fandom—being a fan of multiple texts at the same time" (125). She also examines how fans continue to involve themselves in their respective fandoms through different fan practices, such as re-watching series on DVD or through reruns of specific episodes. While there is little explicit research on ontological security through the lens of fan studies beyond Williams' various works (Williams, *Post-Object Fandom*, "Replacing," and "'This'"), other scholars have similarly examined fan responses and reactions to changes or shifts in their fandoms (though not necessarily in the post-object era of those fandoms), as well as participatory fan practices and interactions (Cover, "Audience" and "New"; Jenkins, *Convergence*; Klastrup & Tosca; Lamerichs; McCormick).

"Power resides where men believe it resides": Authorial Intent, Author/Audience Relationships, and New Media

In the second chapter of her book, Williams briefly discusses the emphasis in fan discourse on "authorial presence" when a finale is planned ahead of time (as opposed to a show being abruptly canceled) (31), implying that fans are more critical of storyworld creators and producers in those situations. The emphasis on authorial intent within Williams's findings calls to mind composition studies' emphasis on author/audience relationships, beginning with Walter Ong's "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," in which Ong posits that writers must always imagine their audiences. The conversation on author/audience relationships in the study of composition continues with Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's idea of "audience addressed/invoked," in which Ede and Lunsford argue that scholars often oversimplify the relationship between author and audience and that a balanced view (93) of audience placed the

writer and the reader at equal importance. This is an interesting concept in the context of contemporary serialized popular culture media—like *GoT* and other transmediated storyworlds—, as the audience is able to voice feedback between storyworld installments through various digital platforms. Storyworld "authors" (e.g., creators, writers, producers, etc.) then have the potential to respond to audience criticisms in subsequent installments, often to mixed reactions.

Additionally, in her conclusion, Williams notes, "As digital media fandom continues to shift and develop and the lines between what it means to be 'online' or 'offline' blur further, exploration of post-object fandom across these contexts would be instructive" (*Post-Object* 202). While she specifically discusses post-object fandom discourse and new media, several scholars have worked to address the changing landscape of author/audience relationships within new media, taking a variety of approaches (I. Bell; Cover, "Audience" and "New"; Dobrin; Litt & Hargittai; Litt; Livingstone; Lunsford & Ede; Marwick & boyd; Morley; Schiller).

When Lunsford and Ede revisited their audience addressed/invoked article in 2009, it was to address how new literacies affect agency and challenge traditional notions of authorship and audience. They attempted to answer three questions in their essay: "In a world of participatory media… what relevance does the term *audience* hold?; How can we best understand the relationships between text, author, medium, context and audience today … and usefully describe the dynamic of this relationship?; To what extent do the invoked and addressed audiences … need to be revised and expanded?" (*Chapter* 43-44). Lunsford and Ede posit that new literacies are a "different kind of mindset" than literacies associated with print media (44) and explored how best to address them as scholars and teachers. Ede and Lunsford argued—as did others (I. Bell; Cover, "Audience"; Jenkins, *Convergence*)—that there is a much murkier distinction

between author and audience in the "cyberspatial-postindustrial mindset" of new literacy (45).

While Ede and Lunsford acknowledge some scholars' views that the term "audience" has

overstayed its welcome in composition studies, they do not think the term should be rejected.

Instead, they contend that the term is "overdetermined" (47), but still useful. They note that

participatory communities "challenge conventional understandings of both author and audience"

(53) but can still be understood as a combination of audience addressed and invoked. Lunsford

and Ede maintained, however, that the terms are still too broad when discussing online audiences

and must still be narrowed for specific rhetorical situations. This is a debate which may apply to

GoT and other fandoms, as fans have become increasingly participatory, blurring the lines

between author and audience through fan works (Jenkins, *Convergence*) and responses to their

fan objects.

New media spaces have offered users and media consumers unparalleled ability to

participate and contribute to media narratives, which has been a "culturally based" audience

desire of ours, according to Rob Cover ("New" 174). Cover discusses new media theory

specifically through the lens of electronic games and the affordances they allow their audience as

contributors to the narrative. Through his analysis, Cover discusses the changing author-text-

audience roles brought on by new digital media (much like Ede and Lunsford) and posits that the

interactivity of electronic games "achieves a new stage in the democratization of user

participation" (173). Similarly, Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* explores new media

knowledge communities, participatory culture, transmedia storytelling, collective intelligence,

(new) media literacy, and the role of politics in pop culture, as well as how each concept relates

to one another. Throughout the text, Jenkins discusses participatory and active audience

reception of texts, and in several instances notes how those audience receptions have somehow

affected subsequent texts. In other words, participation in new media spaces not only affects the consumer, it also affects the content creators. This indicates that users also have the power to be creators and once again illustrates the changing author/audience dynamic. Harvey agrees, stating that, due to transmedia storytelling's "playful" and "participatory" nature, creators and audiences "are sometimes one and the same, or that there is at least some crossover…" (*Fantastic* 18).

In transmedia studies, which I rely on heavily throughout my research, scholars like Jonathan Gray and Colin Harvey have explored the role of the author/creator/producer of popular culture texts and how fans respond to them, much like Williams and Jenkins. In his exploration of paratexts, Gray expands upon the term "paratext" first used by Gerard Genette "to discuss the variety of materials that surround a literary text" (Gray 6). In *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts*, Gray notes, "Ultimately, though Benjamin declared the death of aura, and Roland Barthes declared the death of the author, [I argue] that … various paratexts have resurrected both aura and author, becoming primary sites for the generation of both as discursive values in today's mediated environment" (83). Essentially, many kinds of paratexts (e.g., behind the scenes footage, creator/producer commentary, etc.) have both reinstated the importance of authors' perspectives on their work and indicated works' artistic value (or at least attempted to do so). In his third chapter, "Bonus Materials: Digital Auras and Authors," Gray builds on this point by reiterating how authors (here referring to official creators/producers/directors, etc.) of a text have an innate authority over the media they produce and subsequent interpretations of that media. This authority is exerted through paratexts like creator/producer commentary, particularly in regard to fictional universes (88-89). Harvey seconds this idea, noting that fans often default to the words of a text's producer(s) to determine what is and is not canon (*Fantastic* 4).

Similarly, in *Fantastic Transmedia: Narrative, Play and Memory across Science Fiction and Fantasy Storyworlds*, Harvey notes the largely unavoidable relationship between the author of a text and how that text is "remembered" transmedially. Harvey often responds directly to Gray (and several other transmedia scholars) in his discussions of transmedia storytelling, memory, and the role of the author, forwarding Gray's contention that official creators use various paratexts to assert their authorial control. Harvey states, "The tension between authorial intent on the part of official creators and subsequent reception and negotiation on the part of audiences is rendered still more complex by the disparate kinds of paratext which can occur, and their relationship to the originating work" (133). Apart from his discussion of the authority afforded to creators by various paratexts, Harvey also examines the relationship between intellectual property (IP) rights' holders and their control over how a transmedia storyworld unfolds (*Fantastic* and "A Taxonomy"), arguing that "In its most explicit version, transmedia storytelling tends to be articulated as such by those who own the IP rights to the creative work in question" (*Fantastic* 182). The idea that intellectual property rights largely outline how a transmedia story unfolds is one which Jenkins examines at length through his discussions of *Star Wars* (*Convergence* 141-142, 160, 162, 164) and *Harry Potter* (176, 194-200, 216) and which speaks to Williams' assessment that the current media landscape is commercially driven, to the disdain of many fans ("This" 266, *Post-Object* 175).

"Hold the door": Transmedia Storytelling

Jenkins's definition of transmedia storytelling seems to pervade most of the subsequent scholarship on the topic, although scholars like Harvey expanded (or in some ways contradicted) Jenkins's definition. Indeed, Harvey's aim in *Fantastic Transmedia* was to argue for a "broad

definition of transmedia storytelling, one which is capable of accounting for the multiple kinds of interrelated narrativisation that can occur across media" (1). Jenkins defines the term as follows:

> Stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world, a more integrated approach to franchise development than models based on urtexts and ancillary products.
>
> (*Convergence* 334)

Harvey notes the tensions between certain kinds of transmedia extensions, bringing in Gray's work on paratexts to account for those expansions less readily considered "narrative" like toys and certain advertisements. Yet unsatisfied, however, Harvey synthesizes ideas from transmedia scholars like Jenkins, Gray, and Jason Mittell, taking a cross-disciplinary approach by incorporating social and cultural definitions of transmediality (*Fantastic* 23). Ultimately, Harvey adds the considerations of intellectual property and memory to the conversation surrounding transmedia storytelling.

Melanie Schiller also discusses transmedia storytelling, pointing out the concept "is still in its infancy" (104). In her chapter of *Stories: Screen Narrative in the Digital Era*, Schiller examines the term, as defined by Jenkins, and various considerations regarding its future. She outlines the "range of phenomena" the term encompasses, including "a new cultural context in which social media, connectivity, fan cultures, and online-information exchange play a big role…" (97), emphasizing the intersection of author/audience relationships in the new media landscapes that previously mentioned scholars have explored. Schiller posits that transmedia storytelling is influenced and driven by fan desires to experience transmedia experiences, and similar to Jenkins, Harvey and others, she points out that "participatory fan practices inevitably extend the story world in new directions" (99). She forwards Jenkins's claim that transmedia

storytelling relies on using each medium involved in the process to its fullest potential, and points out Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon's desire for a "media conscious narratology" (99). Schiller also points out that the term "cannot be reduced to mere franchise branding and exploitation," even though "transmedia storytelling practices may go well with marketing strategies of the industry aiming at creating blockbusters" (100), aligning with Harvey's suggestion that fantasy storyworlds and transmedia storytelling likely go hand-in-hand because of the narrative affordances the genre allows (1).

Similar to other scholars who have pointed out the complexities of authorship when considered within new media (I. Bell; Cover, "Audience" and "New"; Dobrin; Litt & Hargittai; Litt; Livingstone; Lunsford & Ede; Marwick & boyd; Morley), Schiller claims, "Transmedia narratives, as they move through different media, problematize notions of authorship: these narrative universes do so not only by expanding across multiple media, which necessitates *collective authorship*, but also by allowing and actively encouraging audience participation" (102). Media franchises toe the line between adaptation and transmedia storytelling, as Harvey suggests, which naturally means they do require collective authorship among the narrative expansions of each storyworld. *GoT* exemplifies this, particularly because the show began prior to the novels' completion, and as such required extensive collaboration between Martin, Weiss, and Benioff.

Another scholar who builds on Jenkins' work on transmedia storytelling is Dan Hassler-Forest in his text *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics: Transmedia World-building Beyond Capitalism*. In the text, Hassler-Forest draws connections between popular storyworlds—such as *The Hunger Games*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and *Game of Thrones*—and the political views he claims they represent; he offers that *Game of Thrones* "can be read as global capitalism's

response to Tolkienian high fantasy" (19) and says "One of *Game of Thrones*'s most-repeated lines perfectly encapsulates neoliberalism's merciless form of competitive individualism: 'in the game of thrones, you either win or you die'" (70-71). He also puts forward the terms "fantastic capitalism," which describes "Fantastical storyworlds that give narrative and aesthetic expression to Empire's spirit of capitalist realism" (70) and "transmedia world-building," which builds off of Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling, "combining it with world-building to indicate commercial franchises that develop complex fantastic storyworlds across a variety of media" (4-5). Hassler-Forest provides three requirements for the latter term; transmedia world-building "takes place *across* media," "involves *audience participation*," and "*defers narrative closure*" (5). Though Hassler-Forest examines transmedia storytelling through a more political lens than scholars like Jenkins and Harvey, his findings exemplify the value in examining the concept, and its potential impact on fans. His term "transmedia world-building" also works to specifically address some of the strategies authors apply in transmedia storytelling.

As previously mentioned, Harvey aims to uncover a broader definition of transmedia storytelling, which is less strict than those previously put forward by scholars like Jenkins (*Fantastic*). Harvey argues that while Jenkins and others have posited that science fiction and fantasy storyworlds have been heavily transmediated because of the audiences they attract, those storyworlds also "boast generic characteristics which make them particularly suited to storytelling across different media platforms" (1). Instead of excluding "licensed storytelling from the definition," Harvey wants to provide a definition of the term which can account for the various methods of transmedia storytelling, which are often inextricably linked to "the industrial practices intrinsic to their conception, development, production and distribution" (1), and he does

so by examining numerous "fantastic" storyworlds, including *Lord of the Rings*, the Marvel

Cinematic Universe (MCU), and *Star Wars*.

According to Harvey, his definition is able to account for both big-budget franchise

transmediated storyworlds and more "micro-budget" independent stories. He addresses legal

procedures in the industry, like intellectual property rights and how transmedia storyworlds are

governed by legal parameters. Much of Harvey's analysis is permeated with collective, cultural,

"vertical," "horizontal," and even autobiographical memory, and he explores how different

storyworlds are "allowed to remember, misremember, forget and even 'non-remember' diegetic

elements from elsewhere in a specific transmedia network" (2). Collective memory refers to

"shared" memory, which belongs to more than one person, and cultural memory is Jan

Assmann's refinement of the term to deal with "fixed points in the past" that become

"mythologised" (*Fantastic* 34-35). Williams also refers to collective memory in her work

regarding ontological security and theme parks; she contends that collective memory is

"maintained and recirculated through participatory culture" (*Replacing* 233). Vertical memory,

according to Harvey, coincides with adaptation, as it "travels from the source material to the

destination text" (*Fantastic* 91). Horizontal memory, on the other hand, applies to transmedia

storytelling, as it refers to the remembering of events between a particular media network (91).

Fans often address various rememberings and misrememberings within storyworlds through

discussions of "canon"—defined by Jenkins as "the group of texts that the fan community

accepts as legitimately part of the media franchise and thus 'binding' on their speculations and

elaborations" (*Convergence* 321). Harvey also outlines the similarities and differences between

adaptation and transmedia storytelling, noting that the distinctions between the two are often

much more muddied than their accepted definitions imply. The vertical memory involved in

adaptation often transforms into horizontal memory as the narrative of the source material is manipulated for a new medium, with the finished product being a hybrid of adaptation and transmedia storytelling—much like the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), which Harvey discusses, or *GoT*.

Ryan and Thon's *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, cited by Schiller, discusses similar concepts to those laid out by Harvey and Jenkins. The text is a "sequel" to *Narrative Across Media* (1), a text previously edited by Ryan which focuses on "the comparison of expressive power of different media… for stories and their worlds are crucially shaped by affordances and limitations of the media in which they are realized," (1). This aligns with Jenkins' views on transmedia storytelling, which he says should use the affordances of each medium appropriately to continue a narrative (*Convergence* 334). *Storyworlds*, then, is a natural progression from *Narrative* for Ryan and Thon, as it explores transmedial storyworlds and acknowledges how these storyworlds' creators (and fans) are constantly expanding them in the age of new media. Ryan and Thon build off of Jenkins' term "media convergence," which he defines as "a situation in which multiple media systems coexist and where media content flows fluidly across them" (*Convergence* 322). Ryan and Thon figuratively "place" narrative at the center of that convergence, as, in transmedial storyworlds, different media converge around the storyworld to illustrate different aspects of it, while different storyworlds can also converge around the concept of "narrativity," (2). Throughout the text, Ryan, Thon, and their contributing writers offer valuable definitions for and interpretations of transmedia storytelling.

Ryan and Thon succinctly divide *Storyworlds* into three parts within their introduction—"Part 1: Mediality and Transmediality," "Part 2: Multimodality and Intermediality," and "Part 3:

Transmedia Storytelling and Transmedial Works." For the purposes of my research, the latter part of their text is most helpful, as it discusses transmedia television (Mittell), the "consistency" of transmedia storytelling (Harvey), and fan involvement in transmedia storyworlds—particularly *GoT* (Klastrup & Tosca).

In the first chapter of their edited collection, Ryan offers definitions of the prominent terms featured in the subtitle of their text: media and storyworlds, outlining the difficulties in molding those definitions into "the sharp analytical tools that will be needed to impart narratology with media consciousness" from the "conveniently vague catchphrases" that are used in many contexts (17). Ryan begins by outlining the many phenomena that have been labeled as "media" in the past. In her discussion of a tentative definition for the term "storyworld," Ryan points out the common use of the "fictional world" concept, which she posits does not work, because storyworld is a "broader concept" that "create[s] their own imaginary world" (23). Ultimately, she concludes that "storyworlds are actually narrative universes made of a factual domain—what [Ryan calls] the 'textual actual world'—surrounded by a plurality of private worlds: the worlds of the beliefs, wishes, fears, goals, plans, and obligations of the characters" (25). Ryan then discusses the narrative elements in storyworlds, which are "intradiegetic"—or existing within the storyworld—and "extradiegetic"—or "not literally part of the storyworld but play[ing] a crucial role in its presentation" (25-26). These terms can presumably be applied to both transmedial expansions to a storyworld and many of the kinds of paratexts discussed by Gray, depending on how they are situated within the transmedial network of the storyworld.

With Ryan's definitions of both "media" and "storyworld," Mittell and Harvey are then able to explore transmedia storytelling tactics in television. Mittell first clarifies that "transmedia is not a new phenomenon, born of the digital age" (189), but that transmedia strategies and

techniques have multiplied in both number and form alongside digital media—similar to Harvey's contention that transmedia predates new media ("A Taxonomy"). Mittell cites Jonathon Gray's idea that we cannot isolate core texts from their various paratexts, though Mittell contends that we can differentiate between promotional paratexts and narratively expansive paratexts, which he attempts to do throughout the chapter. Throughout the chapter, Mittell discusses two transmedia storytelling tactics for television, which he calls the "What Is" and "What If" approaches to transmedia television and narrative extension. The former "seeks to extend the fiction canonically...hopefully expanding viewers' understanding and appreciation of the storyworld" (and aligns with Jenkins's examination of *The Matrix* in *Convergence Culture*), while the latter "poses hypothetical possibilities rather than canonical certainties" (203). Ultimately, Mittell comes to the significant conclusion that "*transmedia extensions from a serial franchise must reward those who partake in them but cannot punish those who do not*" (196). This claim places the importance on fan response and satisfaction, a similar emphasis to Williams' findings that there is a "common sentiment that fans deserve to be rewarded for their devotion" (*Post-Object* 36).

Mittell also discusses the commercial television industry and its emphasis on ratings, comparing the success of transmedia strategies of various television shows, particularly *Lost* and *Breaking Bad*. His mention of the commercial aspect of television recalls Jenkins and Williams emphasis on the subject (*Convergence*, *Post-Object*), as well as Harvey's discussion of intellectual property rights and their effect on transmedia storytelling (*Fantastic*, "A Taxonomy"). Mittell also uses his personal consumption of *Lost* and its various paratexts as evidence throughout the chapter, exemplifying Harvey's claim of the importance of the "autobiographical" in fan studies (*Fantastic* 4-6). Mittell explains the "expansionist," or,

alternatively, "centrifugal" (196) approach *Lost*'s creators took to expand the narrative outside of the series. *Lost* benefitted from this narrative expansion as a sci-fi/fantasy television show, a concept which Harvey discusses at length in *Fantastic Transmedia* (1). Mittell describes *Breaking Bad*'s approach, on the other hand, as "centripetal" (200-201), as it focused on character development rather than storyworld setting expansion. These align with the "What Is" and "What If" approaches, respectively. Ultimately, Mittell finds the latter transmedia approach to be more effective, as it allowed viewers to spend more time with *Breaking Bad*'s characters than did the "forensic attention" (202) *Lost*'s transmedia encouraged. Ultimately, *Lost* fans did not feel "reward[ed]" (196), as Mittell suggests fans should feel when consuming effective transmedial expansions. Williams agrees with the overall consensus of *Lost* fans following the show's finale, as she dedicates an entire chapter in *Post-Object Fandom* to the show and the subsequent "rejection discourse" many fans joined leading up to *Lost*'s finale. This also aligns with a significant portion of *GoT*'s fanbase following its finale.

Throughout his discussion of transmedia television precedents, as well as the specific *Lost* and *Breaking Bad* case studies, Mittell focuses on the canonicity of each transmedia approach. The "What Is" approach taken by *Lost*'s show creators ultimately left fans feeling cheated, because the finale of the show downplayed much of the mythical lore fans were encouraged to discover (200). As Mittell says, fans and critics seem to assess this transmedia approach by the "canonical coordination and narrative integration" (203) of the extensions to the storyworld. Throughout the chapter, he also cites *Lost* creators and their motivations for certain transmedia tactics based on interviews; Mittell's inclusion of their testimony as evidence illustrates both Gray's and Harvey's previously mentioned point that creators of a text have a unique authority over that text.

Harvey's chapter in Ryan and Thon's text also discusses the different forms of "convergent storytelling" (208). He argues that transmedia storytelling is linked to memory, relying on the audience to both remember certain narrative events while forgetting others, and he draws connections between intellectual property laws and remembering (both of which Harvey expands upon in *Fantastic Transmedia*). As such, Harvey proposes a transmedia taxonomy based on "legal relationships," identifying six categories: "intellectual property," "directed transmedia storytelling," "devolved transmedia storytelling," "detached transmedia storytelling," "directed transmedia storytelling with user participation," and "emergent user-generated transmedia storytelling" (210). Harvey's categories exemplify the range of nuanced relationships between transmedial texts and their intellectual property rights owners, and build on Gray's work with paratexts through a specific lens which can be used to examine transmedia storyworlds' paratexts. Harvey also exemplifies Gray's point that authors maintain a certain authority over the texts they create by using author commentary as evidence throughout the chapter.

Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca discuss and define "transmedial worlds" (TMWs) theory in their chapter of Ryan and Thon's text as they examine a social media campaign leading up to the premiere of *GoT*'s first season. They describe transmedial worlds (TMWs) as "abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms...TMWs are mental constructs shared by both the designers/creators of the world and the audience/participants" (221). This definition again calls to mind the complicated relationship between author and audience in transmedial storyworlds and how often the two overlap. Within their definition, Klastrup and Tosca explain mythos, topos, and ethos, which inform "worldness." They define mythos as being the TMW's established backstory/narration, topos being the setting in regards to space and time, and ethos being the

global and local ethics of the TMW's characters. Disruptions to any of these elements, according

to Klastrup and Tosca, causes "a bitter uproar in the fan community" (232). Klastrup and Tosca

discuss how fans interact with transmedial storyworlds, particularly through social media,

finding parallels with danah boyd's work on networked publics. Klastrup and Tosca observed

audience pushback to the promotional campaign they examined and its clear marketing scheme

which fans found to be "corrupted" (232-233). This once again supports Williams's findings that

many fans do not enjoy "openly accepting and embracing the commercial value they possess as

target audiences/consumers" (*Post-Object* 175).

"My watch is ended": Television and Transmedia Studies

In *Post-Object Fandom*, Williams focuses her research on television shows, as the long-

running nature of television offers ontological security through its routine (82). Throughout the

text, she stresses the importance of examining "threats to [fans'] ontological security through the

demise of, or loss of interest in, a fan object…" (26) because this impacts fans' "established self-

identities" (25). Similarly, in the second edition of their book *Television Studies*, Jonathan Gray

and Amanda D. Lotz state, "Given the role that television is perceived to play in constructing

core beliefs in areas from the most crucial to the exceptionally trivial, and given its role in telling

us stories and offering us information that matter to us, a key task for television studies is to

examine these stories and this information" (28-29). Gray and Lotz point out that while textual

analysis has existed since the days of Aristotle, it is only recently that television programs have

been explored in this way. While their work differs markedly from Williams' studies on fan

responses (given that Williams focuses on fan reception of texts instead of analyzing the texts

themselves), all three scholars demonstrate that television is worth studying, particularly because of the role it plays in forming viewers' beliefs and self-identities.

Gray and Lotz's text is a comprehensive look at television studies (as opposed to "studies about television"), viewing it more as an "approach to studying media" instead of a "field for the study of a singular medium" (3). As such, the authors discuss three approaches to studying televisual media, including the social science approach, humanities-based approach, and the cultural studies approach, each of which they argue grew from the former, and they also discuss the current television landscape and how it has changed over time. Like Harvey's research in his pursuit of a definition of transmedia storytelling (*Fantastic*), much of Gray and Lotz's research is cross-disciplinary, as they draw from disciplines outside of media studies, including sociology, anthropology and economics. *Television Studies* is organized into four chapters, the first of which outlines the history of television and its studies, the second, third and fourth discussing audience studies, institutions, and contexts, respectively. Ultimately, Gray and Lotz posit that "context is crucial to television studies" (142) and, similar to scholars who have discussed the challenges that arise with new media and digital studies, Gray and Lotz assert that "the emergence of research classified at times as digital studies, internet studies, and new media studies has provided the biggest challenge, or change in context, to the map of television and media studies we initially offered in the first edition of this book" (142).

Similarly, in *Time, Technology and Narrative Form in Contemporary US Television Drama: Pause, Rewind, Record*, JP Kelly aims to illustrate the relationship between text and context, and technology and narrative form by focusing on various temporalities in contemporary television. Kelly specifically examines the late 1990s and early 2000s television landscape, known as TVIII, which he argues was a formative era that influenced the television of today. To

provide context, Kelly outlines this era alongside TVI and TVII, which coincide with the three-network era of the 1950s to 1970s and the expansion of cable in the mid 1980s, respectively. Chapter three in particular focuses on the "current televisual landscape" (14), as Kelly explores three technologies that have emerged during the TVIII era and impacted said landscape: the DVD, the DVR, and streaming. In line with Gray and Lotz, the function of the chapter is "to explore the connection between text and context" (56), and similar to Harvey, he outlines "some of the significant legislative and industrial changes that have encouraged and facilitated these recent textual trends, in particular the development of transmedia distribution" (56). Kelly argues that apart from their popularity, each of these technologies have "engender[ed] at least one new temporality in the relationship between viewer and text" (14).

In chapter 7 of *Post-Object*, "'Living in DVD-Land': Post-Object Fandom, Re-Watching and Digital Media," Williams, too, examines modes of viewing in television, focusing on how fans engage with re-runs and DVD box-sets of cancelled television shows. She uses a case study of *The West Wing* to explore this, and she briefly touches on online viewership via streaming through platforms like Amazon Prime and Netflix, as well as illegal downloads, examining many of the same modes of viewing as Kelly does. Williams considers how fans navigate the re-viewing of their favorite shows in the post-object period, finding that, while online viewing is attractive to fans who want to view their program as quickly as possible, DVDs continue to function at the very least as aesthetic objects, as well as an ontologically secure way to re-view their favorite shows at their own pace. Throughout the chapter, Williams subsequently discusses the different forms of ontological security afforded to fans by the different methods of re-viewing. She also sparingly discusses the different "textual interpretations" (147) afforded by these methods (e.g., bingeing vs. watching live), as well as the relationship between older fans

and newer fan interpretation (148-149). Kelly's examinations of TVIII coupled with Williams'
identification of different modes of viewing and how they affect ontological security have
influenced my research on *GoT*.

Also influential to my research has been Williams's brief discussion of fans'
disappointment with producers in her chapter on DVDs and viewing methods. In this chapter,
she posits that, "when fans express disappointment with DVDs they are also articulating an
obligation owed to them by the show's producers" (145), as evidenced by collective
disappointment regarding *The West Wing* DVDs and their lackluster commentary and special
features. She also posits that this fan disappointment and dismissal regarding commentary is a
rejection of the "notion of privileged insight" (*Post-Object* 146) that Gray discusses in *Show Sold
Separately*. Williams argues that *The West Wing* box sets failed to allow fans the opportunity to
"relive their fandom as fully as they would have liked" (147), which relates to Mittell's notion of
"rewarding" fans for their consumption of or participation in the storyworld of their fan object.
Similar to Harvey, Williams also discusses memory, this time from the perspective of the fan
(much like Harvey's own autobiographical memory which he draws upon in *Fantastic*). She
notes how fans use memories of their fan objects to interact with other fans and/or discuss their
fandom in order to navigate the threat to their ontological security when a fan object comes to an
end. Building on Anthony Giddens' work on ontological security, Williams further develops his
idea of "pure relationships," positing that when looking at fan interaction with the fan object and
other fans, there are "two types of 'fan pure relationship': fan/object pure relationships (fan
attachment to fan objects) and fan-fan pure relationships (fan attachment to fellow fans)" (*Post-
Object* 21). She examines in her various case studies how fans "draw on the texts to perform
identity work through points of identification" as "ontological security is not constant and can be

threatened by external factors" (21). This, again, falls in line with Gray and Lotz's determination that television influences viewers' identities in both trivial and significant ways. Throughout *Post-Object Fandom*, Williams brings forward some of the many ways that disruptions in television shows can affect viewers' ontological security, including the death and/or recasting of characters (and actors), the mode of viewing the series, interim fandom and dormant "zombie" texts (168), and unsatisfactory endings, all of which have influenced my research on *GoT*. Ultimately, through her studies of various television shows, Williams concludes that there is no concrete or universal fan response to the ending of a series, but nevertheless "Paying attention to fans' reactions to changes, transitions and endings offers one route for understanding how fandom is related to self-narrative, identity and a sense of ontological security" (197).

"Winter is coming": Moving Forward

Williams encourages fan scholars to "continue to highlight moments of instability and rupture in fans' self-identities and ontological security, to demonstrate an acknowledgement that any understanding of fans' 'selves' must account for the constant processes of renegotiation of identity and self-narrative that fans engage in" (*Post-Object* 200). This is what I attempt to do in my examination of the HBO series *Game of Thrones* and the various ways that it threatens fans' ontological security, instead creating ontological *insecurity*.

Whether because of the audience that fantastic storyworlds tend to lure, as Jenkins supposes, or because of the qualities inherent to fantastic genres, which Harvey suggests lend themselves to transmedia storytelling, science fiction and fantasy storyworlds are often transmedial. For this reason, I thought it appropriate to explore fantastic storyworlds in my research. I chose to study *Game of Thrones*, specifically, for this project in an attempt at

achieving the title of "aca-fan." The term, coined by Jenkins, is described as "a hybrid creature which is part fan, part academic" (Jenkins "Who"). As a fan of the series throughout most of its run, I refused to wait more than two days after an episode aired to watch, and often rewatched each episode throughout the week leading up to the following Sunday's episode. Similar to Harvey's admission in which he says, "I've chosen each of my case studies because it means something to me and I feel I can talk authoritatively about the franchise or project in question," (*Fantastic* 5), I chose to examine *GoT* closely in my research because I feel I am well-versed enough to "make useful observations," as Harvey says (5). Although I am admittedly not nearly as familiar with George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels (having only read the first two), on which the show is based, my research focuses primarily on the HBO television series, and any supplemental knowledge I might need of the novels, or from Martin himself, I have found online via wikis, articles, and interviews.

Additionally, I plan to supplement my research on *Game of Thrones* with examples from other similar fantastic storyworlds, such as *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Again, I have chosen supplemental texts with which I am intimately familiar, though my levels of fandom vary with each storyworld. As Harvey points out, many high-profile fans are involved in their fandoms as professionals, including Joss Whedon and JJ Abrams, and many other popular culture scholars have done the same (such as Jenkins).

Given how recently the series ended (at the time of writing, it has been less than a year since the show's finale aired) and how actively I consumed the show, I was also privy to many fans' real-time response to the series' end, often commiserating with friends in-person and online through the sharing of memes, as we discussed what we enjoyed (or merely endured) as the season progressed. In my third semester of my Master's program at the time, I wove the series

into my schoolwork, turning in several *GoT*-themed projects as the final season was unfolding, and I, therefore, consumed the show as both a fan and an academic during that time.

I was influenced primarily by Williams' work on ontological security in fan communities because of her particular focus on "post-object fandoms," which she defines as "when a fan object moves from being ongoing to dormant, yielding no new instalments" (*Post-Object* 2). While the storyworld in which *GoT* exists is still in flux (as Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels have yet to conclude), the HBO series lives in a post-object era, leaving fans vulnerable.

Throughout the various case studies she discusses in *Post-Object Fandom*, Williams necessarily points out several aspects of television series that may affect viewers' ontological security (though these conditions are not her focus so much as fan response to them is), and which vary depending on the storyworld(s) she is examining in each chapter. These potentially affective conditions include the mode in which viewers consume the show (network television, streaming services, DVD box sets, etc.), character "departures, deaths and replacements" (47-77), periods of interim fandom in which a fan object is dormant, and divergence between fan and producer interpretation of a "satisfying" ending to a series. In my attempts to illustrate if and/or how *GoT* participated in any of these disruptive behaviors, I predominantly use the framework provided by Williams' findings. In addition to Williams' work on television endings and ontological security, I also lean on Gray's work with paratexts, Harvey's work with transmedia storytelling and memory, and Kelly's work on the changing dynamics of TVIII.

Limitations

While Williams focused primarily on fan reactions to their post-object fandom and their resulting negotiation of ontological security through her interpretations of empirical data, I instead chose to focus on ways in which fantastic storyworld creators and producers can and have threatened fans' ontological security. This study could be furthered by the collection of empirical data to examine how *GoT* fans responded to and negotiated any potential threats to ontological security to build on the identification of those threats which I have put forth in my research.

Additionally, in my focus on *GoT*, I have forwarded Williams's work on television studies, only supplementing my findings on the television series with discussion of several transmedia film storyworlds, such as *Harry Potter* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. As Williams states in her conclusion to *Post-Object Fandom*, "it would be useful to consider how post-object fandom can be understood in cinema fandom, where the majority of texts (excluding trilogies, sequels or prequels) are often singular and fans may not respond in the same way as when a long-running television series ends" (203). I would argue that serialized cinema fandom (that which Williams excludes in the aforementioned quote) is just as under-researched as singular film texts, and there is still work to be done in transmedia scholarship to examine how producers threaten the ontological security of their respective fandoms and how, in turn, fans negotiate their fluctuating ontological security.

Analysis

"For the Throne": Modes of Viewing and Ontological Security

Leading up to *Game of Thrones*' final season, fans and first-time viewers had myriad ways to watch the show, none of which were free (legally, at least), as it is a Home Box Office (HBO) series and HBO is a premium television network. Viewers could watch via cable or satellite TV (if they bought an HBO add-on), HBO Go (an online streaming service available to viewers who already pay for HBO through cable or satellite), HBO Now (a standalone streaming service through which fans can watch any HBO series without adding it onto their cable or satellite TV), cable-replacement services like Sling TV (by purchasing the HBO add-on), by buying and downloading individual episodes and/or seasons via iTunes, Amazon Prime, or Google Play (or buying seasons on DVD or Blu-ray), and finally on Amazon Prime (by paying for the HBO subscription, on top of their Prime membership) (Willcox).

As Rebecca Williams explores in chapter 7 of *Post-Object Fandom*, different modes of viewing offer fans different levels of ontological security. For example, as a season is airing, fans gain ontological security through the routine of weekly episodes (130), and once a television show has ceased fans can renegotiate that security via reruns or DVD box sets (160). In fact, a fan object's mere availability in the post-object era fosters security, whether it exists on a streaming platform, through reruns, or on DVD and Blu-ray, and regardless of whether fans actually engage with the object (161). However, as fans neared the end of a series which had been ongoing for close to nine years, and faced the inevitable disruption to their ontological security that ending would cause, they may have navigated that impending threat by choosing a particular viewing method.

Each method of viewing had similarities and differences, and subsequently offered different viewing experiences as each episode of the final season aired. When viewing new episodes through their cable-TV provider, for example, viewers could watch previous *Game of Thrones* episodes leading up to the new episode set to air that week. These reruns of older episodes likely allowed fans a "communal experience" (*Post-Object* 157) knowing that other fans were likely watching the same thing and providing an "imagined community of fellow viewers" (158). When viewing online via HBO Go or HBO Now, viewers had the option to watch any *Game of Thrones* episode at any point in time (including live as each new episode aired), as well as an assortment of bonus materials. Indeed, many of the viewing options offered bonus materials; however, the bonus materials available differed among the methods of viewing. For example, Xfinity TV customers (with the Xfinity X1 voice remote) had access to exclusive content, as Comcast partnered with HBO to provide "interactive companion features" (Gruenwedel). The exclusive *Game of Thrones* X1 features included:

individual character recaps from cast members; 60-second series summaries from celebrities like Bill Hader and Henry Winkler; a video montage dedicated to all the characters who died; behind-the-scenes footage, including special effects, locations, and costumes; a Throne Room Yule Log; up-to-date 'Thrones' news via YouTube; and 'Thrones'-inspired playlists from Pandora. (Gruenwedel)

Fans were also able to vote on who they thought would end the series on the Iron Throne (Tolkien's "One Ring" equivalent in Martin's fantasy storyworld, both symbolizing ultimate power) by speaking "For the Throne" into their X1 Voice Remote (Gruenwedel). Alternatively, fans that watched online via HBO Go or HBO Now had (and continue to have) access to "Inside the Episode" featurettes, which played immediately after each episode concluded. When

watching via their cable TV provider, however, fans could not watch "Inside the Episode" after the conclusion of each episode, and instead would have had to watch that segment via one of the streaming services or on YouTube in the days following an episode's release. Once on YouTube, the "Inside the Episode" featurettes became available to the general public (not just those with access to HBO's streaming services). Both HBO Go and HBO Now also offered other bonus materials, including making-of video clips that discussed everything from filming locations to costume design. While the abundance of viewing options and behind-the-scenes paratexts seems on the surface to be beneficial for fans, as they were able to choose which viewing format worked best for them, it was also potentially confusing (Willcox). The discrepancies among the viewing platforms and options regarding bonus materials each offered also potentially threatened ontological security as much as the viewing options fostered it.

Another viewing option for season 8 became available to fans on Dec. 3, 2019, in the form of DVD and Blu-ray sets of the series, which can act as both "aesthetic objects" (*Post-Object* 145) and an opportunity to revisit the series (or watch it for the first time). The DVD is a "temporally flexible" mode of consumption for fans (Kelly 62), again allowing them to renegotiate their ontological security in the case of a show's cancellation or cessation. While relying on a streaming service for access to a fan object may cause unease for some fans due to the lack of a "physical version of a favourite [sic] series, or the unreliability of the continuation of a show's provision" (*Post-Object* 160), that is not necessarily the case with shows that are *produced* by said streaming service. While HBO cycles through offerings of film and television shows, they have thus far always offered their patrons access to shows produced by the network itself. Other streaming services like Amazon Prime, Netflix, and Hulu have also always offered access to their original television shows and films. The potential insecurity of streaming, then,

comes from the possibility that a patron may not always have access to the streaming service, as opposed to a DVD or Blu-ray collection which can sit on a shelf, waiting to be accessed (*Post-Object* 163) and is the result of a one-time purchase instead of an ongoing $15 monthly payment. Which of these viewing methods offers more ontological security, at least in *GoT*'s post-object era, is difficult to say, as it seems that "...ontological security can be achieved in different ways through different modes of re-viewing" in the wake of a show's ending (163).

Similar to the streaming services and cable providers that offer HBO and, therefore, *GoT*, DVD and Blu-ray versions of the series offer a variety of bonus content, which varies based on the version a viewer buys. The *Game of Thrones* complete series Blu-ray sets, for example, offer "Bonus content and retail exclusive videos from previously released individual season box sets" (Nieto) as well as content exclusive to season 8, including *Game of Thrones: The Last Watch*, a documentary (offered on streaming platforms as well), several exclusive featurettes, ten audio commentaries (including commentary by showrunners D.B. Weiss and David Benioff), deleted and extended scenes, and animated history and lore of the storyworld (Nieto). These kinds of paratexts and bonus materials "...stamp their texts with authenticity, insisting on that text's claim to the status of great art" (Gray 83). As Gray states, bonus materials such as those found on DVDs (and, in this case, on most if not all of the viewing platforms *GoT* is offered on) serve to provide an author (or several), an aura and authenticity (81-115), legitimizing a text for viewers and establishing it as a work of art. Offering bonus material is a particularly effective tactic for "fictional universes" (88), and while it is likely less common for viewers to watch these bonus materials exclusive to DVDs, the same cannot be said for bonus materials which can be found on free sites like YouTube. Although increased access to such materials could be seen as more inclusive, it is also worth noting that behind-the-scenes paratexts, particularly those surrounding

commentary from producers, creators, or perceived "authors" of a text, imply a "proper"

interpretation" of a text (Gray 81). Such an implication could disrupt fans' ontological security if

the presented "proper" interpretation does not align with their original interpretation of the text.

Additionally, paratexts "...[necessitate] our close attention to them," as they can potentially

determine what is perceived as "televisual art" (Gray 84).

It is also possible for fans to be disappointed by the bonus content in a DVD or Blu-ray

box set—or on any viewing platform, in the case of *GoT*—because although these kinds of

paratextual bonus materials add "extra meaning" and act as a "superior" version to the original

text (*Post-Object* 146), fans might feel they are not learning anything new from the bonus

material because of their own detailed knowledge of a show. One need only look to the

comments section of an "Inside the Episode" featurette on the official GameofThrones YouTube

channel to see how fans react to Weiss and Benioff's insights. When reviewing the comments

section for season 8 episode 5's "Inside the Episode" featurette (which also happens to be the

final one of the series), commenters more often than not use the showrunners' remarks on the

episode as fodder for jokes instead of thoughtful discussion. From referring to the showrunners

as "Dumb & Dumber" (Necromia)—a play on David and Dan's collective nickname, "D&D"—

to openly deriding their claims (Hernandez), many viewers seem to be in agreement with Max

Staley's conclusions on this featurette in his article for *The Outline*, titled, "I never want to go

'inside' another television episode again." In said article, Staley's subheadline says it all: "The

only thing more disappointing than the final season of 'Game of Thrones' was having to learn

what the creators thought about it." Later, Staley observes "It's hard to see how any of their

commentary deepens or enriches our understanding of what we literally just watched." While

Williams explores the implications of this kind of disappointment with producers in a post-object

era, Gray notes that some paratexts work "...in media res to subtly inflect the public understanding of an ongoing and open text" (81). While virtually any bonus materials for *GoT* released prior to the completion of season 8 were released "in media res," the "Inside the Episode" featurettes were particularly guilty of influencing audiences' interpretation and understanding of the text because of how they were situated on streaming platforms. Each Inside the Episode featurette played immediately after the episode it discussed and before the following episode on streaming platforms. In early seasons, these five-to-ten-minute videos featured showrunners Weiss and Benioff discussing the episode that viewers had just watched, often alongside the episode's director. In later seasons, particularly once Weiss and Benioff were largely responsible for the writing of the show (having surpassed the storyline of Martin's novels) only the show creators appeared in the featurettes. This seemingly small change alone established Weiss and Benioff as the "authors" of the televisual text, despite Martin having penned the source material, and potentially influenced audience interpretation of each episode as a result.

This potential manipulation of audience and fan memory poses another threat to fans' ontological security, as it calls into question the canon of the storyworld. Fans crave "associated alignment of one's interpretation of a text with the officially sanctioned canonical events" (*Post-Object* 85), particularly as a fan object transitions from active to dormant, as with the anticipated finale or stoppage of a television show. This alignment, as Williams puts it, "enables fans to ward off anxiety about the move from active to dormant fan object, reasserting the validity of their reading of the text and avoiding any potential disjunction between their own understandings and the object itself" (*Post-Object* 85). Weiss and Benioff's "Inside the Episode" commentary, interlaced as it was between episodes, disrupted fan interpretations by exercising their image as

"authors" and offering a perceived "correct" interpretation, thereby threatening fans' ontological security.

"Any man who must say 'I am the King' is no true King": "Author" Commentary, Canon, and Ontological Security

In their discussions of each episode, Weiss and Benioff sometimes made mention of the creative process, explaining the considerations they took when writing certain scenes or applauding actors for their performances. For example, they give insights such as Weiss's here: "Lyanna Mormont was supposed to be a one-scene character, and then we met Bella Ramsay, and we realized that we would not be doing our jobs if we kept her as a one-scene character" ("A Knight"). This comment is, perhaps, meant to serve as an explanation (for fans of the books) of why Weiss and Benioff created a significantly more involved storyline for Lyanna's character compared to Martin's characterization of her in the *Song of Ice and Fire* novels. Again, commentary such as the above established Weiss and Benioff as the "authors" of the televisual storyworld by explaining artistic choices and oftentimes lauding actors for their ability to convey emotions so well that dialogue was "unnecessary." Such an observation – of the unnecessity of dialogue – became increasingly convenient a way to explain why the show's dialogue suffered (or depleted) so much in later seasons.

Overwhelmingly, Weiss and Benioff made claims about the storyworld itself, explaining characters' motivations or behavior, as when Weiss described Daenerys' reasons for burning King's Landing near the end of Season 8:

> I don't think she decided ahead of time that she was going to do what she did, and then
> she sees the Red Keep, which is to her the home that her family built when they first

came over to this country three hundred years ago. It's in that moment on the walls of

King's Landing where she's looking at that symbol of everything that was taken from her

when she makes the decision to make this personal. ("The Bells")

Here, Weiss discusses a scene in the penultimate episode of the series in which there is

(perhaps conveniently) no dialogue and Daenerys Targaryen makes a previously unexplained

decision to burn the city to the ground, effectively denying any prior claims she made that she

would not harm innocent civilians unnecessarily. In Weiss's discussion of Daenerys's

motivations, he mentions facts previously mentioned in the series (e.g., her family building the

Red Keep when first arriving to King's Landing), but also makes claims that viewers may only

infer, at best (e.g., that the Red Keep is a "symbol of everything that was taken from her"). While

many fans might agree with Weiss, or accept his explanation of Daenerys's motives, many

would have seen his commentary before being able to come up with an explanation of their own,

or even decide whether they thought this course of action fit Daenerys's character arc. As a

result, Weiss's commentary functions here as a preemptive measure to quell any misgivings fans

might have had regarding Daenerys's choice in this scene, providing an explanation through

commentary which otherwise would not exist in the text itself.

Weiss and Benioff also sometimes referenced happenings from earlier in the series for

the audience by drawing connections between seasons or even in some cases offering reminders

of information that was never explicitly stated in the show. When speaking of Daenerys in an

earlier episode of the eighth season, on her reaction to the news that she is related by blood to

Jon Snow (her lover), Benioff states, "...she grew up hearing all these stories about how their

ancestors who were related to each other were also lovers, and it doesn't seem that strange to

her" ("The Last"). While there are several characters throughout the show who discuss the

infamous Targaryen incest, including Cersei Lannister, Lord Varys, and Tyrion Lannister, Daenerys never gives any indication that she is comfortable with the idea or even aware of it. In Martin's novels, by contrast, it is made clear that as a young girl she was of the mindset that she would eventually marry her brother, but the HBO series never indicated that the show's version of Daenerys followed this line of thinking. Benioff's comment intends to remind audiences of information indicated in previous seasons (like the Targaryen incest that was commonplace amongst her ancestors, with brothers wedding sisters for centuries to keep the Targaryen bloodline "pure"), presumably grounded in the audience's common knowledge and "collective memory" (*Fantastic* 4). However, his claim that Daenerys is therefore unaffected by the revelation that she is Jon Snow's aunt is not supported by the series itself. It is only through Weiss and Benioff's commentary that the audience is made to believe Daenerys had a reason for reacting so calmly to the news that she was, in fact, her lover's aunt. As this paratextual commentary functions to establish Weiss and Benioff as "authors" of *GoT* (the televisual series), thereby giving them authority over the text (Gray), their interpretation of Daenerys—from explaining her comfort with incest to her sudden desire to burn an entire city to the ground— seems to function as a preventative measure, "...attempted to 'delegitimate' unfavorable critiques" that might occur (Gray 89) and justify their narrative decisions. The show creators' attempt to tamper with audience memory through their commentary thus threatens fans' ontological security because Weiss and Benioff's commentary potentially affects what fans perceive as canon. As Harvey states, "[f]or transmedia fandoms, issues of memory are often expressed through arguments over 'canon': in other words, which elements of a particular storyworld are 'genuine' or 'authentic' and which are non-canon" (*Fantastic* 3). There are several examples in Season 8 of Weiss and Benioff's commentary seemingly contradicting

things depicted as canon within the show. One of the most talked about contradictions was the showrunners' assertion that Daenerys "kind of forgot about the Iron Fleet." After falling into a trap that left one of her three most valuable offensive weapons (her dragons) destroyed, Benioff explained that the reason Daenerys was caught unawares was because she "forgot" about her enemy's forces. ("The Last") Many fans, however, did not accept this explanation, and instead pointed to previous scenes in the season (such as various mentions of this enemy fleet and subsequent plans to subvert it) as evidence against this claim. Similarly, Benioff also claimed that viewers witnessed "…the end of the Dothraki, essentially" ("The Long"), implying that the entire Dothraki race was wiped out in a single moment of combat in episode 3, only for the group to remain a significant player in Daenerys's final attack on King's Landing later in the season, in episode 5. Benioff's comments sparked a recurring meme among the fandom that while Daenerys may have "forgot[ten]" about the Iron Fleet, it was Weiss and Benioff who seemed the most forgetful about the season's events. In the instance of Daenerys's character arc in the final season, Weiss and Benioff "remind" fans of the show that, a) the Targaryens built the Red Keep and conquered Westeros and that Keep is the "symbol" of everything Daenerys has lost, which according to Weiss is the canon reason she goes back on her word, and b) the Targaryens were historically incestuous, making the insinuation that it is therefore canon within *GoT* that Daenerys is used to the idea and unbothered by her relation to Jon.

While audience members had the opportunity to skip the "Inside the Episode" featurette before moving on to the next episode, it would play automatically if viewers did not opt to skip it. The segment played immediately after the "Next Week on *Game of Thrones*" segment, which previewed the following week's episode. While the segment is "extradiegetic," or "not literally part of the storyworld but play[s] a crucial role in its presentation" (Ryan 37), it is situated

"intradiegetically," or "in the storyworld" (Ryan 37). It also recalls Harvey's "centripetal" form

of transmedia expansion ("A Taxonomy" 200-201), as Weiss and Benioff's commentary often

seems to attempt to further develop characters (though it is worth noting this development does

not take place within a representation of the storyworld, with the featurettes functioning more as

paratexts than transmedial narrative expansion).

Not only do the showrunners speak concretely about the storyworld, making claims about

characters and their motivations, but the featurette is also placed immediately after each episode,

disrupting narrative flow and influencing audience interpretation of the text before the audience

has even had time to reflect on each episode. Additionally, Weiss and Benioff ask audiences to

remember not only supposed happenings from the series, but happenings from the novels it was

adapted from as well, as evidenced by a claim made by Benioff regarding Melisandre, a Red

Priestess:

> There have been a few hints before that Melisandre is much older than she appears.
>
> Going back to a very early conversation with George Martin about her, she's supposed to
>
> be several centuries old. So, we always wanted to show her true age and were waiting for
>
> the right moment and this was it for us. ("The Red")

Again, this commentary encouraging audience members to remember specific events from the

series tampers with the fandom's collective memory, or shared memory, and even with

individuals' recollection of collective memory (*Fantastic* 34-35). Because of Weiss and

Benioff's inherent authority, and the additional authority they invoke when referencing their

(private) conversations with Martin, the original author of the storyworld, fans are more likely to

trust their televisual interpretation of the storyworld. The decision to show Melisandre's "true

age," which might initially seem irrelevant or unnecessary to some fans, is given some weight

when the show creator's reference their reasoning behind including it in the storyworld (i.e., that Martin said it so it must be important). The inclusion of this detail may also have been a way to reward fans of Martin's novels for their viewership of the HBO series, in the same way that Mittell argues transmedia extensions and paratexts should reward fans for their dedication (196).

In his discussion of adaptation versus transmedia storytelling, Harvey outlines two distinct types of memory that help distinguish between those two categories of storytelling (*Fantastic*). Adaptation, Harvey argues, is a form of "vertical memory," which "travels only one way, from the source material to the destination text" (91). Simultaneously, however, adaptation should "present itself as the first telling" (91), functioning as if the original source text does not exist. Adaptation begins to transform into transmedia storytelling at the point which "the story starts to spread horizontally and spatially" (91), during which time transmedia storytelling relies on "horizontal memory between elements of a transmedia network" (91). Through the bonus material paratexts they offer, like the animated histories of the storyworld and even their "Inside the Episode" commentary, Weiss and Benioff encourage viewers to practice horizontal remembering. While it is not necessary for viewers to view those paratexts in order to understand or enjoy the series, watching them does offer more information and clarity about the storyworld that is not afforded by simply watching the show. Instead of treating their adaptation of Martin's novels as "the first telling" of the story, Weiss and Benioff ask viewers to remember paratextual information, whether representative of the storyworld or shared as "insight" from the creators themselves in order for viewers to understand characters and events more fully. As Harvey states, "What this discussion does is to further highlight a central tension between authorial intentionality and the multiple interpretive strategies employed by those engaging with the material in question" (92). In other words, viewers must consider the "authors'" intentions after

watching each "Inside the Episode" segment whilst considering their own interpretation of the text.

Similar disruptions of canon and audience versus author interpretation have occurred with other fantastic storyworlds, like those of *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars*. J.K. Rowling has infamously revealed facts about characters and events after the release of the final novel in the *Harry Potter* series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, which were not discussed in the book series (Looper)—even sparking a meme for her troubles (Ohlheiser). Some of those revelations have come in the form of official transmedial extensions that she has written or co-written, like the play, *Harry Potter and Cursed Child,* and the *Fantastic Beasts* film series. Other tidbits of information, however, have been revealed through less "official" means, either in interviews with Rowling, through her Twitter account, or on the site formerly known as Pottermore (now Wizarding World). Rowling "has shown many signs that she wants to continue to shape and control how fans respond to her work well after she finished writing it" (Jenkins "Three"), and has established herself as the sole "author" of *Harry Potter*'s wizarding world throughout the storyworld's transmedial network, though there have, of course, been other contributors to the storyworld. She has done so by either remaining involved in the creation of its transmedial expansions (e.g., *The Cursed Child*, *Fantastic Beasts*, etc.) or by sanctioning and approving other transmediations of it (e.g., *Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery*), though they may not be considered canon. Additionally, on both Pottermore and Wizarding World, she was and is the only named author of any of the content. On Pottermore, any of the articles not written by Rowling are cited as being written by "The Pottermore Correspondent," while any articles not written by her on Wizarding World are written by "The Wizarding World Team." The lack of

authorial figures on the site enables Rowling to remain the authority figure of the franchise (Brummitt 125).

Rowling's commentary commonly falls in one of two categories, succinctly labeled by the former Pottermore as "Rowling's Thoughts" or "Exclusive Content from J.K. Rowling." The former category features behind-the-scenes looks at Rowling's creative process for writing the books or regarding her involvement with the series' filmic adaptations or transmedial works. The latter offers previously nonexistent "canon" (Brummitt 125) revelations on characters in the series or aspects of the wizarding world. Some of these revelations have been seemingly innocuous, as mundane as the history of trains in the wizarding world and how the Hogwarts Express came to exist (Rowling). Others of Rowling's additions to the storyworld, however, have caused a stir in the fandom, bringing into question the consistency of Rowling's revelations with other canonical installations of the wizarding world. For example, though Minerva McGonagall was once purported by Rowling to have begun teaching at Hogwarts in 1956 @renegadeapostle), she was seen teaching at Hogwarts in *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald*, which takes place in 1927 (Kaufman). Many fans argued whether this oversight was intentional or not, with some claiming that the *Fantastic Beasts* character was a *different* Minerva McGonagall, after which the well-known Hogwarts professor of the original novels was named, while others claimed it was merely a mistake on Rowling's part (Kaufman). Rowling has yet to weigh in on the subject, leading some fans to believe that this question of canon will be answered in one of the future installments of the *Fantastic Beasts* film franchise. Regardless of whether this will be explained in the future, however, fans might never have questioned the canon of either story had Rowling not stated McGonagall's age and history on Pottermore (from which specific years have since been removed on Wizarding World). The fact that fans are now

left unsure of the canonical implications of Rowling's previous mentions of the character coupled with McGonagall's most recent appearance in the storyworld's newest transmedial installments illustrates how creator commentary can influence fans and their interpretations of the storyworld, ultimately threatening their ontological security as a result.

Similarly, the *Star Wars* fandom has suffered threats to ontological security as a result of creator commentary and claims made by its producers. Not only has George Lucas, the storyworld's original creator, changed the canon of the Skywalker saga multiple times over the decades—as noted by the "Han shot first" debate (Rogers)—but fans were also thrown for a loop in 2014 when Lucasfilm (owned by Disney) announced that the "hundreds of titles collectively known as the Expanded Universe" (Taylor) would no longer be considered canon within the storyworld. The Expanded Universe (EU) was composed of books and comics which covered the post-*Return of the Jedi* storyline, and were largely considered "...second-class citizens in Star Wars [sic] canon, occupying a separate tier below the movies and TV shows" (Taylor). This does not take away from the fact, however, that many fans *did* consider these continuations to be canon, despite Lucas' lack of involvement in the works, and something for which their reclassification as "Star Wars Legends" did not compensate. In addition, the launch of Disney+ (Disney's online streaming platform) revealed yet another version of *A New Hope*, which features the infamous Han Solo and Greedo shootout scene altered yet again (reportedly by Lucas, before Disney's acquisition of the property) (Rogers). As Adam Rogers says in an article for *Wired*:

> Put another way, the Disney+ version of *Star Wars* means the canon now includes 1977's *A New Hope* and its 1981 revise, 1980's *Empire*, and 1983's *Jedi*. The 1997 special editions, on film and in 2K resolution. The 2004 special editions on DVD, from a 1080p

master. The 2011 special editions, again in 1080p, for Blu-ray. And now … this. Which

is what, exactly?

Rogers' summary highlights the confusion for fans and viewers that comes with seemingly

endless retroactive changes creators and producers of a text make. As mentioned in an article for

Looper, there are several details and transmediations (beyond the EU) which Disney implicitly

wants fans to forget, including Anakin Skywalker's lack of a father, two animated series (*Star

Wars: Droids* and *Ewoks*), the *Dark Forces* video game (which tells the story of how the Rebels

acquired the Death Star plans very differently than *Rogue One* did), and the *Clone Wars* movie,

among other details (Gates). This illustrates Harvey's point that intellectual property rights

holders control the narrative of a franchise and determine the direction of transmedial expansions

(*Fantastic*, "A Taxonomy"). With Lucas's penchant for reprising the franchise decades later (as

seen with the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy) and Disney's tendency to make films for the sake (and

exploitation) of nostalgia (Rahman-Jones), who is to say that Disney will not continue to release

Star Wars films decades into the future, which may or may not adhere to the current purported

"canon"? This uncertainty in the franchise threatens ontological security for fans of the beloved

series, just as Rowling's commentary and transmedial continuations do for *Potter* fans and Weiss

and Benioff's commentary has done for *GoT* fans.

Weiss and Benioff are, admittedly, in somewhat of a different situation than Rowling and

Lucas, as they are not the original creators of the storyworld; they have merely adapted the text.

GoT has even gone beyond adaptation and moved into the realm of creation. Weiss and Benioff

have removed, altered, and added characters to the series, differentiating it from Martin's novels,

and by season 7 of the series had surpassed the storylines of Martin's published novels

("Differences". As Martin says on his "Not a Blog": "I am working in a very different medium

than David and Dan [...] There are characters who never made it onto the screen at all, and others who died in the show but still live in the books…" ("An Ending"). However, Weiss and Benioff have, over time, established themselves as the sole "authors" of the adaptation, with occasional input from Martin in the later seasons. Their elimination of directors' input in the "Inside the Episode" commentary of the final four seasons has functioned to achieve just that, indicating that they are the authority. Even when citing previous conversations with Martin, Martin is not included in the featurettes, though Weiss and Benioff use Martin's input as justification for their narrative choices. As such, they remain the authority figures of the televisual text and encourage viewers to consider their input and insight immediately after watching each episode. Similarly, Rowling has strategically remained the authority figure of the *Harry Potter* franchise, controlling the canon of the narrative (however confusing that might be at times) and Lucas and Disney have done the same with *Star Wars*. The contradictory reports of canon by Rowling and Disney's revocation of canon after acquiring *Star Wars* both threaten fans' ontological security, just as Weiss and Benioff's unsubstantiated claims in their commentary threaten that of *GoT* fans.

"Valar Morghulis": Character Deaths, Recasting, and Ontological Security

In the third chapter of *Post-Object Fandom*, Williams discusses how ontological security is threatened and subsequently renegotiated by fans in the event of character deaths and recastings or regenerations of characters during a show's run. She does so by examining the treatment of specific characters and their departures from their respective television series. The reasons for each character's departure varied, ranging from reported strained relationships between the actor playing the character and the producers, to the death of an actor playing a role. Among some of her observations throughout the chapter, Williams points out that while

character departures are not unexpected by fans—given the long-running format of the televisual medium—fans remain mindful of genre when viewing television series, and the genre of a television series affects fans' expectations of character departures. For example, while fans might expect to see characters depart in various ways in the "longer narrative arc" (*Post-Object* 47) of a soap opera, character departures are not as expected in shorter form cult or drama series (such as *GoT*). Williams also notes the affective connections between fans and television characters, stating:

> Much work on television programmes [sic] has considered the importance of affective connections between fans, characters and the actors who play them [...] since the bond between viewers and characters is one of the main ways in which audiences become attached to specific shows. (47)

This illustrates the importance of a character's role on a show in providing ontological security to viewers, as many fans become emotionally attached to characters, identifying with them in some way and suffering a sense of disruption when that character departs from a series.

Throughout the chapter, Williams observes fans' expectations for character departures, noting that many fan responses to a character's departure hinge on how the character leaves the show and whether there is narrative resolution. In her examination of Cordelia Chase of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* spinoff series *Angel*, Williams notes that ontological security is not as threatened for viewers when they know that a character will be leaving a show ahead of time. In her brief comparison of *Angel* to *GoT*, Williams says, "In contrast to the surprise of unexpected character deaths such as in *Game of Thrones*' infamous 'Red Wedding' scene or the killing off of major characters [...] Cordelia's demise was anticipated and therefore presented less of a shock to fans who identified with the character" (*Post-Object* 52-53). As Williams' statement suggests,

GoT was known during its run for its many character deaths, including many major characters, throughout the series. None of the departures of those characters were ever announced ahead of time, leaving fans shocked when season one's protagonist, Ned Stark, was suddenly beheaded at the end of the season, or when the beloved characters Catelyn and Robb Stark were brutally murdered during a wedding feast in season three. As Williams says,

> One need only look, for example, at the response when HBO series *Game of Thrones* aired an episode entitled 'Red Wedding', where several popular main characters were violently killed off, for evidence of the strong bonds viewers may have with the characters and the often powerful reactions they demonstrate when those characters are taken away. (47)

Given how strongly many viewers identify with their favorite characters in television shows, fans' ontological security can undoubtedly come under threat, both by the mere fact that the character is leaving the show and by the manner of their departure. Few *GoT* characters were written out of the show any other way than by being killed off, and violently at that. While there were instances of a character being brought back to life—most notably, Jon Snow—once most characters were killed on the show, they did not return.

Moreover, the way *GoT* utilized death throughout the show changed over time. In its first several seasons, the show was well-known for "subverting expectations" (Hello Future Me; Monroe; Nando v Movies), often by subverting fantasy tropes and killing major, traditionally noble, characters like Ned, Catelyn, and Robb Stark. The show was praised for this in its early seasons, and even though it threatened viewers' ontological security for beloved main characters to die suddenly and violently, it became a well-known trait of the show, so much so that the subversion of viewers' expectations became an expectation itself. In one viewer's analysis of

Oberyn Martell's death in season 4, he notes how, although the audience has come to expect that good, noble characters are not victorious throughout the show, Oberyn's death is still a surprise: "What happens a few seasons in when the audience starts predicting the unpredictable? How do you maintain tension? Well, in *Game of Thrones*'s case, you subvert their expectations by not subverting them" (Nando v Movies). Additionally, while Oberyn had just under 40 minutes of screen time while he was on the show, and he was by no stretch of the imagination a main character, his role was well-developed enough that his death felt significant for many fans. As his fate was tied to Tyrion's, Oberyn's death affected him as well, and created a conflict with the Sandsnakes in Dorne for several seasons to come. In later seasons, by contrast, there were less significant deaths (until the very end of season eight) and more deaths of minor characters. As another viewer notes, "What I've learned from *Game of Thrones* is that the death of a character is most impactful when it has multiple purposes, when it happens to characters who are important to the overall narrative, when it gives viewers and other characters the chance to process and grieve, and when the fallout of the death is lasting" (Razbuten). Because of the pattern *GoT* established for itself early on in the series, that it was "a show willing to kill anyone" (Razbuten), many fans felt the stakes were lowered in later seasons, as several major characters were repeatedly put in life-threatening situations and somehow always came out alive. While the respite from the deaths of major characters might have eased the threat on ontological security for some viewers, it likely caused ontological insecurity for others, as the show felt "less like *Game of Thrones*" in the later seasons (Razbuten).

In addition, many actors were recast during *GoT*'s run. While Williams explores recasting in *Post-Object Fandom* through the *Doctor Who* storyworld, that situation is unique in that the regeneration and subsequent recasting of The Doctor is part of the storyworld's

mythology. This was not the case with *GoT*, and as such any recasting decisions within the series cannot be explained away with mythology or canon. Granted, none of these replacements were attached to the major characters of the series; however, the many actor changes over the course of the series' eight seasons could cause confusion in a show that boasts such a sprawling cast with intertwining storylines. While some of the changes were made for logistical purposes, such as young actors being replaced by older actors to demonstrate the passage of time (e.g., Tommen and Myrcella Baratheon), other replacements were made for aesthetic purposes, such as The Children of the Forest (who were originally cast to look like actual children, before being changed aesthetically to look more like they were originally described in Martin's novels). This particular casting replacement was perhaps more problematic because the characters did not reappear until two seasons later (originally appearing at the end of season four and reappearing in season six). With the new casting choice and completely different aesthetic, viewers were likely confused as to who these characters were upon their reappearance.

Other notable examples of recasting throughout the series include Daario Naharis (played by Ed Skrein in season three and Michiel Huisman in seasons four through six, with the actors' costuming and styling differing completely), Gregor "The Mountain" Clegane (played by three different actors throughout the show's run), and Beric Dondarrion (who was also not seen for an entire season before reappearing as a different actor) (Ashton). While viewers were likely not as attached to these actors as they might have been to some of the major characters in the series, the jarring physical and aesthetic changes between many of these original actors and their replacements can easily cause confusion for viewers. As Williams states, "Changes in the physical appearance of a favourite [sic] character (or actor) may, like the death of an actor, threaten fans' sense of ontological security" (180). This is especially true when viewers are

asked to remember characters from seasons before who no longer look the way they were first represented, either due to an acting change, an aesthetic change, or both. This ultimately threatens viewers' ontological security.

Other fantastic transmedial franchises have recast or altered roles, including *Harry Potter*, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and *Star Wars*. Similar to *GoT*, the films in these franchises have been released over many years (decades, in the case of *Star Wars*), and as such changes in cast and visual effects over time are to be expected. In the case of *Harry Potter*, many of the changes in cast can be explained by the first film's lower budget; as the franchise grew, major characters were played by more bankable actors. For example, Voldemort was originally played by Richard Bremmer, but was replaced by Ralph Fiennes when the character resurfaced in later films, and Bremmer was not surprised when "they just went for a bigger name, being Hollywood-led" (A. Bell). Like *GoT*, many of the other recast characters were minor (e.g., Vincent Crabbe and The Fat Lady), at the very least in the early films, though some characters did grow slightly in prominence as the franchise progressed (e.g., Bill Weasley, Griphook, and Helena Ravenclaw). The MCU has similarly recast some of the actors in its franchise, most notably Terrance Howard's replacement by Don Cheadle as War Machine, and Edward Norton's replacement by Mark Ruffalo as The Hulk. Though there was never an official statement released regarding the former, there were rumors that Howard's departure had something to do with his salary in comparison to Robert Downey Jr.'s, and Edward Norton reportedly had "creative conflicts" behind the scenes of *The Incredible Hulk* (Dumaraog). Both reasons—while not unexpected in "Hollywood-led" films—clearly reiterate Williams' assertion that television and film are part of "a commercially driven and ever-changing media landscape" (*Post-Object Fandom* 267). While fans are aware of this landscape and the inevitability that some roles will be

recast in a longform franchise such as the MCU, it does not mean they are unaffected by these changes. As one Reddit user indicated, "…Recasting really does mess with my sense of belief and connectivity in the MCU. It just annoys me whenever I watch Iron Man or The Incredible Hulk [sic] now because of casting changes…" (AwesomeCauliflower68).

While *Star Wars* has recast minimal characters by comparison, particularly considering the span of the films' releases, the franchise has affected fans' ontological security by changing representations of different characters over time through the use of CGI. Lucas's prequel trilogy has largely been panned by audiences for several reasons, not least of which was "Lucas' [sic] reliance on special effects…" (Liptak). However, the CGI *characters* in the prequels did not represent humans; they were fictional species (Jedi master Yoda, represented by an animatronic puppet in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, and Jar Jar Binks). While the use of CGI and special effects in the prequels has been met with some derision since their release, it was not so much offensive to fans as it was "annoying" (Stewart). Such was not the case when Lucasfilm released *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, which featured controversial CGI "appearances" from Peter Cushing as Grand Moff Tarkin and a young Carrie Fisher as Princess Leia Organa. The film, released in December of 2016, featured a posthumous "performance" by Cushing, who died of prostate cancer in 1994, and a CGI rendering of Fisher's likeness, who died a mere eleven days after the release of the film. Both appearances were seen by many as "uncanny," "either as praise for its uncannily lifelike quality or as a criticism of its falling in the 'uncanny valley' [...] the phenomenon in which things that appear very nearly but not entirely human seem strange and creepy" (Sargeant 22). Although just a cameo, Leia's brief reappearance seemed to many to be "a more distracting character reprise than Tarkin, especially since it was meant to close out the movie on a note of hopeful nostalgia" (Sargeant 18). These reappearances and digital recreations

of these characters were not done out of "necessity"—as Paul Walker's "digital resurrection" in *Furious 7* could be classified, since Walker died during filming (Sargeant 18-19)—and were instead "a repurposing of the actors['] image[s]" (Bode 50). These repurposings seem a "denigrat[ion of] the craft of acting" (Sargeant 22), and are perhaps more of a threat to ontological security than quietly replacing an actor's role, as was done with the *Harry Potter* character Albus Dumbledore after the death of Richard Harris, who portrayed the character in the first two films.

Williams discusses the "disruptive potential of death" (*Post-Object* 55), as noted by Giddens, and builds on this idea by examining the deaths of actors John Spencer and Cory Monteith, their respective characters on *The West Wing* and *Glee*, and fans' responses to the loss of both actor and character. Williams found that Spencer's reappearance in *The West Wing* following his death (using previously shot scenes) was also uncanny for many fans, as the "almost ghostly reappearance" of the actor so soon after his death "provokes...as with the case of digitally created posthumous performances, reflection on notions of mortality, selfhood and identity" (*Post-Object* 58). While Monteith's likeness did not appear at all in the episode of Glee which addressed his off-screen death, Monteith was of a similar age range to that of many viewers of *Glee*. As such, his death was likely doubly intrusive to fans' ontological security, as "this loss of shared life trajectory can lead to ruptures in self-identity [...]" (*Post-Object* 64).

Fisher's portrayal of Leia was again brought back for *The Last Jedi* and *The Rise of Skywalker* (though not through CGI, except for a brief, wordless scene in *Rise*)—the former by concluding filming of Fisher's scenes before the actress' death, and the latter by repurposing unused footage of Fisher from filming of *The Force Awakens* (Cavna; Yahoo Entertainment)). Fisher's reappearance in films released following her death, likely a testament to Disney's

aforementioned affinity for nostalgia, received mixed reviews from fans. Reactions to Fisher's

likeness appearing in *Rogue One* ranged from not even realizing her likeness was CGI

(Ghostfreak) to comparing the CGI to a "realistic video game" (Foxy Avocado). For some fans,

it may have felt as uncanny as the reappearance of Spencer in *The West Wing* following his

death, particularly in the case of *Rogue One*, as Fisher died so soon after it released.

Additionally, she was likely in the same age bracket at the time of her death as many fans of the

original *Star Wars* trilogy, and therefore her posthumous appearance in those films was

potentially doubly disruptive to the ontological security of said fans, much like Monteith's death

which Williams discusses. While *GoT* did not feature any uncanny performances by deceased

cast members (as it, fortunately, was not necessary), the show did disrupt ontological security by

changing the visual representation of many of its characters over the years. Viewers' ontological

security may have been subsequently threatened by having to recall characters whose visual

representations had changed significantly in a show already densely populated with characters

and interwoven storylines.

"Chaos is a ladder": Interim Fandom and Ontological Security

        Williams discusses the notion of "interim fandom" at length in *Post-Object Fandom*,

using the series *Torchwood* as a case study to examine how fans renegotiate their fandom when a

fan object is dormant, but not necessarily officially concluded. Williams refers to this period of

uncertainty as "interim fandom," describing it as "when fans assume that their fan object is

dormant and must readjust or negotiate this when the object becomes active again" (*Post-Object*

191). In her examination of interim fandom, Williams claims that *Torchwood* falls in the realm

of what Mittell calls a "cessation," which is "a stoppage or wrap-up without a definite finality

that it will be the end of the series…" (qtd. in *Post-Object* 191), leaving fans unsure of whether the show will ever continue. *GoT* falls more into Mittell's definition of a "finale," which is a conclusion to a show which is "widely anticipated and framed as [an] ending to a beloved (or at least high-rated) series" (qtd. in *Post-Object* 31). However, *Game of Thrones*'s storyworld remains in flux, as Martin's novels have yet to conclude and Martin has repeatedly discussed the likelihood of several shows within the *GoT* universe airing in the coming years (Martin "An Ending," "And Then," and "HBO") each of which he labels as "a prequel rather than sequel, a successor rather than a spinoff" (Martin "And Then").

In her research in *Post-Object Fandom*, Williams's findings indicate that fans overwhelmingly had similar requirements of television revivals that they did of television endings. Those expectations included "aesthetics, storylines, and [retention of] the 'essence' of the original series" (170), "character continuity, loyalty to long-term fans and the involvement of the original creative teams" (171), and "hav[ing] something new to say and [...] avoid[ing] re-treading old and familiar ground" (180). In the case of *GoT*, the possibility of a resurrection of the storyworld treads a fine line between potentially hindering fans' ontological security and reassuring it. As Williams states,

> While fans of a decisively cancelled series are often reticent about reviving a narrative universe for reasons discussed above, fans of texts that are in an indeterminate state, and who find themselves in periods of interim fandom, are often more enthusiastic about a return. (192)

Given the poor reception of *GoT*'s finale, a continuation of the storyline could be positively received by fans. The "successor" shows currently in the works, however, are all prequels, according to Martin, and contain none of the characters from the original television series

("HBO"); that definitively eliminates the possibility of "character continuity" mentioned by Williams, and the possibility of "fixing" any character storylines with which fans were unhappy. In addition, given that the infamous petition to re-shoot season eight of *GoT* asked for the *removal* of showrunners Weiss and Benioff from the hypothetical project—calling the writers "woefully incompetent" (D.)—the retention of the original creative team would likely disappoint fans instead of reassuring them. However, the span of timelines in the successor shows ranges from 90 years before the events of *GoT* to as far back as ten thousand years prior (Martin "HBO"), indicating that these potential shows could, indeed, "have something new to say" (*Post-Object* 180), and subsequently re-secure fans' ontological security.

Rowling similarly re-opened the *Harry Potter* storyworld, creating both a continuation of the familiar storyline with *The Cursed Child* and a series of prequels with the *Fantastic Beasts* franchise. The play received a "mixed reception," with some fans praising the casting of Black actress Noma Dumezweni as Hermione Granger, but many feeling as if the play was a worse version of the fanfiction they had been reading for years prior to its release (Ohlheiser). The *Fantastic Beasts* film franchise has been similarly criticized, especially after *The Crimes of Grindelwald* (the second film in the series) revealed that Nagini, Voldemort's pet snake in the original novels, was actually an Asian woman trapped in a snake's body all along. Over the years, amidst Rowling's many tweets and Pottermore/Wizarding World content, "fans felt uneasy about Rowling's additions because they felt like retroactive attempts to make her original books more diverse" (Ohlheiser). Because of the criticism Rowling has received over the years following the novels' cessation, including that they lacked diversity, many fans find her commentary—such as the retroactive reveal that Dumbledore was gay—is an attempt to diversify her storyworld as a response to those criticisms. Rowling's various Potterverse

resurrections seem to have continued to disappoint fans in this and various other ways (Doran),

causing fans to grapple with what they imagined Harry's fate to be following the end of

Rowling's seventh novel and what Rowling has revealed it to be through her subsequent

commentary and storyworld extensions. As Williams states,

> The threat to fan identity that may be caused by the failure of a resurrection can be a
>
> source of anxiety for many fans. If the return of a beloved object undermines the original
>
> attachment and sense of pleasure that is gained from being a fan, there is a strong desire
>
> to ward off this threat and to avoid being disappointed or, even, embarrassed by its
>
> failure. (*Post-Object* 178)

Like Williams suggests, there is a feeling amidst the *Potter* fandom that the transmedial

expansions Rowling has sanctioned have disappointed (or even embarrassed) fans, and did not

live up to their expectations. Rowling's prequels also contain some familiar characters from her

original novels (e.g., Nagini, Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, etc.), adhering to the

"character continuity" (*Post-Object* 171) which Williams suggests fans usually desire in a

continuation of their fan object. This is something which the potential *GoT* successor shows

reportedly will not do, as they will take place far in the storyworld's past. However, while the

prequel shows Martin has discussed likely would not be subject to the *same* criticism as

Rowling's have been, they run the possibility of disappointing fans in much the same way,

particularly if they attempt to address criticisms of the original texts (either Martin's novels or

GoT), as Rowling's prequels seem to have done.

While a storyworld's narrative may be stuck in the limbo of interim fandom, creators

may keep the storyworld alive through various paratextual additions, which are often

commercialized. Prior to Rowling's narrative expansions to the *Potter* franchise and storyworld,

Rowling launched the original version of Pottermore, which differed from both the re-imagined Pottermore that launched in 2015 and the Wizarding World website which has since replaced it. The original version of Pottermore was initially announced in June of 2011, only a month before the last film installment of the *Potter* franchise was set to release in theaters, and a year after Universal Orlando's Wizarding World of Harry Potter opened. In "Old Pottermore," as fans sometimes refer to it, visitors were able to navigate a virtual rendering of the *Harry Potter* story, which took visitors through "moments" they could interact with and explore, unlocking the "exclusive content" previously mentioned along the way. In his initial reaction to the announcement of Old Pottermore, Jenkins discussed the possibilities for the site, and posited that it was likely an effort to keep the fan community alive following the last installment of the films ("Three"). Jenkins's suppositions about the possibilities for Pottermore suggest that Rowling was likely taking advantage of the interim *Potter* fandom that would exist before her transmedial expansions were released. As a result of the relatively recent opening of the *Potter* theme park in Universal Orlando and the launch of Old Pottermore, the storyworld remained culturally relevant during the production of both *The Cursed Child* and the first *Fantastic Beasts* film. The strategic announcements and launches of transmedia expansions exemplified by the Potter theme park and Pottermore alongside Williams's note that fan object revivals are often economically driven illustrates how fans' self-identities and ontological security can be "undermine[d]" (175), especially during interim fandom.

While pilots have been confirmed for several of the five shows Martin has reported he is working on, there is yet no guarantee that they will see the light of day. The uncertainty of the storyworld's revival coupled with the potential for it to disappoint fans serves to create ontological insecurity among the fandom. Williams mentions several times throughout *Post-*

Object Fandom that television is a commercially driven media landscape (30, 174, 175, 187, 200), and with *GoT*'s impressive revenue—estimated to be roughly $2.28 billion across its eight seasons (Entertainment Strategy Guy)—it is no surprise that HBO has greenlit the many successor shows Martin has mentioned on his "Not a Blog." However, Williams stresses many fans' aversion to participating in such a consumerist narrative, which is often the deciding factor in whether a televisual storyworld is resuscitated (*Post-Object*, 174-175). She states:

> However, some fans remain ambivalent about openly accepting and embracing the commercial value they possess as target audiences/consumers for new imaginings of dormant fan objects, often preferring to reject such new texts as commercial, economically driven and inferior. (175)

This economically-driven industry, Williams says, "tends to ignore what fans want because of financial factors" (187), leaving fans' ontological security at risk. This is particularly relevant for *GoT* fans in the wake of a *commercially* successful (but otherwise criticized) final season, with the possibility of several successor television shows which may or may not live up to fan expectations.

"If you think this has a happy ending, you haven't been paying attention": Unsatisfactory Endings and Ontological Insecurity

As mentioned previously, *GoT* falls into Mittell's televisual ending category of a "finale," which "are not thrust upon creators, but emerge out of the planning process of crafting an on-going serial, and thus the resulting discourses center around authorial presence and the challenges of successfully ending a series" (qtd. in *Post Object* 31). Weiss and Benioff were not only aware of when the series would end several years before the eighth and final season aired,

but in fact chose to end it at that point themselves, despite HBO offering them the option and means to extend the series (Hibberd; Tassi). Similar to the *Lost* fans which Williams discusses in *Post-Object Fandom*, *GoT* fans knew significantly ahead of time when the series would end. While HBO did not officially announce the air date for the eighth and final season until about six months prior to its release, showrunners Weiss and Benioff did speculate years prior that the final two seasons would be seven and six episodes long, respectively (Melas). In her discussion of *Lost*, Williams notes that many fans engage in a "rejection discourse" to renegotiate their ontological security, taking up a "critically distanced or defensive posture" (*Post-Object* 104) regarding their fan object. This critical position can be exacerbated when fans and show creators are aware of when a series will end, as opposed to being surprised by a cancellation or sudden end to the series. "Such self-protective posturing," Williams notes, "allows fans to ward off any emotional upset when the show ends as they rationalize their affective ties away via the suggestion that the show had ceased to be worthy of their attention" (106). As such, fans may begin distancing themselves from a show through this rejection discourse prior to the show's cessation in an effort to prepare themselves for an unsatisfactory ending. Fans can be even more critical of a series finale when they know ahead of time when a series will end, as they are "acutely aware of the finite amount of time left to enjoy the narrative diegesis of the series," (109) and feel "a level of blame toward the writers and producers" (110). This is likely the state of mind many fans had as they watched *GoT*'s final season, which was largely disappointing for many, as evidenced by the widely circulated petition to rewrite the final season (D.).

Though many *GoT* fans were disappointed with the direction Weiss and Benioff took certain storylines, their main grievance seems to have been with the lack of development in those storylines, rather than their outcome. As previously mentioned, HBO offered the showrunners

carte blanche with the end of the series: "They said, 'We'll give you the resources to make this what it needs to be, and if what it needs to be is a summer tentpole-size spectacle in places, then that's what it will be,'" Weiss stated in an interview with Entertainment Weekly (Hibberd). Benioff built off Weiss's statement, saying, "HBO would have been happy for the show to keep going, to have more episodes in the final season" (Hibberd). Fans' frustrations seem exacerbated not only by Weiss and Benioff's refusal of HBO's offer, but also with the reason behind their perceived haste: their then-involvement with a new *Star Wars* installment set to release in 2022. The pair said of the announcement, "We are honored by the opportunity, a little terrified by the responsibility, and so excited to get started as soon as the final season of 'Game of Thrones' is complete" (Sharf). Many fans took this to mean that Weiss and Benioff were eager to sever their ties with *GoT* in order to begin their work with *Star Wars* and attributed the rushed nature of the final season to this announcement. Following the backlash to season eight, however, Weiss and Benioff "have walked away from their much-publicized deal with Disney's Lucasfilm to launch a feature film trilogy in 2022" (Boucher), and are no longer involved with the *Star Wars* project. Although there is no official indication that this is due to the poor reception of *GoT*'s final season, the timing of their separation from the project is questionable (to say the least).

Many of the common complaints surrounding season eight boil down to one unmet expectation, mentioned by Williams as one of the most important characteristics of a televisual ending: it must be "true to the series" (*Post-Object* 35). Fans found several character arcs to be unsatisfying, including those of Daenerys Targaryen, Jaime Lannister, and Cersei Lannister. Additionally, many fans felt that there were too few significant deaths in the final season. This complaint may seem counterintuitive, given the idea that character deaths can threaten fans' ontological security. However, throughout its run, *GoT* established itself as somewhat of the

antithesis to other, less "realistic" fantasy storyworlds, like that of *Lord of the Rings*. As previously mentioned, Hassler-Forest offers that *GoT* "can be read as global capitalism's response to Tolkienian high fantasy" (19). Martin himself also made a similar comparison; in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Martin famously mentioned Tolkien's lack of realism in *Lord of the Rings*, asking, "What was Aragorn's tax policy? Did he maintain a standing army? What did he do in times of flood and famine? And what about all these orcs..." and later stated, "I've tried to get at some of these in my books. My people who are trying to rule don't have an easy time of it. Just having good intentions doesn't make you a wise king" (Gilmore). This illustrates a theme in the storyworld, the "law of unintended consequences," which sees many well-meaning characters endure hardship because of the reality of their circumstances and the choices they and others have made (Gilmore). Martin's novels and *GoT* accomplished this largely through their depictions of violent deaths, which would likely be typical in such a pseudo-medieval setting.

Many fans have supported Martin's views on the importance of realism in the storyline. Consequently, some fans have been underwhelmed by the deaths in the last few seasons, as they have occurred mostly to minor characters who did not much bearing on the narrative (Razbuten). One viewer notes that

> ...it feels emotionally manipulative. It's a way to get viewers to feel like a situation is high stakes by killing characters who seem important while not having to sacrifice the characters they have been putting the most focus into. This leads to arcs ending at unsatisfying times in a characters' progression and it feels like the writers abandoning plot threads in favor of having more time for the marquis characters. (Razbuten)

As a result, while the loss of beloved characters was especially jarring in the first few seasons, and likely threatened viewers' ontological security, it came to be expected in *GoT* over time. By

the eighth season, then, when several large battles were fought, complete with ice zombies and fire-breathing dragons, many fans were shocked and even disappointed to see that very few major characters died. This prompted the argument of several characters having "plot armor," which is "essentially when a story defies logic to protect its main characters" (Netzel). While there are several near-deaths in the Battle of Winterfell, during which it seems almost certain that characters like Samwell Tarly have been overrun by undead soldiers, some of those characters reappear inexplicably unscathed later on, which seems out of place for the show, not "true" to the series, and thus threatening to fans' ontological security.

Another major disappointment for many fans was the character arc of Daenerys Targaryen in the final season. The season showcases the character's descent into an all-consuming rage and corruption, which ultimately leads to her burning an entire city to the ground. While arguments have been made on either side, with some viewers claiming there were signs throughout the series all along pointing to Daenerys' eventual demise (Gardner), others claim that the minimal foreshadowing throughout the series did not constitute proper character development, and thus her fate in the final season felt unconvincing (Trope Anatomy). Fans on either side of the fence, however, seem to agree that her descent in the final season, whether foreshadowed or not, was rushed and poorly handled:

> First of all, within the actual scene, it's hard to tell what it actually is that makes her snap. Is it the bells, the Red Keep, the prospect of Cersei? The scene doesn't visually clarify what exactly she's reacting to...because of the lack of externalization, it doesn't get the message across. Second of all, it feels like the most recent episodes, the show took a route that could've naturally curved in that direction…[but] rather than letting the story

play out until it got to its natural destination, they decided on a destination and forced the

story into it. (T. Williams)

This viewer's examination indicates how Weiss and Benioff have failed to portray character

motivations within the show itself, something which they have often attempted to address in their

"Inside the Episode" commentary instead. In addition, this viewer's observation that writers

"forced" the narrative indicates that Daenerys's character arc seems rushed and poorly executed.

Some fans have gone so far on YouTube as to provide their own alternate endings to the series,

essentially rewriting the final season in a series of videos (Flick Fanatics, "Part 1" and "Part 2").

A form of fanfiction, this indicates fans' desire for continuity and satisfactory narrative closure

that the final season of *GoT* did not seem to provide. By imagining what could have been, fans

are able to renegotiate their threatened ontological security.

In addition, several of the narrative decisions in the final season confused fans, with

many fans claiming they felt these developments undermined much of what the show had

previously emphasized. As film critic YouTube channel Film Radar discusses in a video

regarding the final season (before the final two episodes had aired):

I genuinely can't believe they would bring an end to the Night King that easily...if all is

as it seems and the main focus is now Cersei, I think that is a severe misstep that will

have fundamentally ruined the entire show...I think we should have seen more

devastation at the hands of the Night King. It should have been a harder-fought battle

where the side of the living suffered heavier losses, because honestly now the rest of the

series feels pretty pointless. (Netzel)

As expressed in this video, many narrative choices confused fans as to the larger message of the

series, leaving fans disappointed that the final season did not stay "true" to the series and

represent a satisfactory conclusion to the story. As a result, fans' ontological security was

threatened not just by the fact that their beloved fan object was coming to an end, but also

because that fan object had failed to meet many fans' expectations.

"Breaking the wheel": Conclusion

At the time of writing, I have been working from home (both professionally and on my thesis) for several weeks. As many transition to what is affectionately being called the "new normal" amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, we as a society are enduring one of the worst collective threats to our ontological security that many of us have seen in our lifetimes. Our everyday functions have been uprooted as we adjust to staying home indefinitely, avoiding contact with others in an attempt to flatten the curve, cancelling plans made long ago, and renegotiating how we interact with others and perform our jobs on a daily basis. During this adjustment period, we struggle to maintain a sense of normalcy, coping with our lack of control in a variety of ways. Some are turning to social media in an attempt to connect virtually to others, while others are stoking their creative fire and using their time in isolation to create art. Some are using their free time to catch up on popular culture they've been wanting to consume, while others must spend their free time looking for employment because they've been laid off. Perhaps more bizarrely, some are hoarding "necessities" for staying home as we navigate this unprecedented situation and renegotiate our ontological security accordingly.

It is important during such a fluctuating cultural moment to examine how exactly we are renegotiating our ontological security, and examine what our coping mechanisms are during such a stressful, chaotic moment in the cultural zeitgeist. Regardless of differing circumstances or mental states, many are coping through humor, sending relatable memes to friends (alongside articles on maintaining mental health and productivity while self-quarantining). Streaming services stocks skyrocket as people fill their time with nostalgic television and film that might restore some of that elusive ontological security. Many fans are revisiting *GoT* memes almost a year after the final season aired, sometimes comparing the year 2020 to awful characters in the

show (or even to all of season eight). Williams states in *Post-Object Fandom*, "Although fans may gain comfort from the routine of their fandom...ontological security is not solely dependent upon such repetitions" (28). Indeed, our fandoms are not our only source of ontological security—that much is clear. However, they do "[ensure] that one can deal with the unexpected and adjust to changes in routine" (28). What does it say about us as a society that in times of strife and collective uncertainty we lean on popular culture for security, relatability, and comfort? What, in turn, does it say about the popular culture we consume if we are not only leaning on it but also *comparing* it to our current feelings of unease?

While I was not living through a pandemic in May of 2019, my ontological security was still threatened as perhaps my favorite show was coming to an end, and an unsatisfying one at that. While many fans claim that the show began to decrease in quality following its fourth season, the final season seems to have been the most disappointing for many fans (myself included). As such, fans negotiated the inherent threat to ontological security caused by the end of their fan object alongside additional threats to security—many of which they had been navigating prior to season eight. Heavily influenced by Williams's work with ontological security and post-object fandom, many of the threats to ontological security I observed were laid out in her book, *Post-Object Fandom*. I was also influenced by Gray's work on paratexts and authorship and Harvey's work on memory and canon. In addition, I drew from transmedia scholars' definitions and examinations of transmedia storytelling (Harvey, *Fantastic*; Jenkins, *Convergence*; Mittell; Ryan & Thon) to discuss how other transmediated storyworlds have threatened fans' ontological security. Using Harvey's definition of "the fantastic," I used other transmediated science-fiction and fantasy storyworlds alongside *GoT* supplementally to exemplify how pervasive ontological insecurity is within the genre.

Namely, *GoT* caused ontological insecurity through the various viewing platforms it was offered on and the subsequent confusion of 1) accessing the show and 2) accessing the various forms of paratextual content, which often differed from platform to platform. Additionally, the show creators attempted to establish themselves as the authority figures over the text, particularly in the latter half of the series, through their commentary on the "Inside the Episode" featurettes which played when viewing *GoT* online. Throughout the show's run, it also threatened fans' ontological security through its character deaths—both how significant they were in earlier seasons *and* how arbitrary many of the deaths felt in the later seasons—and recasting of characters. The circumstances of the show's adaptation/transmediation hybrid status have also left fans in a form of interim fandom, which seems like it will be exploited by HBO producers as there are potentially five new shows the network plans to release within the storyworld. Finally, the show's unsatisfactory finale threatened viewers' ontological security because, for many fans, it did not stay "true" to the series; the same can (and is) said about several of the prior seasons as well, although season eight had higher stakes, being the finale of the show.

As popular culture becomes increasingly transmediated and serialized, with storyworlds expanded sometimes decades after they were first released, it is worth examining how fans respond, and how they are potentially threatened or exploited. Given how influential fandoms are to our self-identities, self-narratives, and development, it is crucial that we study the rhetorical choices made by "authors" and how they affect the ontological security of fans. In addition, fans of transmediated works—particularly "fantastic" works, which have become less niche and more mainstream in recent years—should also be mindful of how their ontological security is affected by their fan objects (though I expect many already are, regardless of whether they know what to term it). Future scholarship can forward or recontextualize this research in a number of ways; as

I stated earlier in my limitations section, I focus here on a television show, much like Williams. Any examinations of film franchises were supplemental and cursory in comparison to my examination of *GoT*, and so it would be worth exploring specific storyworlds and the ways ontological security is affected (or unaffected) by them.

Ultimately, while season eight of *GoT* left me disillusioned in many ways, there are several things I enjoyed about it as well, and the series' earlier seasons still bring me comfort. (I have yet to fully subscribe to the rejection discourse that many of my peers have; I'm not an anti-fan *yet*.) Although I have been studying the show in various ways for what seems far too long now, I will likely be revisiting it very soon purely for pleasure, as I lie nestled in my bed, home for the umpteenth day in a row, secure in the knowledge and acceptance of my temporary ontological *in*security.

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