

Game of Thrones and the Enduringness of Story

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*About 20 years ago, I sat down separately with several film and television development executives in Los Angeles to talk about their aesthetic priorities and what influenced their decisions to greenlight a project. I wrote the findings of the interviews in my book, *For Entertainment Purposes Only* (Lexington Books, 2000). Each person gave me permission to disclose his and her company's names because it was essential to lend credence to the views of such influential leaders on the topic. Among the people I spoke with for the research were development executives from HBO and October Films. Their business priorities were consistent with respect to the profitability of the project, measured by premium channel subscribers and modest ticket sales, respectively. They also noted the generating of buzz as important - Hollywood's term for 'talk' and media attention about a project. All spoke eloquently about their aesthetic priorities which were to remain true to the values of what was then considered independent film.*

*Also described as artsy works with budgets under \$20 million, independent film carries the tacit mandate of telling intimate stories with deep characters portrayed with strong acting. These projects typically differ from major (or mainstream) studio productions in several respects. Mainstream studios typically incur high production costs, emphasize splash over story substance, use high-profile actors to carry the film, and are motivated to maximize ticket sales at the box office or rake in advertising revenue on television. In short, the focus of major studios is on the commercialization of the films they produce and distribute, measuring a project's success in dollars more so than accolades. Of course, there are exceptions in that many mainstream films are simply great, with strong stories and acting such as Paramount and Twentieth Century Fox's *Titanic* and New Line Cinema's *Lord of the Rings*, both high-grossing and award-winning films. But exceptions notwithstanding, mainstream film contrasts sharply with independent film, whose goal is to stay true to the art form by consistently telling compelling stories with high-quality cinematic presentations.*

*Examples of 'indie' films in the 90s were Miramax's *Smoke Signals*, October Films' *The Apostle* and Fox Searchlight's *Boys Don't Cry*, all of which won multiple independent film awards and the last even won an Oscar for best acting. Recently, films such as Annapurna Pictures' *If Beale Street Could Talk* garnered Oscar and Golden Globe wins for acting in 2019 and A24's *Moonlight* won Oscar for best film in 2017. All of these films fit the mold of 'indie' as defined years ago, but there is a spirited debate occurring in the industry today. The debate concerns what constitutes independent film and whether budget should factor into a film's classification as indie or mainstream. We agree that budget should not be a factor, and instead the emphasis remain on the story and the quality of its presentation. We will save these arguments for another day. But it is worth mentioning that none of the arguments consider where the original programming of premium and streaming channels fits, whether in the form of movies or television series.*

Years ago, HBO's original programming was considered independent because it adhered to the indie mandate and the work was done outside of the major studios and their measures for success. Today, like HBO, companies such as Netflix and AMC not only develop award winning movies but also television series. Their success is measured in the indie tradition of awards and of course, channel subscribers rather than commercial advertising dollars. Because of this differentiation, we consider original programming to be of the indie mold.

So, in addition to assessing just how well independent studios have remained true to the sector's values, we wondered if the aesthetic priorities of the industry 20 years ago reflect the aesthetic tastes of the audiences they seek to attract today. If audience preferences aligned with studio priorities, it would suggest that it is the appeal of a story that endures, and audiences simply thirst for a good cinematic presentation of it. Given this, the story's underlying elements could offer insights into what can potentially predict the success of a film or television project.

Twenty years ago, DVRs had not yet arrived; VCRs were the recording devices of the day. Cable TV was limited with just a handful of premium movie channels like HBO and TMC. The world wide web was on the cusp of exploding into homes and moving into mainstream prominence. Mobile phones were quite literally just a phone, not the handheld microcomputers that we use today to manage our everyday lives and stay in constant touch with friends and family through texts, emojis, social media posts, and instant photos. So, with the technological revolution we have experienced since the turn of the century, have audiences' cinematic preferences for independent works changed too? We went about exploring this question with a mini-survey on the HBO series, Game of Thrones (GoT).

Described in part as a fantasy drama, Game of Thrones is a television series set in medieval times about a battle over 7 kingdoms. The past seven seasons has depicted battles among the various factions leading up to the final showdown anticipated in the upcoming and final season, which premieres on April 14th. In addition to war, the show integrates elements of politics, gender, race, class, and age. GoT's U.S. viewership has quadrupled over its seven seasons, growing from about 2.5 to more than 10 million on average per episode. By comparison, The Sopranos series finale drew [11.9 million](#) and The West Wing pulled approximately 8 million viewers on average. The show has also generated a lot of buzz over the years making it arguably the most talked about series, with cultural critics, pundits, psychologists, and marketers weighing in on its value and offering explanations for its appeal. With these achievements, it can be argued that GoT is an outlier because of its wild popularity. We would counter that it is because of its reach that the show warrants a teasing out of the elements that appeal to so many people. In short, GoT seems to exemplify viewers' aesthetic tastes, making it a very appropriate choice for the study.

Viewer Demographics

The web-based survey was administered over two days, March 27th and 28th, 2019. It consisted of 11 questions posed to 540 individuals across the country and of all age groups, asking about their level of interest in the season 8 premiere of GoT. With a response rate of 89%, the survey contained 482 responses and a completion rate of 86%. The sample yielded a margin of error of +/-4.6% at a 95% confidence level. Per Chart 1 in the sidebar, 62% of respondents indicated they were somewhat to very likely to watch the season 8 premiere. Of these, 53% were female. The age band consisting of 45-54 year-olds made up the largest segment at 28% (see Chart 3). Eighteen to 24 and 25 to 34 year-olds comprised 19% each. The respondents' ages are consistent with those noted by [Variety](#), which identified the key demographic for GoT as 18 to 49 years old. Together, this age range makes up more than 70% of the sample.

Chart 1

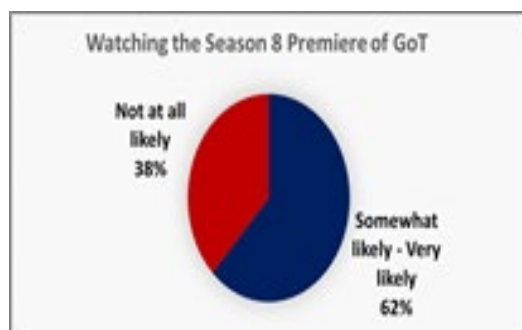


Chart 2

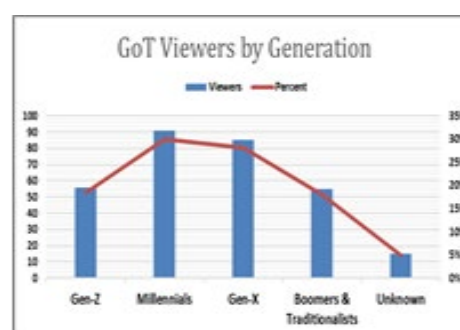
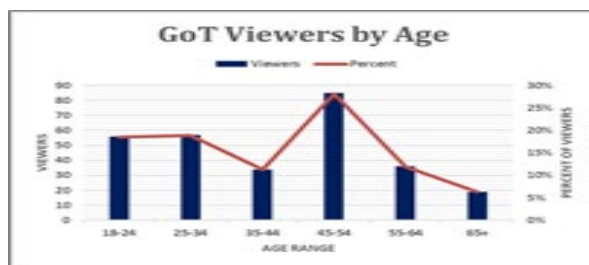


Chart 3



We have been unable to find a mainstream television series that matches GoT's ratings and breadth of appeal across age groups. Most have a younger or older audience, not both. The series boasts an IMDB rating of 9.5 on a 10-point scale! ABC's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. comes to mind when considering a mainstream show that rates high among young audiences (ages 21 – 34) in particular. The action packed, science fiction series approaching its sixth season, has a rating of 7.5 with approximately 2.3 million viewers. It has been twice nominated for an Emmy in the visual effects category only, suggesting that story and depth of characters do not explain the show's appeal. Instead, its staying power is its ability to draw advertising revenue and its possibilities for syndication.

On the older side of the age band is ABC's Castle. The under-rated show is about a writer who partners with a female detective to develop material for his novels, but he falls in love with her along the way. The series ran for 8 seasons, and won Emmys for music, People's Choice awards for Favorite TV Drama, and TV Guide awards for acting. A high quality show with an IMDB rating of 8.5, it pulled strongly among [45 – 64 year olds](#). Recently cancelled, the show enjoys syndication and is still quite popular. But in short, nothing comes close to the broad appeal of the Game of Thrones series.

Chart 4

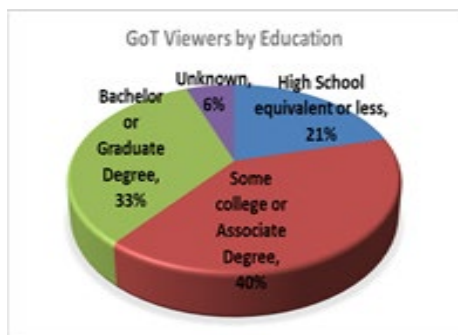
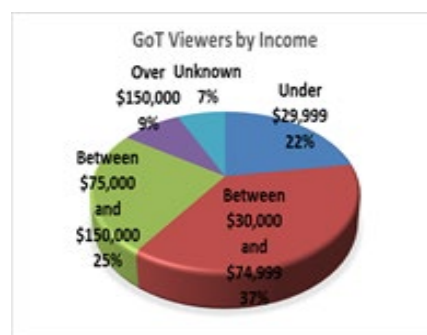


Chart 5



More than 3/4th of survey respondents indicated they had at least some college education (see Chart 5). Interestingly, Game of Thrones is often described as one of the smartest shows on television, "[\[So\] smart, in fact, that it can be hard to follow.](#)" While the educational attainment of the largest audience segment in the sample has some college level education, a fifth of viewers indicated they have attained something less (see Chart 4). This suggests that the show's audience is not monolithic and it has something for everyone.

These bands comprise 22 and 25 percent, respectively, further indicating the show's appeal across income groups. The culmination of the sample's demographics points to Game of Thrones as having a very broad appeal, spanning age bands, education segments, income, and grabbing the interest of both men and women.

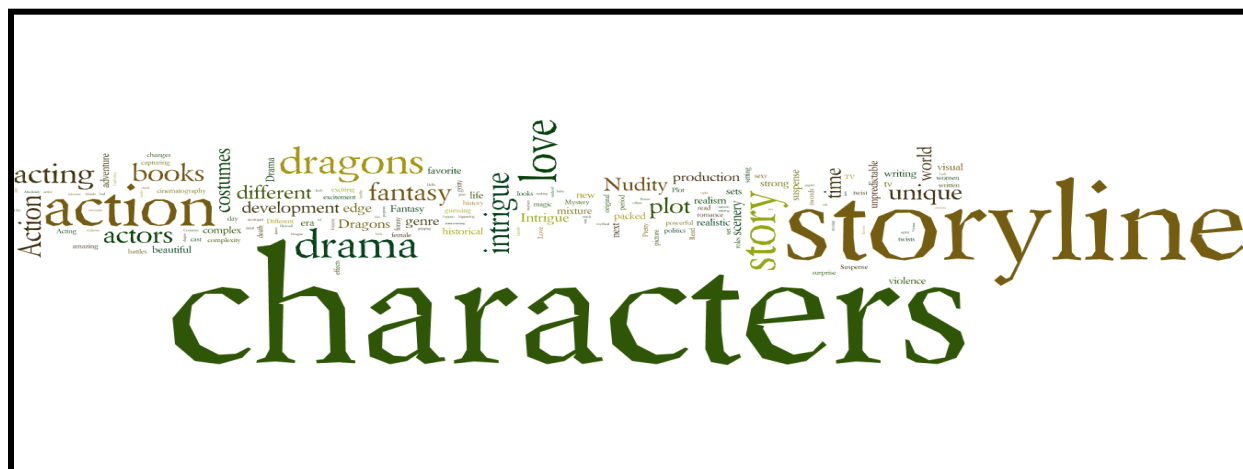
Critical Acclaim

The critical acclaim of cinematic work is one standard of measure for assessing a film or television production. It manifests in awards and positive reviews that essentially validate the quality of the story being told, the depth of the characters, and the strength of the acting. It stands to reason then that a successful production is one that garners a lot of prestigious awards. Awards are the film and television industry's nod to the strength of a show or movie's critical elements. GoT has won numerous prestigious awards over its 7-season run: a Golden Globe for acting and multiple Emmy awards for Outstanding TV Drama Series, acting, production design, music composition, and visual effects just to name a few. The show's accolades are reminiscent of drama series like AMC's *Breaking Bad* (5 seasons), Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* (3 seasons – still running), ABC's *Scandal* (7 seasons). Like GoT, *Breaking Bad* and *The Handmaid's Tale* won multiple Golden Globes for Best TV Series and best acting performances and all won Emmys in all or some categories, including Outstanding Drama Series, writing, acting, cinematography, production design, and others. Baffling is a notable series like HBO's *The Wire* (5 seasons), which was only twice-nominated for Emmys for writing and received no Golden Globe and Emmy nominations for the tremendous acting. The show's IMDB rating is 9.3 out of 10, second in this group only to GoT which has a 9.5. One journalist described it as "[the greatest television \[program\] ever made.](#)" The explanations for this absence of tangible critical acclaim is still being debated 10 years after the show's series finale. Nonetheless, accolades such as these attest to the critical acclaim of these shows. But do the tastes of viewers support the industry's notions about GoT?

Audience Appeal

As shown in Exhibit 1, the most interesting and poignant finding from the survey is how respondents described GoT's appeal for them. The sizes of the words convey their relative frequency in the responses. The largest term is

Exhibit 1 – GoT Appeal



'characters,' suggesting this as the single, most prominent element that grabs their interest. [Critics often laud the complexity of the characters](#) in GoT. Arya's character, for example, defies her expected role to marry royalty and instead becomes a fighter determined to avenge her family. And Daenerys, who began as a victim and over time built an army and nurtured dragons, now wields undeniable power. The depth of the characters and their transformation over the series resonate with the experiences and aspirations of many everyday people who strive for strength and courage. There is also the cunningness of Littlefinger; the immaturity of Joffrey; the brutality of Ramsay; and even the gentility and loyalty displayed by Tyrion and Jorah. Not only can viewers relate to this in terms of what they see,

hear and in some cases experience every day, this breadth of characters in the series reinforces the idea that the show has something that appeals to everyone.

Second in the exhibit are 'storyline' and 'story,' indicating their high importance for respondents. GoT is a story of race, gender, politics, and the wielding of political and military power to conquer. Examples of these are: the ruthlessness practiced by those in power to keep it and gain more; dark skinned people brought out of bondage by a blond, white woman; young and older women in power like Sansa and Cersei, respectively. Viewers can connect with these elements in large part because they are relevant today. But as I wrote in an earlier publication, cinema has historically been tied to the events of the day so it can resonate with people's lives during that period. For example, a flood of war and comedy productions are released during times of military conflict, the former to reflect reality and the latter to provide an escape from its horror. Recently, Aaron Sorkin, a writer of *The West Wing*, noted that the series almost did not air because the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke soon after the show was penned. Said Sorkin, "[We knew] we simply can't do this right now. People will giggle." Today, strong political divisions and race and gender issues are played out daily on television news programs and in social media, making the GoT storyline especially palpable.

As can be seen in Exhibits 2 and 3 below, there are no major differences in the show's appeal for men and women.

Exhibit 2 - GoT Appeal for Women



Exhibit 3 - GoT Appeal for Men



Both emphasize characters and story as appealing elements, highlighting drama, action, acting, fantasy, and intrigue as important but relatively minor. The notable difference between the two is the appearance of 'nudity' for men and 'love' for women. But even these do not come close to the two primary draws of the show.

Escapism and Anticipation

'Action,' 'plot,' 'dragons,' 'fantasy' - it is evident that the level of escapism provided by GoT is quite high. Forty-one percent planned to decorate their homes and/or wear GoT-themed costumes for the viewing, which exemplifies the

degree to which entertainment in general provides for escape from everyday routines. With sports, some fans wear jerseys, guzzle hats and paint the team's colors on their faces to immerse themselves into the event. With cinema, some viewers carry props and don period clothing and costumes imitating those worn in a film or show. Star Wars and GoT are just two examples of this.

More than half of respondents who indicated they were likely to watch the premiere planned to watch it with friends and/or family and many were preparing for its airing much like football fans do for the Big Game. They shared plans to prepare meals, and 4 out of 10 indicated they were somewhat likely to very likely to purchase a big screen television for the event – a [fairly common phenomenon for the Big Game](#). A handful indicated they would binge on the previous episodes to build excitement for what's to come in the season 8 premiere.

In addition to show loyalty, the constant media buzz about GoT spurs its anticipation even before trailers of the premieres are released. For example, a simple search of Game of Thrones articles yielded more than 209 million results. Even if half of these were duplicates, the sheer number demonstrates the wild popularity and interest in the show by journalists, scholars and yes, even laypeople. By comparison, a search of The West Wing yielded 126 million and AMC's Mad Men (8 seasons) 150 million. GoT-related publications were exceeded only by the AMC series, Breaking Bad (5 seasons), which had 241 million hits, ABC's Scandal (7 seasons) 336 million and HBO's The Wire (5 seasons) with a whopping 389 million. College courses have been developed to explore the cultural success of GoT as well as The Wire, and many academics have commented on the appeal of Scandal.

Conclusion

The findings here suggest that the tastes of today's audience do indeed align with those of Hollywood's independent sector of yesterday and that story is the point of intersection. The multi-generational appeal reinforces this along with the use of terms like 'characters,' 'story,' 'storyline,' 'action,' and 'plot,' to pinpoint the elements of the show that account for their interest and enjoyment. Viewers simply have a strong affinity for the characters depicted in the show and the quality of the story unfolding on the screen, consistent with the aesthetic priorities articulated by the development executives I spoke with 20 years ago. We can say then that these qualities are enduring aspects of a cinematic work in that they stand the test of time. Then, now and very likely in the future of cinema, these elements will be the factors by which the potential viewership and critical acclaim of an independent film or television series are predicted. The fact that many viewers can enjoy these original programs commercial-free and in the comfort of their own homes with family and friends is a bonus.

Indie contrasts sharply with mainstream works that pull in audiences with the implied promise of adrenaline rush through action, splash, quick cuts, brief interactions among characters, popular music genres, often cartoonish characters, and recognizable actors with fantastic bodies who appear in the presentation. This strategy has worked for the majors over the past 60 years or so, and particularly since the advent of home computers, mobile phones, DVRs, and DVD players. These technologies have made tickets easy to buy and shows easy to record and rent. A small lot of these works are truly enjoyable. Indie film and television series, however, offer something different. And it is clear from this analysis that its appeal exists across multiple segments of people, and story and characters serve as the threads that connect them.

For more details on the survey and enhanced charts and exhibits, please go to [About the Data](#).