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### **The Game of GAME OF THRONES. George R.R. Martin's A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE and Its Video Game Adaptations**

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Felix Schröter

**The Game of *Game of Thrones*.  
George R.R. Martin's  
*A Song of Ice and Fire* and Its Video  
Game Adaptations**

**Abstract**

Video games have not only become an integral part of most transmedial entertainment franchises but also influenced the narrative and aesthetic conventions of other media, especially film. One consequence of this is the growing prominence of ›game-like‹ narratives (and storyworlds) that subordinate characters and storytelling to more abstract principles of narrative organization. In this article, it is argued that this ›game logic‹ leads to some transmedial storyworlds being especially well-suited for an adaptation as a video game, and that the novel-based transmedial world of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* is such a world. Drawing on transmedial narratology, film studies, and game studies, the relationship between transmedial worlds and games will be discussed with reference to three different *Game of Thrones* video games: the action role-playing game *Game of Thrones* (2012), the browser game *Game of Thrones Ascent* (2013), and the real-time strategy game *A Game of Thrones. Genesis* (2011). As will be shown, all three games follow very different strategies in identifying and implementing the core elements of the respective storyworld, mainly informed by generic conventions and (assumed) player preferences. Thus, the comparison also casts a light on medium-specific strengths and weaknesses regarding video games' contribution to a broader transmedia storytelling context.

## 1. Introduction

Although not a particularly new phenomenon, the growing cultural, economic, and academic relevance of transmedial entertainment franchises like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* has also led to a paradigm shift within media studies and narratology, away from the sole examination of ›narrative‹ in different media toward the discussion of ›transmedial worlds‹ and the way they relate to their medium-specific instantiations. Most prominently, this shift is reflected in the growing popularity of concepts like ›world building‹ (cf. JENKINS 2006: 114), ›storyworlds‹ (cf. HERMAN 2009; RYAN/THON 2014), and ›imaginary worlds‹ (cf. WOLF 2012), which all »extend beyond the stories that occur in them, inviting speculation and exploration« (WOLF 2012: 17).

But however broad the scope of this new paradigm, ›narrativity‹ as a transmedial concept is still regarded as the common center around which different media converge (cf. RYAN/THON 2014); storyworlds are about *stories*, after all. Without trying to dispute this pivotal role of narrative for the representation of transmedial (story)worlds, this article proposes another perspective on the question of how transmedial worlds are organized and represented within individual media. As Wolf notes:

The growth and adaptation of a world, however, goes beyond narrative, and may even have very little to do with narrative. Some degree of a world's aesthetics (the sensory experience of a world) and a world's logic (how a world operates and the reasons behind the way it is structured) must be carried over from one work to another or from one medium to another. (WOLF 2012: 246)

A similar shift has occurred in adaptation studies. In the preface to the 2013 second edition of *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon admits that adaptation studies' emphasis on narrative might not have been appropriately capturing the nature of all processes of adaptation within transmedial franchises. Especially with regard to video games adaptations, she argues that it is less the story itself than the storyworld that is being adapted: »Thematic and narrative persistence is not the name of the new adaptation game; world building is« (HUTCHEON 2013: xxiv).

With narrative (or, at least, ›narrative persistence‹) seemingly becoming less important, it has to be asked what other organizing principles might govern the design of transmedial storyworlds and how these influence the storyworld's instantiations in different media. In this article, I propose that one especially salient organizing feature of contemporary storyworlds is, indeed, what Wolf calls a world's ›logic‹, i.e., the general idea of how a world operates and how it is structured (cf. WOLF 2012: 246). And while this logic can certainly take many forms, my focus will be on a particular sub-group of storyworlds, namely those which feature a distinctive ›game logic‹—a property that, unsurprisingly, becomes especially relevant for the adaptation of the respective storyworld as a (video) game.

In the following, I will elaborate on this claim by discussing the relationship between games, stories, and storyworlds, illustrating my arguments by examining the transmedial world of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and its video game adaptations. Building on the premise that storyworlds adhering to a game logic lend themselves particularly well to an adaptation as a video game, I will compare three different video games: the action role-playing game *Game of Thrones* (2012), the browser game *Game of Thrones Ascent* (2013), and the real-time strategy game *A Game of Thrones. Genesis* (2011). As will be shown, all three games follow very different strategies to identify and implement the core elements of the world of Westeros, but only one actually stays true to what can be identified as the game logic of the novels and the TV series.

## 2. Narrative and Games

Narrativity has become a key concept in the humanities, with narrative being considered a core pattern for cognition and comprehension (cf. GRODAL 1997; HERMAN 2002), as well as for the construction of identity and (autobiographical) history (cf. RUBIN 1995). However, this predominance of narrative as an explanatory concept is no longer uncontested: in the late 1980s and early 1990s, hypertext theoreticians shifted the focus from prototypical narrative to interactive, computer-based ›database narratives‹ (cf. SIMONS 2007). In his seminal 2001 book *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich describes the database as narrative's modern age correlate:

Many new media objects do not tell stories; they don't have beginning or end; in fact, they do not have any development, thematically, formally, or otherwise that would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other. (MANOVICH 2001: 218)

While Manovich's strict juxtaposition of narrative and database may well have overstated the case, it still appropriately captures the fact that digital media allow for an organization of narrative sequences that relies to a lesser extent on traditional concepts of narrative continuity than on ›fragmented‹, ›nonlinear‹, and (most often) ›interactive‹ representations of events. Incidentally, it is this same line of reasoning which has significantly contributed to the emergence of (video) game studies as an interdisciplinary field of research, with the so-called ›ludology vs. narratology‹ debate remaining its influential founding myth (cf. THON 2015). While this debate is by and large settled today,<sup>1</sup> in its early days it has brought forward very fruitful examinations

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<sup>1</sup> In the late 1990s, a number of scholars advocated for an approach to video game studies that recognized their primary identity as games. Using methodologies from anthropology, philosophy, or game design, they rejected treating video games solely as narrative media that ›happen to be interactive‹ (cf. AARSETH 2004; ESKELINEN 2004). Instead, they stressed ontological questions (What are the essential features and properties of video games *as games*?) and experiential aspects of video game play (How are games experienced as playful and rule-based activities?). By now,

of the ontological properties of games as well as a discussion of ›games‹ (or game-like features) as transmedially valid concepts. In what follows, both aspects will be briefly discussed, as they significantly contribute to the understanding of the relationship between games, narrative, and storyworlds.

In order to distinguish narrative and games from each other, at least a tentative definition of the latter seems to be necessary. For a start, most scholars agree on differentiating between *play* and *game*, with *play* being conceived as a free-form activity, and *game* as its more structured, rule-based counterpart (cf. JUUL 2005: 28). In his 2005 book *Half-Real*, Jesper Juul takes up this distinction and examines seminal game definitions by scholars like Johan Huizinga (cf. HUIZINGA 1938), Roger Caillois (cf. CAILLOIS 1958), Chris Crawford (cf. CRAWFORD 1997), or Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (cf. SALEN/ZIMMERMAN 2004) to come up with what he calls the ›classic game model‹ (cf. JUUL 2005: 36–43):

A game is a rule-based [formal] system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable. (JUUL 2005: 36)

Juul's definition certainly makes for a good »compromise between the extremes of generality and specificity« (MÄYRÄ 2008: 35), although his conflation of ontological features (like rules and outcomes) with cultural aspects of games (like player attachment and negotiable consequences) might raise a few structuralist eyebrows. However, it is still general enough to support the idea of games as a transmedial phenomenon: explicitly drawing a parallel to narratology, Juul claims that »games actually move between different media: card games are played on computers, sports continue to be a popular video game genre, and video games occasionally become board games« (JUUL 2005: 48).

Yet, this transmedial nature of games is not what I am concerned with in this article, for there certainly is a world of difference between claiming that a novel, film, or TV series uses game-like principles to organize characters, spaces, and events, and claiming that these media actually *reproduce the entirety of the game* (including, for example, rules, outcomes, and player efforts).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, my focus will be on the question how specific elements of the classic game model (like rules, outcomes, goals, and conflicts) can be identified as contributing to the structure of certain narratives and their storyworlds.

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however, the debate is more or less settled, with most scholars agreeing that (some) video games may be narrative (in some way), but that narrative representation in video games is still subject to a wide range of medium-specific idiosyncrasies (cf. THON 2015).

<sup>2</sup> One will, for example, have a hard time realizing a game of *Tic Tac Toe* as a film due to the latter's obvious lack of responsivity to the audience's action. However, there exist some hybrids like the (in)famous sub-genre of ›VCR board games‹, which utilize film sequences to give instructions to players or serve as a game clock. Examples include the *Atmosfear* series (1991–2006), *Star Wars. The Interactive Video Board Game* (1996), or—more recently—the *24 DVD Board Game* (2006).

### 3. Game-Like Narratives and Storyworlds

In order to further clarify the notion of ›game-like‹ narratives or storyworlds, it is worthwhile to turn back to Lev Manovich's discussion of algorithms and narrative in *The Language of New Media*. He states that, while most narratives—unlike games—do not require algorithm-like behavior from their readers, narratives and games *are* similar in that the reader/player, while proceeding through them, must uncover their underlying logic or algorithm: »Just like a game player, a reader of a novel gradually reconstructs the algorithm [...] that the writer used to create the settings, the characters, and the events« (MANOVICH 2001: 225). It is this algorithm of creating (and reconstructing) the building blocks of narrative, which Juul's classic game model can be related to: a narrative can be said to ›be game-like‹ or ›follow a game logic‹, if the algorithm organizing its settings, characters, and events can better be described in terms of rules, outcomes, goals, and conflicts than in terms of, say, narrative continuity, realism, or character psychology.

This line of reasoning has also left a mark on film studies. Marsha Kinder, for example, identifies a game logic in what she calls ›database narratives‹ like *Pulp Fiction* (1993) or *Run, Lola, Run* (1998):

*Database narratives* refers to narratives whose structure exposes or thematizes the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories and that are crucial to language: the selection of particular data (characters, images, sounds, events) from a series of databases or paradigms, which are then combined to generate specific tales. (KINDER 2002: 6, original emphasis)

According to Kinder, database narratives differ from other types of narratives in that they (1) rely less on montage than on incongruous objects or *hot spots* as a means of navigating from one scene to another, (2) use *puppet-like avatars* who are not restricted by traditional notions of consistency or narrative logic, and (3) create *narrative fields* that emphasize story possibilities, randomness, repetition, and interruptions instead of narrative continuity. Thus, they »reveal the arbitrariness of the particular choices made, and the possibility of making other combinations which would create alternative stories« (KINDER 2002: 6).

Similarly, German media scholar Jochen Venus describes certain plots and genres as game-like: according to Venus, heist movies like *Ocean's Eleven* (2001) often follow a game logic in that their ensemble cast acts like a group of players participating in a game—in the case of *Ocean's Eleven*, the game of simultaneously robbing three casinos (cf. VENUS 2007). Each single character is assigned a specific role and the viewers' enjoyment results from watching them perform more or less successfully (cf. VENUS 2007: 315). Moreover, acting as a single ›group character‹ (*Gruppenfigur*) rather than a ›group of characters‹ (*Figurengruppe*), these films' protagonists are not created bottom-up from individual character features, but top-down as required by overarching goals, the different settings or ›playgrounds‹ of the film, and the possible integration of further game elements (cf. VENUS 2007: 314). While Venus'

analysis has a strong focus on heist movies, it is also compatible with Kinder's characters-as-avatars and Manovich's algorithmic creation of settings, characters, and events and can be applied to many contemporary films and TV shows with large character casts such as *Lost* (2004–2010), *Heroes* (2006–2010), or—as will be discussed in more detail below—*Game of Thrones* (2011–).

Having established the notion of game-like narratives as following a top-down game logic in creating settings, characters, and events, we can now turn to the relationship between games and storyworlds, keeping in mind this article's initial claim that some contemporary storyworlds (like the transmedial world of *A Song of Ice and Fire*) prominently adhere to a game logic, which proves especially relevant for their adaptation as a video game. In transmedial narratology, the concept of *storyworld* stems from analytical philosophy and cognitive approaches to literature and linguistics, having both a ›text-oriented‹ and a ›recipient-oriented‹ component.<sup>3</sup> Narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan, for example, proposes that a storyworld is initially projected by individual texts, but also exists as a recipient's imaginative experience (cf. RYAN 2014: 32–34). Similarly, Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca define transmedial worlds as both »abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories [...] can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms« and »mental constructs shared by both the designers/creators of the world and the audience/participants« (KLASTRUP/TOSCA 2014: 296f.).

Thus, the storyworld concept bears a striking resemblance to the concepts of algorithm and database discussed above. For, as Ryan puts it, a storyworld is »more than a static container for the objects mentioned in a story; it is a dynamic model of evolving situations« (RYAN 2014: 33). To think of storyworlds as dynamic models from which different stories can be derived reveals an important structural analogy between games and storyworlds: both are abstract, rule-based models that map relationships between their constituents. While games can be said to consist of elements like game pieces, rules, goals, and outcomes, storyworlds quite similarly consist of existents, settings, physical laws, social rules and values, as well as physical and mental events (cf. RYAN 2014: 34–36). Thus, storyworlds can, tentatively, be said to be following a game logic when they privilege physical laws, social rules, and values over character psychology or causal event structure.

Moreover, *transmedial* storyworlds seem to be especially prone to exhibit game-like features. Henry Jenkins, for example, speaks of the ›encyclopedic ambitions‹ of transmedia texts, which are often »based not on individual characters or specific plots but rather complex fictional worlds which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their stories« (JENKINS 2007: n. pag.). Instead of specific plots, Klastrup and Tosca argue, successful transmedial worlds exhibit three defining features: *mythos*, *topos*, and *ethos*. While *mythos* refers to the »establishing story, legend, or narration of the

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<sup>3</sup> For recent applications of the storyworld concept in the context of transmedial narratology, cf. RYAN/THON 2014. Cf. also HERMAN 2009, WOLF 2012, and RYAN 2013.

world« (KLASTRUP/TOSCA 2014: 297), *topos* refers to the general setting of the world, its broad historical period and geography, and *ethos* includes the explicit and implicit ethics of the world and its characters, or—more generally—the principle idea of how the world works and how characters behave in it (cf. KLASTRUP/TOSCA 2014: 297). Among these features, it is the world's ethos, in particular, which tends to incorporate game-like aspects as it provides basic rules that define the ›inner workings‹ of the world. Consequently, one would expect simplifying and ›translating‹ the world's ethos into actual game rules to be the most salient strategy of adapting a transmedial world as a video game (cf. WOLF 2012: 260). However, as the subsequent analysis of three *Game of Thrones* video games will show, not every video game adaptation necessarily stays true to the game logic of the storyworld it originates from.

#### 4. The Game of *Game of Thrones*

Both Martin's book series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996– ) and the critically acclaimed TV show *Game of Thrones* tell an epic high fantasy tale of war, love, deception, and magic, with a very large cast of characters and an exhaustive mythology.<sup>4</sup> Set in a pseudo-medieval fantasy world, the series' plot revolves around the power struggles of various noble houses for the right to rule the kingdom of Westeros—an ongoing conflict that is addressed (both intra- and extradiegetically) as the ›game of thrones‹.

While this explicit reference should certainly not be taken at face value, the transmedial world of *Game of Thrones* does indeed seem to follow a game logic in that it subordinates narrative continuity to the algorithmic logic of medieval politics and warfare. In the novels, various characters such as Cersei Lannister (›When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground«, *A Game of Thrones*) or Tyrion Lannister (›The wars, the intrigues, the great bloody game, and me in the center of it«, *A Clash of Kings*) actually comment on the basic ›rules‹ of this game. Likewise, the more cunning characters such as Tyrion (›Too many strange faces, [...] too many new players. The game changed while I lay rotting in my bed, and no one will tell me the rules«, *A Storm of Swords*) or Petyr Baelish (›I might have to remove her from the game sooner than I'd planned. Provided she does not remove herself first. [...] In the game of thrones, even the humblest pieces can have wills of their own. Sometimes they refuse to make the moves you've planned for them«, *A Feast for Crows*) recognize their own role as both players and game pieces.

In general, the game of thrones involves the struggle for power and influence by means of warfare, deception, or diplomacy. But at the same time

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<sup>4</sup> While there are certainly a number of differences between the events and characters as represented in the novel and TV series, these differences do not relevantly affect the overall logic of the transmedial world as a whole. I will therefore refer to both, if not stated otherwise.



it is about the abuse and consequences of power, which inevitably corrupts anyone in Westeros, no matter how righteous their cause (cf. SPECTOR 2012: 169). Characters who find themselves as pieces in this game most often face a »painful retributive justice, born of moral absolutism, that lends reality and depth to the medieval society portrayed in the series« (VAUGHT 2012: 91). At the same time, characters like Petyr Baelish, Lord Varys, or Tyrion Lannister manage to »game the system« precisely because they are excluded from it, as author Brent Hartinger observes: »Having suffered dearly under the rules of an unforgiving society, outcasts such as Tyrion and Varys pay keen attention to rules, precisely so they can manipulate them in order to give themselves a fighting chance« (HARTINGER 2012: 162).

But not only the general ethos of the world can be described in terms of (game) rules, the novels' and TV series' narrative itself also exhibits game-like features, as James Lowder (2012) points out:

[The] game of confounded expectations is central to the success of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. [...] It informs the title of the first volume in the series and manifests in the works themselves in interesting ways, from the thematic treatment of games [...] to the story's basic structure, with the tightly focused individual chapters functioning quite like the movement of discrete units in a miniatures battle. (LOWDER 2012: xv–xvi)

According to this reading, Martin's infamous plot twists (like the sudden death of major protagonists) do not invalidate the argument of an overall rule-based, and thus predictable, narrative structure. On the contrary, the randomness and interruptive power of events like Ned Stark's execution or the »Red Wedding« only add to their game-like quality: they subordinate narrative logic to what Kinder describes as a »narrative field« that emphasizes story possibilities, randomness, repetition, and interruptions instead of narrative continuity (cf. KINDER 2002: 8).

In summary, the transmedial world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* can be said to follow a game logic both in thematic and structural terms: while the former aspect emphasizes the »game of thrones« as a game of strategy—gaining influence by manipulating friends and foes, waging war, and forging alliances by securing bloodlines and marrying into powerful families—, the latter points to the algorithmic logic of the narrative itself—stressing randomness, narrative possibilities, and disruptions. So how do the different *Game of Thrones* video games relate to this game logic?

## 5. Playing the Game of Thrones

### 5.1 *Game of Thrones*

At the time of this writing, three licensed *Game of Thrones* video games exist, the most ambitious of which is the 2012 single-player 3D role-playing game

*Game of Thrones*.<sup>5</sup> Originally a game based solely on the *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels, French developer Cyanide Studios made a deal with HBO to use art assets, music, and voice actors from the TV series, and even involved George R.R. Martin as consultant on the game's script.<sup>6</sup> The game's events take place simultaneously to those narrated in the first novel, beginning some four months before the death of Jon Arryn and continuing into the early part of the TV show's first season. However, both the game's plot and cast of characters differ significantly from the novel and TV series, with cameo appearances by Cersei Lannister, Lord Varys, and Jeor Mormont being among the few exceptions.

Mimicking the formal structure of the novels, the game's story unfolds in chapters, alternating between playing as the red priest Alester Sarwyck, heir to the town and castle of Riverspring, and the skinchanger Mors Westford, sworn brother of the Night's Watch. Both protagonists are involuntarily involved in a political scheme that revolves around Jeyne Greystone, a young woman who not only bears the bastard child of king Robert Baratheon but who also turns out to be the bastard daughter of the Mad King, Aerys Targaryen, herself. Naturally, this unborn half-Baratheon, half-Targaryen child draws the attention of powerful lords (who try to protect Jeyne and make her son the rightful heir to the Iron Throne) and queen Cersei Lannister (who tries to eliminate this threat to her own son's regency). For the first half of the game, the two player-controlled characters, Alester and Mors, pursue opposite goals: Alester, having returned to Riverspring after years of exile, seeks the help of queen Cersei to put a stop to his sister's marriage to her bastard half-brother Valarr, by which the latter contests Alester's own right to rule Riverspring. In exchange for her help, Cersei asks him to prosecute and eliminate a number of enemies of the realm, among them Jeyne Greystone. Meanwhile, in the North, Mors Westford sets out to protect the same girl, following an order by Jon Arryn, the King's Hand. Finally, Alester and Mors meet, uncover the secret that surrounds Jeyne, and help her escape her prosecutors. In the end, though, Jeyne sacrifices herself after giving birth to her child, letting her killers believe that she died while still pregnant. Alester and Mors manage to escape with the baby, head to King's Landing, and use the attention drawn by Eddard Stark's execution to take their vengeance on Valarr.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> One of the challenges academic writing has to face when dealing with transmedial entertainment franchises like *Game of Thrones* is their highly dynamic nature. During the editing process of this article another highly anticipated game, Telltale's episodic point-and-click adventure *Game of Thrones* (2014), has been released. While no detailed analysis can be provided here, the game's adaption of the storyworld adheres to Telltale's established formula of featuring an interactive narrative by combining extensive story-driven cut-scenes with single moments of player choice.

<sup>6</sup> [http://gameofthrones.wikia.com/wiki/Game\\_of\\_Thrones\\_\(2012\\_role-playing\\_game\)](http://gameofthrones.wikia.com/wiki/Game_of_Thrones_(2012_role-playing_game)) [accessed November 25, 2014].

<sup>7</sup> In another somewhat artificial plot twist, Mors realizes that Alester is actually the murderer of his late wife, which leads to a showdown of both fighting each other to the death. Depending on which character the player chooses to control in this fight and what he or she decides to do with



Fig. 1:  
Prerendered cut-scene in *Game of Thrones Ascent*



Fig. 2:  
Combat sequence in *Game of Thrones*

In contrast to this quite complicated plot, the gameplay itself sticks to the conventions of the role-playing game genre: the player is mostly engaged in tactical real-time combat and clicks his or her way through cut-scenes and dialogues with other characters. He or she levels up the player-controlled characters by gaining experience points for completing the game's linear main quest or one of the thirteen available side quests. As is typical for con-

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Jeyne's child afterwards, the game offers four different endings, each presented through non-interactive cut-scenes.

temporary role-playing games, the player can choose between different »classes« for his or her characters (e.g., hedge knight, sellsword, or archer), which come with certain skills (allowing for game mechanics like shooting a bow or performing special axe attacks). When leveling up, the player not only increases his or her characters' overall attributes (like strength, agility, or intelligence), but also gains additional skills allowing for more complex combat tactics. Consequently, the player's overarching goal to reach the end of the main quest is complemented by the need to improve his or her characters' ludic abilities or obtain more effective weaponry.

Thus, on the level of narrative, the game stays true to the general mythos and ethos of the transmedial world with its complicated plot full of surprising twists and turns revolving around Westeros' political power struggles. But however nicely the game's narrative might capture the game logic of the *Game of Thrones* universe, its game mechanics and system of rules spectacularly fail to do so: for one thing, the fact that the player is spending most of his or her time fighting and completing highly repetitive quests works against the ethos of the transmedial world, which rather focuses on large-scale politics and warfare. Instead, the game isolates only some minor aspects of the storyworld (character growth and armed combat), transforms them into game mechanics, and builds a fairly mediocre role-playing experience around that. Moreover, the game does not stay true to the topos (i.e., the setting) of the transmedial world, as the navigable game spaces are often restricted to quite unremarkable places (like castle ruins or forests), limiting the player's freedom to explore the world to a series of sequentially connected spaces. Thereby, the role-playing game *Game of Thrones* provides a fitting example of the challenges that go with the »interactivation« (WOLF 2012: 260) of a storyworld: while any video game adaptation requires a *simplified model* of the world to be constructed, in order for interaction and exploration to be possible (cf. WOLF 2012: 260), the role-playing game models specifically *those* elements of the transmedial world's mythos, topos, and ethos that are *not* essential features of its distinctive game logic.

## 5.2 *Game of Thrones Ascent*

My second example, the browser game *Game of Thrones Ascent*, was originally released on Facebook in 2013 and as a mobile app for Android and iOS in 2014. Due to these platforms' constraints in computing power, the game relies solely on pictorial and verbal modes of narration (apart from the musical score and occasional sound effects to provide audio feedback or signal progress). The player takes on the role of a highborn lord or lady, managing their keep and the surrounding lands through a series of operations that can be accessed via the game's main screen. As is typical for this kind of browser game, the emphasis is on resource management realized through the keep's different buildings: the counting house provides silver coins which must be collected at regular intervals; the village center produces goods like stone,

fish, or iron; the smithy transforms raw material into weapons and armor etc. Building new items costs not only money, though, but also a certain (and steadily increasing) amount of time, during which the player has to wait or pursue other in-game activities.



Fig. 3:  
Main screen in *Game of Thrones Ascent*

The second major gameplay element is combat: by spending silver coins, the player can hire sworn swords, who can be sent on adventures to gain money, experience points, or building material. These characters possess a number of game-related abilities and attributes that affect their chances of success during adventures—like, for example, an overall rank level, point values for ›battle‹, ›trade‹, and ›intrigue‹, as well as a character class, which comes with certain bonuses when performing battle, trade, or intrigue actions. This is also the case for the player-controlled character itself whose battle, trade, and intrigue stats will be added to the sworn swords' stats on certain quests. In addition, the game also features a rather story-driven ›campaign mode‹, consisting of a series of quests, which are divided into volumes, roughly paralleling the TV series' seasons. The quests tell the story of the player-controlled character's family and how it is intertwined with the *Game of Thrones* plot. What is interesting, though, is the way the game tries to connect both: some quests re-tell important events of the novel, such as Ned Stark's execution or the (in)famous ›Red Wedding‹, with the player-controlled character as a kind of participant-observer who does not influence the main



course of events but can still engage in meaningful interactions with main or support characters before, during, or after such iconic events. Although most of these story quests are solved by simply choosing between different dialogue options and sending sworn swords into battle, they still offer some narrative depth reminiscent of the novels.



Fig. 4:  
Sworn sword adventuring in *Game of Thrones Ascent*

With regard to the campaign's narrative, *Game of Thrones Ascent* manages to stay true to the topos, mythos, and ethos of Martin's transmedial world by focusing on politics, deception, and warfare on a thematic level, as well as on randomness, narrative possibilities, and disruptions on a structural level. However, the actual gameplay of leveling up one's characters, collecting resources, and upgrading buildings soon loses its narrative significance: in order to slowly progress toward the end game, the player's sworn swords have to repeat the same nondescript adventures over and over again, later quests and building upgrades require ridiculously high amounts of time to be completed, and the game mechanics labeled ›battle‹, ›trade‹, and ›intrigue‹ turn out to be mere camouflage for the same repetitive player actions of clicking on things to compare numerical values. Thus, the game does—in a way—deliver a quite convincing adaptation of the respective storyworld, but subordinates the game logic of the ur-text to the generic conventions of a prototypical free-to-play Facebook game. In contrast to the role-playing game *Game of Thrones*, the storyworld's ethos is integrated more extensively into the game's system of rules (e.g., by allowing for strategies other than brute force),

but the available options serve merely as gift-wrapping for otherwise identical game mechanics. While this disparity between the rules and fiction of a game is not uncommon for video game adaptations, there also exist more meaningful ways to transform the game logic of a narrative into actual game mechanics. This will become evident in the following and final case study.

### 5.3 A *Game of Thrones. Genesis*

Published in 2011, the real-time strategy game *A Game of Thrones. Genesis* is the first licensed *Game of Thrones* video game and features both a single-player campaign and a multiplayer mode. The campaign spans a thousand years of Westerosi history and allows the player, in a series of different chapters, to reenact major events of the world's mythos, from queen Nymeria's arrival in the Kingdom of Dorne (some 700 years before the novels) via Robert Baratheon fighting during the War of the Usurper to (in the game's final chapter) the wildling attack on the Wall as described in *A Storm of Swords*. However, these events merely serve as a narrative backdrop against which the interactive gameplay takes place. Consequently, narrative representation is limited to textual descriptions at the beginning of each chapter as well as occasional cases of character speech during the levels themselves, providing background information on the historical time period, the setting, and the protagonist's goals and motivations. The game's system of rules, on the other hand, turns out to be a quite faithful reproduction of the story-world's game logic.



Fig. 5:  
Examples of units in *A Game of Thrones. Genesis*

In a typical real-time strategy game, players send out ›units‹ (i.e., characters or groups of characters) to gather resources, with which they build an army to crush their opponent. In *A Game of Thrones. Genesis*, players, too, gather resources for hiring mercenaries and recruiting armies, but also deploy more subtle strategies: to gain influence and so-called ›prestige points‹, players can send out envoys who convert the towns spread across the map to their cause. They can also use spies to create secret agreements with their opponent's villages, which then increase their own income while seemingly still belonging to the opponent. They can use assassins to kill merchants carrying resources belonging to another player; they can send rogues to instigate uprisings in unallied towns, or capture opposing units and hold them for ransom. Another particularly cynical game mechanic is connected to the ›noble lady‹ character: after producing this unit, the player can send her to a town or castle where she creates a ›blood pact‹ by marrying the respective lord and giving birth to his child—thereby preventing these castles from being undermined by enemy envoys or spies.<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 6:  
›Noble ladies‹ and the ›blood pact‹ mechanic in *A Game of Thrones. Genesis*

Thus, on the level of game mechanics, the game incorporates many aspects that are characteristic for the ethos of the transmedial world: when building a simplified model of the world of Westeros, the designers decided to simulate the entirety of the ›game of thrones‹ as a strategy game, turning the rules of diplomacy, warfare, covert politics, and even social dynamics

<sup>8</sup> While the ›blood pact‹ game mechanic plays quite an important role within the game's system of rules, it also reinforces the notion of disenfranchised women being used as tradable commodities and ›birth-giving machines‹ within a patriarchal power structure, reminding the players of the more conservative aspect of Martin's *Game of Thrones* universe (cf. SCHRÖTER 2016).



(like marrying and giving birth) into actual game mechanics. In contrast to the Facebook game discussed above, these mechanics not only differ in the way they are fictionalized, but actually comprise very different sets of rules and variables. Also, every action taken by the players has an effect on the overall state of the world: killings, assassinations, imprisonment, and other treacherous actions will lead toward the ›war‹ game state, which, once activated, prevents any further diplomatic efforts. On the other hand, sending messages of peace to enemy castles or freeing captured enemy units will maintain peace and allow for strategies built around diplomacy, trade, and forming alliances. Thus, depending on the player's strategy, both maintaining peace and precipitating war may prove useful in different scenarios—just as in George R.R. Martin's vision of pseudo-medieval politics. However, the observation that *A Game of Thrones. Genesis* (more so than the other games) manages to build upon the storyworld's game logic is not surprising at all, given the fact that the generic conventions of the real-time strategy game obviously fit the logic of the game of thrones particularly well.

## 6. Conclusion

Processes of adaptation within transmedial entertainment franchises pose challenges not only to media practitioners but also to transmedial narratology and adaptation studies—especially regarding storyworlds that seem to rely less on narrative logic than on more traditional forms of storytelling. In this article, I have stressed structural similarities between storyworlds and games, proposing that a storyworld can be said to ›follow a game logic‹, if the algorithm organizing its settings, characters, and events can better be described in terms of rules, outcomes, goals, and conflicts than in terms of narrative persistence, realism, or character psychology. As I have tried to show, this game logic manifests itself most notably in a transmedial world's ethos and serves as a useful analytical concept to examine video game adaptations of the respective storyworld. The case study of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, however, made clear that different video game adaptations might draw on a storyworld's game logic to a greater or lesser extent. While all three analyzed games integrate at least some aspects of Westeros' mythos, topos, and ethos into their narrative design, only the real-time strategy game *A Game of Thrones. Genesis* turns the game logic of the novels and TV show into actual game mechanics. Thus, the comparison also casts a light on different strategies in video games' contribution to a broader transmedia storytelling context: while the adaption of a storyworld as a video game genre that best suits its game logic is a particularly salient strategy, other factors may also come into play. The role-playing game *Game of Thrones*, for example, tries to concentrate on a fairly linear and ›cinematic‹ experience with some narrative depth (and, thus, hits the franchise's narrative and aesthetic tone);

the Facebook game *Game of Thrones Ascent*, on the other hand, subordinates most of the transmedial world's defining features to the generic and, above all, economic logic of a free-to-play Facebook game. The question which strategy proves the most successful can hardly be answered conclusively, though, as all three games largely failed to satisfy critics and fans of the franchise. But, as has been shown, the different ways in which they failed are what makes them highly relevant test cases for a transmedial narratology.

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