



Lectio praecursoria:
Game of Thrones as a Work of
Fantasy Fiction in the Storytelling
Environment of the Internet

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Biography: Markus Laukkanen, PhD, defended his doctoral dissertation titled “Co-Opting *Game of Thrones* with Digital Paratext Narratives: Interactivity, authorship, and affordances in the storytelling environment of the internet” at Tampere University in November 2025. He works as a researcher in the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation -funded project “Journalistic Future Narratives in and about NATO-era Finland”. Laukkanen's research interests include narratology, the study of fantasy, interactive digital narratives, social media studies, culture war narratives, and journalistic narrative practices. Link to dissertation: <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-03-4228-9> Contact: markus.laukkanen@tuni.fi

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In a broad sense, my dissertation (Laukkanen, *Digital Paratext Narratives*) concerns a kind of literary culture in the age of the internet. In a slightly more exact sense, it concerns the intertwining of the narrative forms and narrative practices that proliferate in online spaces. It asks, how do these new forms and practices change the ways we approach fictional narratives? In particular, how does the *de facto* online context of contemporary narratives influence the author–audience dynamic of fictional communication (e.g. Phelan)? While these have ended up becoming the central topics of my dissertation, I did not originally set out to study the internet or internet culture. Rather, I set out to

make sense of a fantasy story that had captivated me – and many, many other people – like few others before.

I wrote my Finnish-language master's thesis (Laukkanen, *Monsters*) on George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire fantasy series. More precisely, I wrote it on what I perceived as its dynamic relationship with the popular genre of fantasy. In that thesis, I discussed how approaching a work of fiction as fantasy informs one's reading of it on many levels. These range from paying attention to certain parts of the work while overlooking others, to anticipating the progression of its plot. The knowledge of this anticipation is famously used by Martin to create shocking twists and surprises for his readers.

My dissertation monograph was supposed to expand this train of thought further: to move from the level of an individual work to that of the entire genre. In fantasy scholarship, there is an old tradition – that I find frustrating – of trying to define the genre based on the inclusion of fantastic elements (e.g. Manlove; Attebery). If a work of fiction depicts something that is perceived as “impossible” in “consensus reality” (Hume 12), meaning the real world, then that element is taken to be what makes the work fantasy. This logic always rubbed me wrong, as it did not really mesh with my own experiences of reading fantasy.

Reading a work of fiction in the context of a popular genre like fantasy, I thought, means adopting many genre-specific narrative expectations. These expectations are learned through previous experiences with works in the same genre (see Rabinowitz 43–44). Popular genres, then, could be thought of as discursive formations, or even traditions with their own customs and rules of conduct (see Kraatila 36). Authors and audiences of fantasy, together, form a *discourse community* that dynamically negotiates what the genre is and what it is not. Whether a work of fiction is fantasy, then, is determined by whether it is created and read as part of the genre conversation of fantasy, not by its inclusion or non-inclusion of fantastic elements. Even though the dissertation I ended up writing is very different from what I envisioned back then, this discursive understanding of fantasy has given my research an outlook to literary phenomena as something authors and audiences co-create by partaking in public discourse.

When I was writing my master's thesis, I had a tantalizing recurring idea: expanding my focus from A Song of Ice and Fire to its popular television adaptation *Game of Thrones*, and maybe even to their public reception. After all, I was writing about the ways Martin's literary work makes use of genre conventions to shock and surprise. What better illustration of how impactful such genre-conscious narrative devices could be than the online fan discourse about *Game of Thrones*? For example, reaction videos to the death of the series' initial protagonist, Ned Stark, seemed to gain considerable virality online. People who had read the novels would secretly film and share their friends and loved ones being horrified by the events of the show. Some of these early reaction videos can still be found online, although most have been lost to the ephemerality of digital texts. Indeed, many only exist because they were inadvertently archived as parts of later compilation videos seeking to remonetize the work of others.

Tackling this phenomenon, in addition to putting forth my case about the genre poetics of A Song of Ice and Fire, seemed much too far-ranging a task for what was already an ambitious master's thesis. I therefore only briefly

referred to *Game of Thrones* and its public response in that text, thinking I might lean on them more extensively later. In my doctoral dissertation, I decided from the beginning to include *Game of Thrones* not only as an illustration of the effect of Martin's poetics, but as actual target material. Maybe, I thought, I would even analyze some actual audience comments and reactions. This decision was to prove fateful.

Sometime later, when working with a group of fellow doctoral students on a Finnish-language book about narratives after postmodernism (Björninen) – where I wrote a chapter about *Game of Thrones*, naturally – I was confronted with the vexing question of whether there were any discernible elements in post-postmodern narratives that could not be found anywhere in postmodern literature. The only distinct feature I felt I could convincingly argue was exclusive to the domain of post-postmodernism was the influence of online culture on contemporary fiction. As the internet did not really exist before the 1990s, I reasoned, online culture could not possibly have influenced, say, the narrative form of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). So that is what I decided my chapter would be about: the influence of online culture as I saw it in *Game of Thrones* (Laukkanen, "Kuka kertoo").

This shifted my focus, again, away from Martin's poetics of fantasy literature, and towards a broader discursive outlook to *Game of Thrones*. Once I started delving into this topic in more detail, I realized that audience-created online content – or *audience-authored digital paratexts* as I call them in the dissertation – regarding *Game of Thrones* could not merely be a fun sideshow that illustrated my argument. These paratexts would have to be promoted to equal status with *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones*: they would become a category of target material proper for my study. Shifts like this kept happening even after that, and eventually audience-authored paratexts became my primary focus, and the works of fiction themselves were demoted to a supplementary role. It seemed to me that what I had uncovered was more than a fan culture curiosity: I took it to be a sign of a fundamentally changed, or changing, relationship audiences had with works of fiction, and perhaps with narratives in general. That new relationship was fundamentally interactive in nature. In digital media environments, audiences participate in narrative communication in active ways they could not practice before.

It turned out that I was nowhere near the first person to have had thoughts along these lines. In retrospect, this should not have been surprising. In game studies and media studies particularly, a lot of work on interactive cultures had already been done. Due to this revelation, I again drifted further away from my original idea of a monograph dissertation on the poetics of fantasy based on Martin's work. Delving into internet studies has been an education in interdisciplinary thinking. Different fields approach similar questions in very different ways, through different theoretical frameworks. If you ever start to feel confident that you know a thing or two about something, adopting an interdisciplinary perspective to it will soon cure you of that illusion. Especially when studying something timely – like online culture – there is bound to be a nigh on endless variety of perspectives out there capable of offering something valuable to your research. While navigating the overlapping frameworks of various fields of study has been humbling and difficult, I have also found it very productive.

As the culture of interactive audience engagement became more entrenched over time, it seemed to become increasingly common that fans did not just share their own reactions to or interpretations of *Game of Thrones*. They also started to actively speak back to the show (see Jenkins 14), creating alternatives and counterpoints to it. Of course, things like this have always happened in fandom scenes to some extent. I argue, however, that it is *internet-age culture* that has truly made active audience participation in works of fiction a major cultural practice. My eventually article-based dissertation involves lengthy elaborations on narrative theory regarding the communicative dynamics of that practice; here, I want to illustrate some of those dynamics with examples.

Let us first take a look at a case I discuss briefly in the first article of my dissertation (Laukkanen, “Audience-authored Paratexts”). By the end of the third season of *Game of Thrones*, the character Gendry Rivers – an illegitimate son of the recently dead king Robert Baratheon – finds himself in some trouble. Magically powerful “king’s blood” courses through his veins, but he has no protectors at court. His cold-hearted uncle, Stannis Baratheon, has decided to allow him to become a victim of human sacrifice in order to obtain dark powers. Stannis’ loyal right-hand man, an ex-smuggler-turned-knight Davos Seaworth, disapproves of this plan and decides to save the poor youngster. Under the cover of night, Davos frees Gendry, sneaks him away from the island fortress, provides him with a rowboat, and instructs him to flee to King’s Landing, the capital of the realm.

At face value, there is nothing very special about this plotline of strained family relations, magic, and betrayal in the context of *Game of Thrones*. However, after his escape, Gendry ended up not appearing in the series again until season seven, which aired four years later. The character was barely mentioned in the years between his watery escape and eventual return. This was regardless of the fact that up to that point, the show had generally presented him as a major character, and many in the fandom had been fond of him. As a result, memes depicting Gendry’s imagined adventures at sea started being produced and going viral. It was often jokingly suggested that the show should intermittently cut to a view of the open sea with Gendry perpetually rowing his little boat.

Over time, however, the fandom response to the character’s disappearance started to sour, like it did to many other aspects of *Game of Thrones*. It was widely assumed that Gendry had been abandoned by the show, and that his storyline would never reach a conclusion. Now some fan-produced memes named Gendry’s rowboat “S. S. Abandoned Plotlines” and populated it with other characters whose storylines fans expected to go nowhere, including Brynden “Blackfish” Tully, Rickon Stark, and the fire-priest Thoros of Myr. If you have seen *Game of Thrones*, you might remember that these particular characters did end up returning to the show before it ended, although many fans still vehemently argue that their storylines were not concluded in a well-considered or satisfactory manner.

Audience-created memes, including the more negative ones that I would consider counter-narratives (see Hyvärinen), were popular enough in online discourse that the creators and writers of *Game of Thrones*, as well as Joe Dempsie, the actor who portrayed Gendry, commented on them multiple times. Eventually, a reference to the memes was even incorporated into the series

itself. Upon Gendry's return to the show, Davos goes to retrieve him from King's Landing, where he sent him in the third season. As a way of greeting the young man he once saved, the old knight quips, "Thought you might still be rowing." As an in-universe line of dialogue, this makes little sense: it is clearly nothing but a direct reference to the audience-created memes about Gendry's lost years. Online audiences, then, contributed to the discourse surrounding *Game of Thrones* forcefully enough to have their input be reflected in the actual narrative of the series.

Sometimes production publicly acknowledges the existence of audience-authored content or even approves of it – as was the case here. I argue that such acknowledgements contribute to legitimation of the *narrative authority* of audiences (Dawson, *The Return*). If the creators of *Game of Thrones* accept the input of audiences as a part of the story, then surely others should too. In my use of the concept, narrative authority refers to one's ability to narrate a given story, and to have that narration be recognized as legitimate by others. Creators of narratives generally have a great deal of narrative authority regarding works, whereas audiences do not. However, the underlying interactivity of digital environments affords audiences the ability to assert some amount of contingent narrative authority even in cases where production does not help them. It remains contingent, because in principle it only affects those who interact with works of fiction via online spaces. It is worth noting, though, that nowadays people increasingly *do* interact with narratives – and everything else – in ways that are mediated by the internet. This means that even if you yourself do not interact with audience-created online content, others around you do, and that includes authors of fiction. You could remain blissfully naïve to the digital context of contemporary culture, but the culture itself is not. Through cultural osmosis, the consequences of digital culture seep into everything.

Okay then, someone might say, but why does this matter? Is this not, ultimately, an inconsequential phenomenon? A sideshow at best. Based on how widely paratextual fandom discourse is used in society, I do not think so. For example, Barack Obama and Donald Trump, two consecutive American presidents, shared memes about *Game of Thrones* on official White House social media channels to lay claim to cultural capital associated with the enormously popular series. In what has been called the attention economy of the internet, the ability to tap into that cultural capital is a way of wielding significant power (Evans 148–149). It is power to set the stage of public discourse, to control the narrative so to speak (see Dawson, "Who Controls").

In my dissertation, I touch on many different ways participatory audiences seek to wrest control of pre-existing narratives from their authors. For example, there exists a strand of audience discourse concerning *Game of Thrones* as climate fiction. Different factions of the participatory audience argue either that the series concerns anthropogenic climate change or that it does not (Laukkanen, "Narrative Authority"). To support the climate fiction interpretation, fans appeal to the plot of the series, drawing parallels between real-world climate change and the apocalyptic long winter that threatens Westeros. To argue against the climate fiction interpretation, they may appeal to *Game of Thrones* being set in a fantasy world that is completely separate from the real world. Whether arguing for or against the climate fiction interpretation, participatory audiences often appeal to the authority of Martin as the original author of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Was the climate change parallel

some find in the story intended by Martin or not? If it was, then it is considered acceptable to deploy the cultural capital of the series for climate activism. If it is decided that it was not intended by Martin after all, however, it is portrayed as being morally wrong.

As luck would have it, Martin himself has publicly commented on this topic. His comments seem to favor the climate activist interpretation: he has said that the long winter could indeed be seen to resonate with the real-world threat of climate change. This was reported widely on entertainment media websites. But if you oppose the climate fiction interpretation of the series, what are you to do with this information? Will you accept defeat? Of course not. Instead, you will disregard Martin's comments – or rather, argue that he did not mean them, that his words were misreported, or that he was tricked or coerced to make these comments. Or perhaps he was lying for attention. To counter the climate fiction interpretation, some in the audience created an image of Martin stitched together from other quotes and interviews. J. R. R. Tolkien famously disliked *The Lord of the Rings* (1955–1957) being read as an allegory for the Second World War. Martin reveres Tolkien: he has even been nicknamed “the American Tolkien.” Somewhere here there is an angle that allows this faction of the participatory audience to construct an image of Martin to counter the one wielded by the other faction.

Ultimately it does not matter if *Game of Thrones* is about climate change or not, of course. However, participatory audiences online seek to gain some level of ownership of the series and its cultural capital in order to deploy them as weapons in online culture wars. In other words, they co-opt *Game of Thrones* for political purposes. While such *narrative co-optation* may find more dire expressions elsewhere in contemporary society, I think public discourse about fantasy – and other kinds of fiction, to be sure – nevertheless constitutes an important and easily overlooked arena of 21st-century life where important cultural values are negotiated.

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