

THE CONVERSATION

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Our transportation into Game of Thrones could have ugly results

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Who doesn't want to be Daenerys Targaryen? © Home Box Office

Author



Tom van Laer

Assistant Professor of Consumer Research, ESCP Europe

The fourth season of Game of Thrones has gripped scores of people with its epic story of warring factions in a strange and changing landscape, dragons and dire wolves, incursions and sieges, plots and betrayals, battlefield brilliance and cunning with coin. So unsurprisingly, that won't be the last you'll see of it. There are to be more series, and possibly even films.

The sequence of doorstep fantasy novels that George R R Martin began with A Game of Thrones provides the sort of immersive experience of an alien world that has always been popular. But such escapism has a social import, too.

The Game of Thrones saga has generated the kind of hype which most Hollywood blockbusters can only dream of. It recently became HBO's most popular programme to date, overtaking The Sopranos with an average audience of more than 18m viewers per episode, and has gathered 4m viewers since the last season.

And that's not to mention piracy. The third season's premiere was the most simultaneously shared file in the history of the BitTorrent file-sharing network, with more than 160,000 sharers.

So Game of Thrones has really nailed immersion in fiction. As such, it echoes a study I recently worked on that looked at the elements of narrative that really draw us in, and the effects of such

transportation; the extent to which we are detached from reality due to engrossment.



Arya, the first of many. © Home Box Office

Narrative transportation

Let's backtrack a bit. In 2000, social psychologists Melanie Green and Timothy Brock investigated what effect narrative transportation has on people in a highly influential paper. They had participants read fictional stories under different conditions, and measured how far they were immersed in the stories. They also analysed the extent to which participants agreed with beliefs consistent with the stories after they had read them.

In one story they used, a stranded and starving Eskimo boy and his dog resist evil impulses to kill each other for food, and in the end, they are rescued. So the story promoted ideas about the value of loyalty and friendship. The researchers found that after they had read the story, those who were more engrossed were more likely to say they found loyalty and friendship valuable than those who were less transported.

So people who are more transported into a narrative world are more likely to be persuaded to adopt the beliefs espoused within it into the real world.

We aggregated all of the research on narrative transportation published since Green and Brock's study, and investigated the reliability and robustness of this phenomenon.

We were specifically interested in what writers and television series directors do that can change, however incrementally, the attitudes of readers or viewers, and what individual characteristics increase the possibility of a change in attitude or opinion resulting from the fiction.

By averaging the results of 76 different research reports (reporting 132 separate effects based on over 21,000 participants), we found that a number of ingredients in the fiction reliably change the attitudes and intentions of readers and viewers.

A test study

It is perhaps unsurprising that we are likely to emulate characters we identify with. But more unexpectedly, the body of research indicates that it does not matter if the characters are good or bad. Take Tyrion Lannister. He drinks, he sleeps with prostitutes, he gambles, and he is a member of the Lannister family: the bad guys.



Menace to society? © Home Box Office

Still, we easily forgive bad people in fiction. And he's the best of the bunch, right? Just add his late chivalry and Tyrion's bad behaviour is forgotten. We try to know and feel Game of Thrones in the same way as he understands Westeros. As a result, whatever the writers make Tyrion do in some small way has an effect on us. If we like Tyrion, chances are we are likely to become ever so slightly more accepting of drinking, prostituting and gambling, without realising.

Aspects of the reader or viewer are also important. The more we watch Game of Thrones, the more our attitudes and intentions change to reflect the story. Our research indicates that this is especially true for women and highly educated people.

The particular example of Tyrion Lannister may be only conjecture, but we can see the transportation effects of Game of Thrones in unexpected places. The US Social Security Administration revealed last year how Americans are increasingly naming their children after Game of Thrones characters: "Arya" is the fastest rising name for new-born girls.

With many proclaiming Western governments and companies to be morally bankrupt and Mother Nature to be in the autumn of her life, then, perhaps it's a good idea to drop our voices two octaves, stare into the middle distance, and declare that "winter is coming"? Or perhaps the game of thrones helps us counter these negative elements by teaching us our true limits and leadership potential like it did for Daenerys Targaryen. Well, here's to the programme inciting us to save our world – for the newly arrived Aryas.



Television Game of Thrones