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After “The Iron Throne”: What two YouTube fan-channels discussed following the end of *Game of Thrones*

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Abstract: This article presents an exploratory study on what themes were discussed in all Game-of-Thrones’ transmedia-world-related videos uploaded by two YouTube fan-channels (Talking Thrones and GrayArea), over a period of one year after the premiere of the final episode of this HBO series. Qualitative content analysis mapped 79 different themes within a sample of 57 videos. The most pervasive themes are related to the YouTubers’ expression of their personae as fans, but also as content creators. Specific traits (story, plots, characters, storytelling) of *Game of Thrones*, the books on which it is based, and their transmedia relation are also regular themes. A netnographic analysis of the most viewed video and of the YouTuber’s comments and upvotes in its comment section pointed towards similar outcomes: the YouTuber was beyond the status of a fan expressing his preferences, he was also a content creator referencing his own work and being praised by his audience.

Keywords: fandom; convergence culture; transmedia storytelling; content analysis; netnography

Convergence culture (Jenkins, 2008) suggests the interplay of two not-always-at-ease trends: cultural industries increasing their long-standing tendency (Hesmondhalgh, 2019) to explore and protect intellectual properties through different media; audiences having growing chances to intervene in their public discussion and to create – and spread (Jenkins et al., 2013) – related contents. YouTube is symptomatic of these. The platform's business model evolved toward protecting and promoting copyrighted content and its authors/owners (Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). Simultaneously, it still hosts other sorts of content and creators, from the biggest YouTubers to microcelebrities, who are increasingly similar to the former but have a narrower reach and thematic focus (Marwick, 2019). Overall, YouTubers' origins may be traced back to a webcam/amateur culture, but these performers are now hybrid content creators that engage in the construction of characters ideally perceived as authentic, which often depends on the serial production of self-centered content, and its commercialization and association with other established practices in the cultural industries (Pereira et al., 2018). This paper is centered on two YouTube fan-channels (Talking Thrones¹ and GrayArea²), with hundreds of thousands of subscribers. Both are (mostly) devoted to the HBO series *Game of Thrones* (GoT) and George R.R. Martin's (GRRM) book-saga *A Song of Ice and Fire* (ASOIAF).

These contents form a transmedia world. It started in 1996, with the release of the first book in what is now an ongoing saga of high fantasy novels (i.e., ASOIAF), but it currently comprises other sorts of books – novellas, compendia, comics (Sarikakis et al., 2017). As a transmedia world, it is also made of contents such as video games (e.g., *Game of Thrones*, released in 2014 by Telltale Games) and, above all, (past and future) TV series set in the same fictional universe, of which GoT (aired between 2011 and 2019) is the prime example. This particular series was a global phenomenon, generating

a large, global fandom, and leveraging the overall transmedia world (Pérez & Reisenzein, 2020; Sarikakis et al., 2017). The season finale was one of the most popular (and divisive) television events of the first semester of 2019, as suggested by its audience metrics (Pallota, 2019; Wynne, 2019).

Transmedia storytelling may be regarded as an aesthetic manifestation of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2008, 2017): by recurrently developing contents within the same fictional universe through several media, it allows diverse entering points for different people and increases the chances of long-lasting engagement by the audiences. It is indicative of the cultural industries' willingness to further harness profitable stories and the increasing relevance and visibility of some of the audiences' practices. Fans are particularly significant in this matter: their actions might be useful to continuously spread media content, sustain general interest over time and situate audiences' reception (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Early fan studies sought to distance fandom from prejudice: the fanatic gave place to a particularly productive and active audience (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992), albeit at the margins – in comparison with mainstream audiences, but also in relation to the cultural industries, as a powerless elite (Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995). Convergence culture suggested some changes (Jenkins, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2013):

- media and audiences' fragmentation would make niches such as fandom more valuable, especially if they could draw other audiences' attention;
- producing contents to reach niches could mean the creation of transmedia stories, which mirror established practices within fandom;
- as a space of collective reception, readily accessible online fandom could be crucial to helping anyone make sense of the transmedia vastness. It could also leverage the audiences' relative power concerning cultural industries, as there

would be platforms for fans to become collectively involved, in a bottom-up logic, in the creation and circulation of content and meaning regarding their favorite contents, on a scale that was previously confined to the cultural industries.

Meeting these expectations was far from straightforward: the endurance of power inequalities (van Dijck, 2013) or media habits beyond explicit participation (Schäfer, 2011) questioned the extent of changes. Nevertheless, not everything remained unaltered and the world of GoT/ASOIAF provides many examples of how fandom, using online platforms, can impact the reception of transmedia contents (Bourdaa & Lozano Delmar, 2016; Matthews, 2018; Pérez & Reisenzein, 2020).

This paper presents another take in this regard. It aims to contribute to the debate on the more or less fulfilled expectations of convergence culture by focusing on two high-profile fans who have reached a relevant place in the production and circulation of content and meaning. The main goal of this research is to systematically map the themes discussed about the transmedia world of GoT/ASOIAF, over a period of one year after the premiere of the last episode of the HBO series, in every video uploaded by two YouTube fan-channels. Hence, it is an exploratory study on *what* was debated and created by two fans-that-are-YouTubers, who continuously produced new contents and sustained the discussion regarding GoT/ASOIAF, while managing their own status as regular content creators within a period without official releases.

Methods

To systematically map themes, qualitative content analysis was deemed the best option as it is an inherently systematic approach to identifying meaningful parts within contents (Bardin, 2008; Schreier, 2012). Despite the lack of consensus on what themes

are, these can be regarded as patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006) or topics (Schreier, 2012) that mark changes in what is being discussed, as contextualized by research goals. Therefore, themes function as trimming criteria to distinguish meaningful segments within content (Bardin, 2008), which can be established both in theoretical/deductive and grounded/inductive ways (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Regarding this article's procedures, 73 themes, under 10 pre-established dimensions, were considered prior coding. Theoretical inputs³ and the authors' previous knowledge of both channels (but not the videos to be coded) inspired the listing of those themes. Two researchers were assigned to each channel and independently coded every video related to GoT/ASOIAF, signaling present/absent themes. Induced topics were later checked in all videos, following the same procedure and added, if possible, to the categories. Discrepancies among coders were debated until reaching consensus⁴. Consensual coding was used to increase mapping reliability: this is crucial when analyzing transmedia worlds' vast lore and fandom's expertise, which necessarily relies on the researchers' ability to recognize them.

To further explore how previously identified themes developed in the most watched video⁵, a brief netnographic observation (Kozinets, 2002) was conducted. It was focused on the YouTuber's video and in his comments and interactions (replies, upvotes) with other users within the comment section (the first 30 to appear when ordered by "top comments"⁶).

Sampling/sample

According to Stebbins (2001), exploration is a mostly inductive approach — hence the start with particular cases — that can be used “when a group, process, activity, or situation has received little or no systematic empirical scrutiny” (p. 9). In the context of our research, the above content analysis procedures established a flexible “research

agenda” (Stebbins, 2001) to guide the study of two particular cases that could help begin to shed some light on an underdeveloped research topic. Therefore, this article used non-probabilistic convenience sampling to select Talking Thrones and GrayArea as relevant cases for exploration for several reasons.

First, both channels had a considerable number of subscribers at the beginning of the study (November 2019), making them intrinsically interesting cases – Talking Thrones had around 599,000 subscribers and GrayArea 169,000. Besides, *The New York Times* mentioned them as being among those popular “creators [who] scrutinize book chapters and TV episodes in search of breadcrumbs and Easter eggs to help enlighten ‘Game of Thrones’ devotees” (Dowling, 2019, para. 3). Hence, they were also recognized by a third party as central elements within GoT/ASOIAF fandom.

Considering the eight channels presented by Dowling (2019), Talking Thrones ranked fourth and GrayArea seventh in the number of YouTube followers.⁷ However, considering the news piece (Dowling, 2019) and the exploration of all channels, the pair selected presented some distinct combination of features deemed relevant for an exploratory study focused on a specific transmedia world. In short, a combination of popularity, a strong focus on GoT/ASOIAF and an expected diversity of profiles explains the choice of this sample in the context of an exploratory study:

- Talking Thrones and GrayArea were amongst the content creators almost exclusively centered on GoT/ASOIAF (that was not the case of three of the channels, including the two most subscribed);
- the YouTubers were also regular uploaders of new content (unlike the third most followed channel), despite being mostly focused on a single transmedia universe – which is key to generating a sample of considerable size;

- the researchers had previous knowledge of these channels and their different profiles – Talking Thrones as a male YouTuber more focused on the series, GrayArea as a female content creator, the only one quoted by Dowling (2019), particularly enthusiastic about the books. In theory, this difference could provide diverse inputs on the themes fans of GoT/ASOIAF can discuss.

Regarding the video's sampling procedures, each uploaded video between May 20, 2019, and May 19, 2020, was added to a database⁸. Only the ones whose headlines mentioned the transmedia world of GoT/ASOIAF were considered. The YouTubers uploaded 97 videos, mostly (n= 66) by GrayArea. Surprisingly, 30 from GrayArea were not considered because the headlines did not mention GoT/ASOIAF. Besides, 10 (from Talking Thrones) were unavailable when the analysis started. Table 1 summarizes the video sample.

Table 1. Video sample (overall and by channel)

	Overall	Talking Thrones	GrayArea
Number of videos	57	21	36 ⁹
Average number of views (September 4, 2021)	148,425	291,554	68,908
Average video length	00h20m09s	00h15m37s	00h22m47s

Concerning the netnography, the selected video was “How Game of Thrones Should Have Ended? (Complete Version) – Game of Thrones Season 8”¹⁰, by Talking Thrones. It aggregated six different previous videos (now unavailable), had more than 1.3 million views (September 4, 2021) and set out to rewrite the entire eighth season.

Themes mapped

A total of 79 themes were mapped, 61 in GrayArea's and 55 in Talking Throne's

channel. The average number of themes per video is similar in both channels (15 overall). Most themes (73) were considered by the initial topic list; 6 were added during the analysis (within the existing categories). Among the latter is one of the two most recurrent themes (42 presences): the YouTubers' references to their own practices within the platform. This means that there are recurrent mentions of past videos, often accompanied by an invitation to (re)view them by posting the links in the description, or plans for future videos, sometimes asking for feedback on the potential interest from their followers. The other most recurrent topic (also 42 presences) is the YouTubers' motivations and preferences about GoT/ASOIAF, which encompasses broader and narrower arguments: that is, both channels expressed their likes and dislikes concerning specific episodes, plots, or characters, but also went back-and-forth in the overall transmedia world, connecting different takes. Other relevant themes (Table 2), which were often used to emphasize the two most recurrent topics, are narrative elements from GoT (known elements of future HBO prequels/sequels started to appear in later videos) and GRRM's books (mostly the already edited ASOIAF volumes, but also other related written stories), the transmedia relationship between GoT and ASOIAF, and the YouTubers' take on fandom (its general motivations and preferences, but also how these content creators see themselves as part of fandom).

Table 2. Themes with 15 or more identifications

Theme	Presences
YouTuber's motivations and preferences	42
YouTuber's own practices within YouTube/as YouTuber	42
Characters from GoT	36
Characters from edited ASOIAF books	36
YouTuber's expectations and theories regarding ASOIAF	34
Story & plot from GoT	31
Story & plot from edited ASOIAF books	31
Transmedia relation between GoT & edited ASOIAF books	28
Remarks on the YouTuber's stance within a community of fans	26

Storytelling from GoT	24
Story & plot from other ASOIAF-related books	23
Characters from other ASOIAF-related books	22
Fandom motivations and preferences, as perceived by the YouTuber	22
Transmedia relation between GoT & future ASOIAF books	20
Storytelling from edited ASOIAF books	19
YouTuber's considerations on GRRM	19
YouTuber's expectations and theories regarding HBO prequels & sequels	18
Characters from HBO prequels & sequels	17
Geography from edited ASOIAF books	17
Fandom expectations and theories regarding ASOIAF books, as perceived by the YouTuber	17
YouTuber's considerations on David Benioff & D.B. Weiss	16
YouTuber's generic theories regarding the transmedia world of GoT/ASOIAF	16
Paratexts (documentaries, interviews, news pieces) regarding Game of Thrones	15

This is strikingly clear when we sum the presences of all found themes under their respective dimensions (Figure 1). The YouTubers' expression of their fandom (motivations, preferences, theories, and appraisal/criticism towards the ASOIAF and GoT authors, respectively, but also their creative practices concerning this transmedia world, within YouTube and, to a lesser extent, on other platforms) is the most recurrent dimension, alongside the discussion of specific traits (narrative ones, but also paratexts, rumors, inspirations) of GoT and the edited books of ASOIAF. Other contents (GRRM's other and future books in this universe and the expected HBO prequels/sequels) are also often mentioned, much like the transmedia relationship between contents. The YouTubers also occasionally voiced their perceptions on the general fandom (motivations, preferences, and theories), comparing them to their own concerns (discussing their place within an intangible community) while assuming a role as interpreters of the general feeling of the fandom.

Figure 1. Themes grouped by dimensions and their frequency

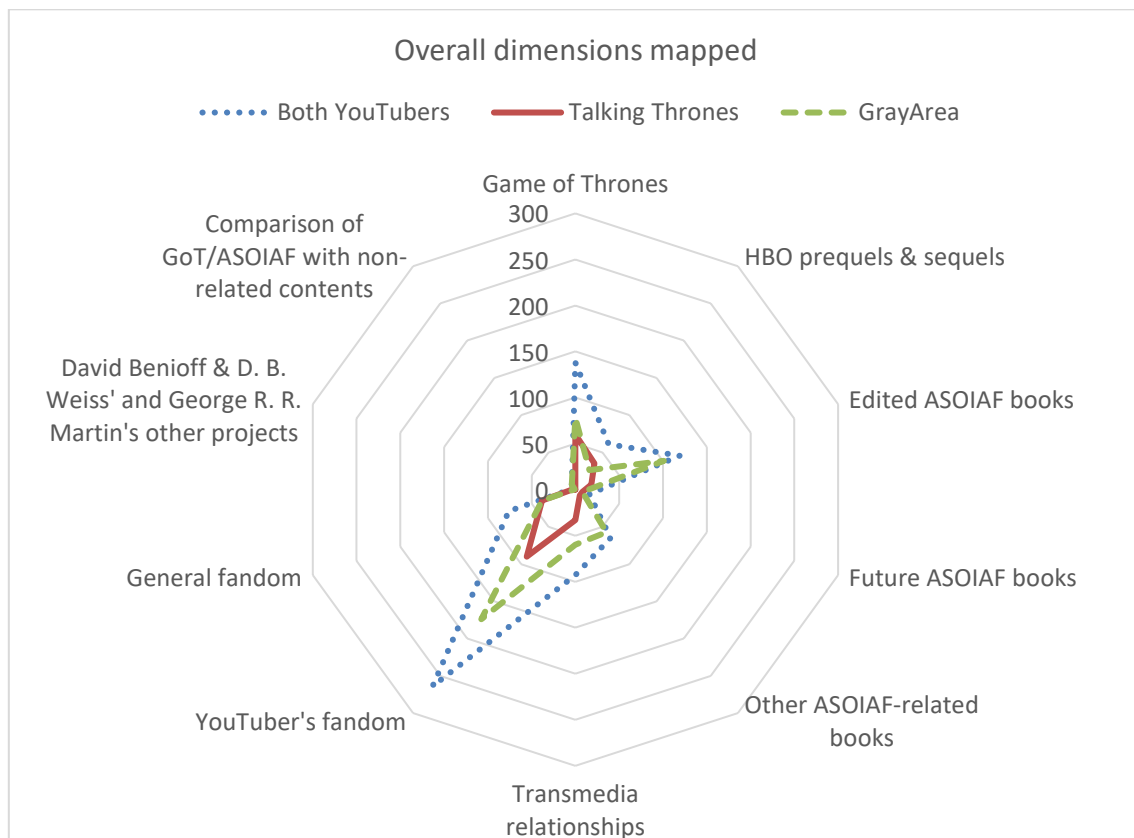


Figure 1 highlights another relevant outcome: despite their shared proficiency in the transmedia world of GoT/ASOIAF, Talking Thrones' videos are mostly centered on the HBO series, GoT foremost. In one of them ("My Thoughts After Watching The Game of Thrones Documentary – Game of Thrones Season 8"¹¹), the YouTuber states personal reasons – from everyday life experiences and how these were eventually related to strong identifications with characters or the urge to share thoughts with other fans – to be a fan and author of contents related to GoT. This strong commitment was particularly evident while rewriting an entire season.

Netnography

Concerning the netnography, the video analysis showed a rewriting focused on:

- the YouTuber's previous practices;
- the author's preferences and theories regarding GoT (and, to a lesser extent, other preferences and theories from the general fandom);
- the (explicit and implicit) comparison of those preferences and theories with what was developed within the series (mostly story & plot, characters, and storytelling).

Another relevant output concerns the video relation with ASOIAF: it is, at most, brief, with only one explicit reference. In this particular video, there is background knowledge in the transmedia world lore that might be related to GRRM's books. However, the still unfinished book saga was not used as reference to rewrite the TV series. While this can be explained by the fact that the events of the series have chronologically overtaken those of the books, it is nonetheless significant that GRRM's work is not explicitly used to, for example, refocus a character or overall plot. The HBO series *and* Talking Thrones own activity as fan/YouTuber appear to have functioned as the main references for rewriting the GoT season finale. Despite reworking the David Benioff and D.B. Weiss series, the implied criticism is not personalized (although Talking Thrones videos are responsible for all 16 explicit references to them – one of them in sharp contrast to the remaining by accentuating the tone of criticism towards the showrunners by joining a somewhat trending meme at the time¹²).

Regarding the 30 comments considered, these are essentially focused on polite exchanges of regards (mostly showing appreciation for the work of the YouTuber, who, in turn, shows appreciation for the remarks). However, there is no further discussion: despite one exception (the YouTuber's acceptance of a succinct alternative presented by another user), the rewriting is not expanded in the comment section. Instead, Talking Thrones's presence seems to be centered on phatic purposes. Even in the one comment

authored by the YouTuber that generated 260 upvotes and 17 replies, which promises/promotes a hypothetical ninth season and links to a playlist of other videos from his channel, there is no additional act beyond one upvote on a complimentary remark. Therefore, if there is a functioning knowledge community, we found no evidence of the YouTuber's participation in it.

Conclusions

Although exploratory, this study presents a systematic effort to understand how two high-profile fans contributed to sustaining and spreading a transmedia world without official releases in the meantime. The themes mapped and the brief netnography point to a significant outcome: something, but not everything, seems to have changed within fandom, if we consider the activities of these specific fans. Even if Talking Thrones and GrayArea continue to express their tastes related to content made by others, they do it while crossing it with managing their profiles as content creators in their own right. After viewing, coding, discussing, and validating all the videos, the indivisibility of these two facets became evident: in the cases studied, even though different themes can be distinguished, the manifestation of fandom goes hand in hand with the management of their personae as YouTubers. This necessarily gives us clues to think about the evolution of convergence culture.

For over one year and through their videos, these content creators showed how fans still “enthusiastically embrace” their favorite contents (Jenkins, 1992, p. 18) by closely examining and reworking them. Therefore, it was not a surprise to find a recurrence of narrative-related themes, such as the in-depth discussion of fictional stories, plots, characters, or geographies, or the centrality of their preferences and expectations as references to evaluate and criticize their favorite contents. Both channels showed their expertise by “entering into the realm of the fiction as if it were a

tangible place they can inhabit and explore” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 18). Rewriting an entire season of GoT, as observed in the netnography, is a clear example of this mastery, but also shows how one fan, when “unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise”, may assert his “right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 18). A crucial difference from Jenkin’s (1992) seminal work is the visibility of these practices, as these fans were able to reach somewhat large audiences.

The most watched video has more than 1.3 million views, both channels have hundreds of thousands of subscribers. The wide reach of their practices highlights the importance of not considering all fan activity in the same fashion (Hills, 2013). The fans at stake are also regular and established YouTubers, which might explain the centrality of their own practices and personae as themes. They may be fans with a vast legacy that can be evoked when discussing in detail the objects of their fandom, but they are also content creators who have built and sustained an online persona that can be attractive in its own right (Pereira et al., 2018). Their audiences might seek not only videos about GoT/ASOIAF, but specific content from Talking Thrones or GrayArea. Hence, their brands benefit from referencing, even hyperlinking, previous videos and partnerships or promoting future endeavors, in and outside YouTube (such as both YouTuber’s Patreon account, merchandise or other contents related to GoT/ASOIAF, much like GrayArea’s co-authored book *The Thrones Effect: How HBO's Game of Thrones Conquered Pop Culture*).

If we consider the example set by the netnography (and that cannot be generalized), the observed YouTuber’s actions in the comment section point in the same direction, as his participation is marked by polite exchanges that acknowledge and reward Talking Thrones as a content creator. This may indicate a different kind of social

capital: “actual or potential resources that are linked to the possession of a *durable network of relations* that is more or less institutionalized” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 2). And the differences in the social capital stress how these YouTubers differ from other fans: Talking Thrones was not acting as just a participant in the knowledge communities suggested by convergence culture (Jenkins, 2008), but rather as a fan *and* a YouTuber, as another focus of other fans’ discussions (whose presence is enhanced by the platform itself, as it visually highlights the actions of the uploader of the video), alongside GoT/ASOIF (and its own authors).

In short, this exploratory research has shown some of the nuances of convergence culture. Nowadays, fans and fandom have a more visible place in the media landscape: not only can they become relevant YouTubers, but their rise is necessarily linked to the capacities of ordinary users, through platforms like YouTube, to choose and help to circulate videos such as the ones analyzed. Hence, the skill to create and spread content capable of reaching significant audiences is also more widely distributed, an example of which is the video discussed in the netnography.

The popularity of Talking Thrones and GrayArea symbolize the need to rethink the value of fan activity beyond audience metrics, as argued by Jenkins et al. (2013). Indeed, the fact that these fans produced content around someone else’s intellectual property while there was no release of new GoT/ASOIAF extensions exemplifies the role that audiences can play in keeping the interest alive in a transmedia world (Scolari, 2013). This may be particularly important in the case of GoT/ASOIAF, considering there is no prospect of new books soon and the problematic final season of the HBO series.

However, the centrality of their personae as YouTubers also reminds us of the need to rethink some of Jenkins’ (2008) earlier propositions. Namely, the presentation

of convergence culture as a top-down and bottom-up process between cultural industries and audiences. That is, these YouTubers imply that there is now something noteworthy in between, which possibly resulted from the very first process suggested by Jenkins (2008). The YouTubers we analyze are not only fans expressing their textual productivity (Fiske, 1992) in a purely socially motivated gift economy (Jenkins et al., 2013): they are also content creators with specific strategies to monetize their work on a commercial platform like YouTube and others alike (Patreon, books, etc.). Future research can further explore the balance we found in the themes of the videos studied between the manifestation of fandom and the management of the YouTubers' brands. This can be done by reaching out to the people behind the videos, by resuming the ethnographic legacy of reception studies – this time with audiences that are also popular content creators.

Notes

1. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-x4iL-dib6tLlfSD4orfQw>
2. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3dNUeJ3jGZ3vixcQf4KSIlg>
3. From convergence culture, fandom, transmedia storytelling and YouTube, and general narrative structure (e.g., Cobley, 2001).
4. In the event of disagreement, which never occurred, the theme would be left uncoded.
5. Systematically mapping themes in advance allowed one to observe the video/comments with an in-depth knowledge of the channel, making it possible to contextualize the single case into a larger scenario.
6. The video had 3,758 comments when the netnography was done.
7. At the beginning of the study, Emergency Awesome had around 3.29M subscribers; New Rockstars 2.41M; Alt Shift X 1.14M; Talking Thrones 599,000; Nerd Soup 232,000; Ideas of Ice and Fire 223,000; GrayArea 169,000; Lucifer Means Lightbringer 13,409.
8. GoT's last episode ("The Iron Throne") aired May 19, 2019.
9. Five were outcomes of this YouTuber's participation in projects with other fans of GoT/ASOIAF (the Obsidian Nights podcast).
10. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HX2mVfRv7kw>

11. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5IKq9ajoOU>
12. The video “A Few Things The Game of Thrones Writers Kinda Forgot? - Game of Thrones Season 8” joins an online parody of a David Benioff comment (<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/dany-kind-of-forgot-about-the-iron-fleet>). This was a stark contrast to other videos: in tone, which was generally balanced in relation to the authors of the series, but also in editing, as the usual linear presentation of arguments was recurrently crossed with the quotation from David Benioff.

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