

TV Review: HBO's 'Game of Thrones' Merges Fantasy With Humanity

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on April 17, 2011 - 10:16am

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CHICAGO – HBO has had waves of creative success including the one started by “The Sopranos” & “Sex and the City,” a later one peaked by “Deadwood” & “The Wire,” and now, a current one that began with “Boardwalk Empire,” continued through the final season of “Big Love,” crested with the masterful “Mildred Pierce,” and appears to have no sign of ebbing with the brilliant, mesmerizing “Game of Thrones.”



TV Rating: **5.0/5.0**

The tagline for “Game of Thrones” and a phrase repeated by Lord Eddard “Ned” Stark (Sean Bean) on the program has been “*Winter is Coming*” (the other being the also-appropriate “*You Win or You Die*”). The line sets the stage for a program steeped in dread. Whether it’s a character’s incredibly dark secrets rising to the surface, the fact that rulers don’t rule for long in this world, or the literal threat of something dangerous on the edge of this civilization, “Game of Thrones” features a constant atmosphere of danger. It’s one of the program’s greatest successes that it always feels slightly on edge, like even the most casual encounter could lead to kingdom-changing catastrophe.



Game of Thrones
Photo credit: HBO

I say “one of the program’s greatest successes” because there are many. “Game of Thrones” is one of the most captivating programs to

premiere in quite some time. It is a complex, nearly flawless venture that may be a bit too dense for some viewers but will greatly reward those willing to do a bit of heavy lifting with their drama. If you were scared off by the multiple arcs on programs like "The Wire" or "Deadwood," then this will be no easier affair. In fact, it's a daringly layered piece with dozens of characters to track, relate, and follow.

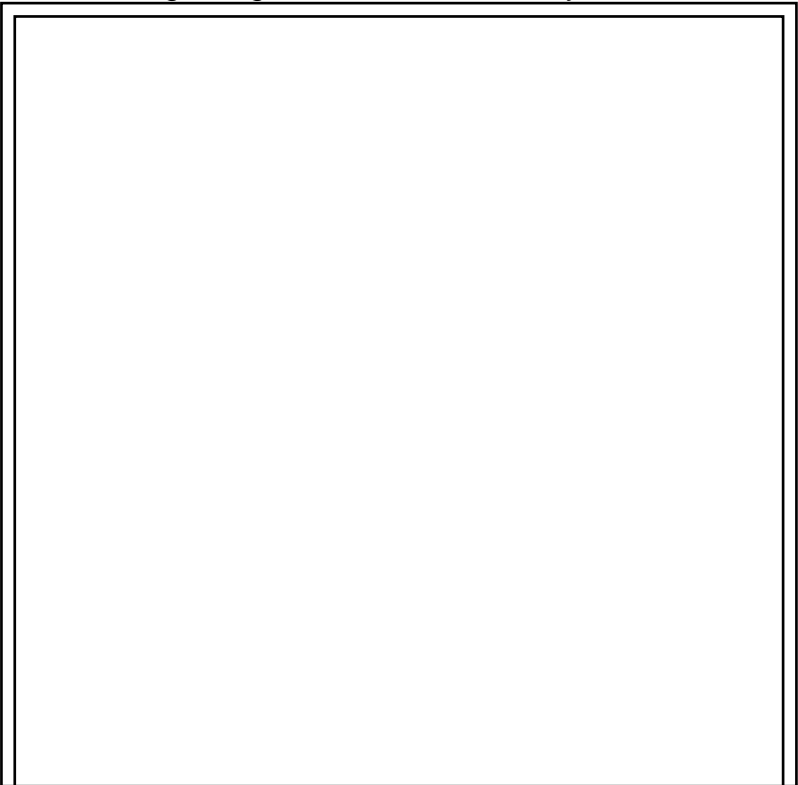


How layered? I realized about 45 minutes into the series premiere that I had very little idea who was related to who or how or why they were doing what they were doing. Shortly after the riveting end of the premiere and into the second episode, it all clicked into place as I stopped worrying about it. I stress patience. Don't bail if you can't follow it. You'll get what you need and you will also have that moment when it either clicks into place or you realize that it doesn't matter if you know every single relationship, power struggle, and character background.

I'll try and give you a few. The lead of the program is the aforementioned Lord Stark, the Lord of Winterfell and head of House Stark, who once ruled the land of Westeros and is married to the headstrong Lady Catelyn Stark (Michelle Fairley). The Kingdom of Westeros is now run by King Robert Baratheon (Mark Addy), a friend of Stark's and head of House Baratheon. His Queen is the devious Cersei Baratheon (Lena Headey), who comes from House Lannister, a motley crew includes Lord Tywin Lannister (Charles Dance), Ser Jaime Lannister (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) and imp Tyrion Lannister (Peter Dinklage).

House Baratheon and House Stark both include numerous children learning the ways of power, deception and how friendship and other personal relationships can only complicate life in royalty. Notable young roles include eldest daughter Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner), tomboy Arya Stark (Maisie Williams), and gentle Bran Stark (Isaac Hempstead-Wright) on one side and spoiled Prince Joffrey Baratheon (Jack Gleeson) and Princess Myrcells Baratheon (Aimee Richardson) on the other.

How the stunning Princess Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke) and her brother Viserys (Harry Lloyd) play into the proceedings isn't clear from the beginning but will become so by the end of the ten-episode first season based on the beloved book by George R.R. Martin.





Game of Thrones
Photo credit: HBO

What story could possibly entwine this many speaking roles? Well, here's where things get tricky. The first episode ends with two shockers so jaw-dropping that only a jerk would dare spoil them here (and HBO has asked us not to do so) and so it's difficult to really discuss the plot of the program at all. The plot specifics aren't as important to the success of "Game of Thrones" as the intangibles that so many programs miss like atmosphere and that sense that winter truly is coming.

"Game of Thrones" is thematically fascinating while also being one of the best-looking programs to ever air on television. There have been a number of expensive productions recently including "Camelot" and "The Borgias" but they don't hold a candle to the production design on this program. Director Tim Van Patten is the All-Star of HBO having helmed more episodes of "The Sopranos" than anyone else (20) while also directing episodes of "Deadwood," "The Wire," "Boardwalk Empire," and many more. He's a spectacular director — arguably the best working on television right now. And he's helped ably by a script from David Benioff ("The 25th Hour," "Troy") and producer work from Tom McCarthy ("The Visitor," "Win Win") that keep the focus on the characters instead of the elements of fantasy. The themes of power and family struggle in "Game of Thrones" are as old as Shakespeare but could also remind viewers of Tony & Carmela Soprano. They're timeless.

As for performances, something that often gets lost in the genre of fantasy, there are several stand-outs including an almost-sure-to-be-Emmy-nominated Peter Dinklage who steals every scene he is in and is nearly matched by the great work of Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, Lena Headey, Sean Bean, Emilia Clarke and young Maisie Williams, who all deserve critical praise that I hope they receive.

It may seem like critics go ga-ga over everything HBO but I was skeptical about "Game of Thrones." Despite having several friends who absolutely adore the books, I've long found that projects based on source material that was once called "unfilmable" usually IS unfilmable. Something doesn't translate. I'm not familiar with the books and I'm sure their fans will take umbrage with what's missing or what's been changed, but I really don't think "Game of Thrones" could have been more of a success. HBO once again lives up to their slogan — this is not TV, it's HBO.

"Game of Thrones" stars Sean Bean, Mark Addy, Michelle Fairley, Lena Headey, Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, Peter Dinklage, Sophie Turner, Maisie Williams, Isaac Hempstead-Wright, Jack Gleeson, Aimee Richardson, Emilia Clarke, and Harry Lloyd. It was adapted by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss from the book by George R.R. Martin and the premiere was directed by Tim Van Patten. It premieres on HBO on April 17th, 2011 at 9pm CST and airs twice more after that first airing on the same night.



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