

GAME OF THRONES EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/game-of-thrones-exclusive-interview-david-benioff-and-db-weiss-try-not-to-spill-the-beans-on-the-final-series-rsdlrmp5h>

In 2012, David Benioff and DB Weiss, the writers of [Game of Thrones](#), killed off Theon Greyjoy. “I was given this amended script at the end of series two,” says Alfie Allen, the actor who plays Theon. “I had this rousing speech, then Brienne [[Gwendoline Christie](#)] just appears from nowhere and stabs me in the heart, saying, ‘This is my Winterfell. Not yours.’ I honestly thought, ‘What a great way to go!’”

Fans of Game of Thrones will know this isn’t what happened. Theon’s death was Benioff and Weiss playing a joke on Allen. He’d been asking them constantly whether or not his character was going to die, so they wrote an entire scene telling him that he was.

“David and Dan called me up and said, ‘So what do you think about your ending — do you like it?’ and I said, ‘Yes, that’s great.’ ‘OK, cool,’ they said. ‘How would you feel about being a zombie in the next series?’ I was, like, ‘I’m game.’ Then they went, ‘OK, how would you feel about being a zombie with no dialogue whatsoever?’ Then they were, like, ‘We’re f***** joking, don’t be silly.’”

Whatever your thoughts on the men who created Game of Thrones, you probably wouldn’t have them pegged as pranksters. The show they have guided to cultural pre-eminence contains more humour than many give it credit for, but it’s overwhelmingly a stern undertaking. Yet the hardest thing when you encounter Benioff and Weiss — David and Dan, as they’re called by everyone on the show — is getting them to be serious. Here they are on [Kit Harington](#). “The moment Kit walked into [the casting director] Nina Gold’s office, he looked like the Jon Snow in our imaginations: dark, brooding, sensitive — and very, very ugly.”

The task before the two Americans is undoubtedly a serious one: to bring in to land a 70-hour series that has become the focus of the TV-watching world. They both know that few shows in history have managed to leave their audience satisfied while maintaining their narrative integrity to the close.

“‘Audience satisfaction’ implies that the audience is a singular entity with a shared response,” Benioff says, “but the truth is that different people will have different responses. Some fans thought the ending of The Sopranos was frustrating. Some thought it was brilliant. We’re in the brilliant camp.

“The point is that there will not be a uniform reaction to our finale, and it seems both impossible and undesirable to create an ending that scores 100% on the satisfaction meter. Besides, what’s so great about being satisfied? We’re after passion here, not contentment.”

Passion for them means being talked about, creating the show on everyone’s lips. “I remember being on a subway car in New York a few days after The Sopranos finale aired,” Weiss says, “and there were four separate conversations going on about what really happened. It seemed like the

whole city was discussing Tony Soprano and whether he died or not. That ending was brave and utterly original.”

“The final episode of Adventure Time almost made me cry,” Benioff says. “If my tear ducts weren’t broken, I’m sure I would have.”

“And the final season of Breaking Bad was brilliant,” Weiss adds, “but then every season of Breaking Bad was brilliant. We were shooting Thrones in Croatia when that came out, and I remember downloading it, locking the door, closing all the windows, turning off the phones and being more focused on what was happening on a screen than I have been since, jeez, probably the end of The Empire Strikes Back.”

It’s interesting he should refer to Star Wars as his screen benchmark, because a few days after our interview it was announced that Benioff and Weiss are to write a series of Star Wars films. Game of Thrones has elevated them from a pair of jobbing screenwriters to a throne of their own. (George Lucas visited the GoT set this year to give them the news in person.)

None of this was predestined when the pair, now in their late forties, met at Trinity College Dublin; a decade later, they began obsessing about George RR Martin’s bestselling A Song of Ice and Fire books. Having persuaded Martin that they were the right people to adapt the novels (he asked them “Who is Jon Snow’s mother?” to check they were genuine fans), they sold the idea to HBO and, in 2009, made a pilot. It was so bad, it had to be almost entirely reshot.

“We made the original pilot and showed it to some people, smart people, good friends of ours,” Weiss says. “In the scene where Bran catches Jaime and [Cersei](#) going at it in the old tower, no one watching knew Jaime and Cersei were brother and sister. Which is arguably the central fact of that whole episode. It felt like a relatively profound writing and showrunning failure.”

“HBO was really on the fence about whether or not it was going to let this go to series,” he adds. “Those were four of the longest months of our lives — sitting there thinking every day that this thing was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that was never going to come by again, and we f***** it up.”

Luckily the reshot pilot held up. HBO ordered one series. “That first year felt probationary,” Benioff says. “It was, like, ‘All right, these guys are probably not very good at this. Let’s see what they can do. We’ve already sunk a lot of money into this pilot. Might as well get one season out of it.’”

Game of Thrones was the pair’s first television showrunning job. The way they describe it, they learnt their small-screen skills on the hoof. “At one time or another, we’ve made mistakes in every facet of showrunning,” Benioff says. Any lines they particularly regret? “‘Where are my dragons?’ [a line from Daenerys as she spent most of series two seemingly on a pointless search for her dragons] stands out as a particular lowlight.”

Even their lowlights caught on, however: “Where are my dragons?” became a popular internet meme, along with Tyrion’s “I drink. And I know things” and Ygritte’s “You know nothing, Jon Snow”.

The internet has been both a help and a hindrance to Benioff and Weiss. Game of Thrones has been pirated more than 90m times, which has lost broadcasters a lot of money, but spread the show's global reach. A greater problem for the writers is the spoiler. As interest in the series has grown, fan sites have taken to publishing any detail they can get their hands on. Given the huge ensemble cast and filming taking place in several locations simultaneously across Europe, often in public, trying to keep the lid on plotlines has become an unwanted part of the pair's job.

"Fan theorising is fun," Benioff says. "We all do it with our favourite shows — not necessarily online, but in discussions with friends. But spoilers are frustrating. The urge to ruin someone else's experience is juvenile and dickish. It's like that twerp in Texas who drove past fans waiting in line at a bookstore, screaming 'Snape kills Dumbledore!'. Why do people enjoy doing things like this? Who knows?"

They do recognise that Game of Thrones has in part made its own bed. Ever since it abruptly killed off Ned Stark, the hero, at the end of the first series — "What if the hero dies? That was part of the original pitch," Benioff says — the show has been written in part to shock. That in turn means some viewers want to know which shocks are coming.

"On some level, yeah, we did realise that people are probably going to freak out when [Sean Bean](#) [Ned Stark] gets his head chopped off," Weiss says. "I don't know if we knew the level at which they would freak out, but we knew that if people cared about the show, then the fact that the guy who was on the poster got his head chopped off would probably shock them."

What's been their stock way of telling cast members they might be about to get axed? "Well, traditionally we'd make a death call," Weiss says. "Eventually the cast members learnt about these death calls and knew to dread them, and it got to the point where every time we called an actor to tell them something innocuous, we'd have to start with, 'Don't worry, you're not dead yet!'"

"The worst kinds of death happen off screen," Benioff says. "The best kind are memorable — Hodor, Oberyn, Joffrey. If you watch the show, you remember how those dudes bought it."

We can safely assume that a lot more dudes will have bought it in memorable ways by the time the final series is over. Ever since Benioff and Weiss met Martin at his Santa Fe ranch in 2013, they have known how the show will end. Martin, of course, has still not written his ending in the books. It was arguably when the adaptation overtook the source novels entirely, in series six, that it hit its best form. Was moving beyond the source novels a release, in hindsight?

"Luckily," Weiss says, "we had a long runway before passing the novels. We knew when we were going to pass them and were able to plan accordingly. Anyway, we've tried to be good foster parents to George's babies. 'Good' in this case means being as abusive as the birth father."

And so to the legacy. Benioff and Weiss would rather not talk about it at all, because they think that's pretentious. "You'll have to ask someone who isn't us," Weiss says.

In the time Game of Thrones has been on, though, television has changed entirely. How might the series have turned out if it had begun on a streaming service, and all those years of shocks could have been administered in one binge?

“It’s a good question,” Benioff says. “We do love airing on Sunday nights [Monday in the UK] and having most of our audience watching at the same time. That sort of synchronised viewing is becoming increasingly anachronistic, but there’s real value to it. The Pickwick Papers became a phenomenon in part because Londoners were eagerly awaiting each new instalment. Like Dan, I remember being in Croatia, impatiently trying to download the final episode of Breaking Bad while not looking at any online commentary. There is something nice about anticipating something in a communal way.”