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HOW DID GAME OF THRONES BECOME SUCH A 'PHENOMENON'?

Winter came and went, leaving millions disappointed by the ending and a generation of adolescent boys exhausted from over-stimulation. Many more wondered whether all the blood and bare bottoms were strictly necessary. But few would argue that HBO's "Game of Thrones", celebrating its 10th birthday on April 17, was anything less than a televisual phenomenon.

Much to the chagrin of TV executives, figuring out how to repeat its global success remains as much a mystery as how anyone ever built a 700-foot wall entirely out of ice. The winning components are clear, not least

"Shameless" and "True Blood", with 236 and 137 nude scenes, respectively.

Power politics

Gore was another attraction, with a catalogue of skin-flaying, eye-gouging, throat-slitting, horse-heart-eating carnage that, famously, refused to spare even the show's main characters. Their unpredictable chances of survival added to its addictive appeal as the deaths racked up - 59 in season one, soaring to 3,523 in the massacrificious eighth and final season, according to data site Statista.

Still, there are more violent shows

you exercise it... and how the young people spend the whole eight seasons looking for ways not to be like their parents or grandparents... these are what gave it its universal appeal."

For all the criticism around its treatment of women, the story had complex female characters at its core. "To maximize your audience, it's no good for fantasy shows simply to have manly men doing manly things while the women are just damsels in distress or mothers looking concerned," Larrington said.

'Intimidating size'

Even for fans of the books, the success came as a shock. "It's still hard to believe that the show exploded into a phenomenon like it did," said Myles McNutt, author of "Game of Thrones: A Guide to Westeros and Beyond". "It could have been that Martin's story was more accessible than we realised but it just had to be unburdened from the intimidating size of his novels."

He said that the timing also helped, coming just as social media became a vital part of TV viewing. "Game of Thrones" was indeed the show that launched a thousand memes. Many even found their way into political discourse, from a British lawmaker warning that winter would come if people didn't vote for Brexit, to then-president Donald Trump tweeting an image of himself in the show's artwork with the words "Sanctions Are Coming" aimed at Iran.

Thriving future?

It may be no surprise that concocting the next hit fantasy show looks challenging. HBO has multiple prequels in development, though only one, "House of the Dragon" is so far greenlit. Amazon, meanwhile, has forked out \$250 million for the rights to "Lord of the Rings". But the stakes are high, as the makers of "Game of Thrones" found when the final series was vilified by fans for seeming

Some 1.8 million people - and counting - have signed a petition demanding it be remade "with competent writers". McNutt said that it was unclear how audiences would respond to new takes on their favorite parallel worlds. "But HBO and Amazon are betting hundreds of millions of dollars that 'Game of Thrones' opened the door to a thriving future for fantasy television, and that's definitely never something I would have imagined a decade ago when the show premiered," he added. —AFP



A couple pays their respects at a makeshift memorial for hip-hop star DMX outside White Plains hospital in White Plains, New York on Friday.

HBO's penchant for naked - usually female - bodies. The non-stop sex brought controversy, especially when it was less consensual than in the original books, starting with the brutal consummation of Daenerys' marriage to Khal Drogo in the first episode in 2011.

"I think they misjudged the audience at the very beginning... There was something quasi-pornographic going on there," said Carolyn Larrington, a medieval literature professor at the University of Oxford and author of "All Men Must Die: Power and Passion in Game of Thrones". But overall, according to the experts at MrSkin.com, the show sits a lowly seventh in the all-time TV nudity rankings, with 82 nude scenes (74 percent female). That's far below

around and titillation alone cannot explain a viewership that reached 207 countries and saw 19.3 million people tune in live for the final episode in 2019 in the United States alone, according to HBO. Media analysts Parrot Analytics said it was still the most talked-about show through 2020, a year after it finished.

Much of the credit must go to the spectacular way in which the world of Westeros was brought to life by showrunners Dan Weiss and David Benioff, and above all to the rich story-telling of George R R Martin, on whose books the show was based. "What made the show so interesting were the twin poles of power politics and family," said Larrington. "How you gain power and how

'Fleabag' actor Waller-Bridge to star in new 'Indiana Jones'

"Fleabag" actor and creator Phoebe Waller-Bridge will star alongside Harrison Ford in the new "Indiana Jones" movie due to hit screens next summer, Lucasfilm said Friday. The series' fifth installment, to be directed by James Mangold ("Ford v Ferrari") has been billed as 78-year-old Ford's final film as the hero archaeologist. The "new adventure" will feature a "dream team

remarkable rise for British actor and writer Waller-Bridge, 35, who won multiple Emmys for "Fleabag," the smash-hit TV adaptation of her one-woman show about a disillusioned young singleton in London.

Waller-Bridge also co-wrote spy thriller "Killing Eve" and the upcoming, pandemic-delayed James Bond film "No Time To Die". She has worked previously with Lucasfilm, playing acerbic droid L3-37 in "Solo: A Star Wars Story" (2018). The fifth Indiana Jones film has been in production for years, with Lucasfilm parent company Disney confirming Ford's return at an investor day in December. Ford first picked up the adventurer's signature hat and whip in 1981's "Raiders of the Lost Ark" - just a few years after achieving global fame as Han Solo in the original "Star Wars" film. Three years later, "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" followed. In 1989, "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" hit theaters, with Sean Connery playing Indy's dad.

Nearly 20 years would pass before Ford starred in the fourth film, "Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull," which had box office success but was critically panned. Legendary composer John Williams, who created Indy's famous theme, will return to score the fifth film, which is due in July 2022. —AFP



Phoebe Waller-Bridge

of all-time great filmmakers" including producers Steven Spielberg - who was initially due to direct - and Kathleen Kennedy, said Mangold in a statement to AFP.

"When you add Phoebe, a dazzling actor, brilliant creative voice and the chemistry she will undoubtedly bring to our set, I can't help but feel as lucky as Indiana Jones himself," Mangold added. The casting caps a



NASA's Ingenuity helicopter unlocks its rotor blades, allowing them to spin freely, on April 7, 2021, the 47th Martian day, or sol, of the mission, captured by the Mastcam-Z imager on NASA's Perseverance Mars rover on the following sol, April 8, 2021. —AFP

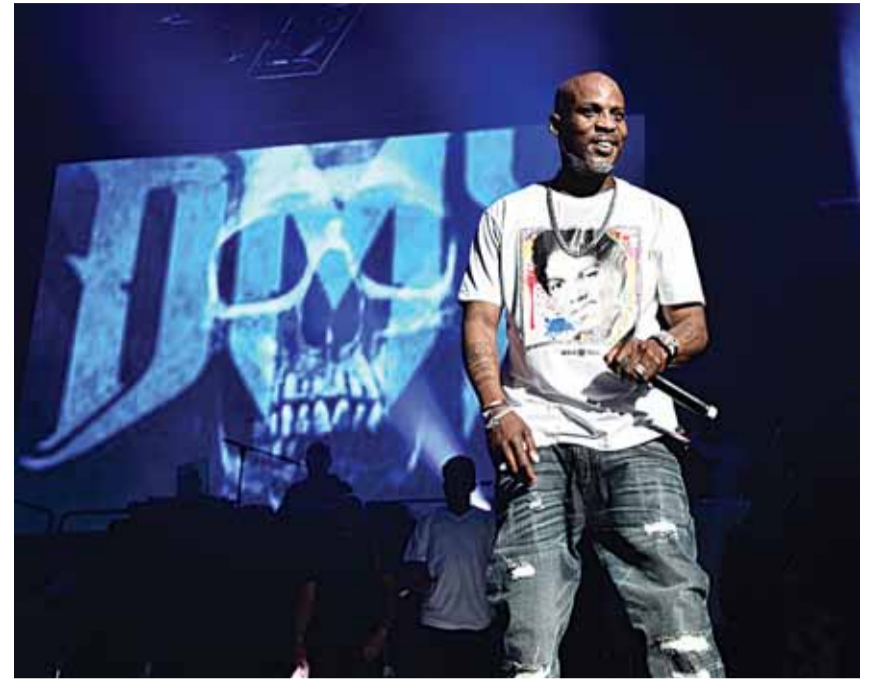
NASA space copter ready for first Mars flight

The helicopter that NASA has placed on Mars could make its first flight over the Red Planet within two days after a successful initial test of its rotors, the US space agency said Friday. The current plan for the first-ever attempt at powered, controlled flight on another planet is for the four-pound (1.8 kilogram) helicopter, dubbed the Ingenuity, to take off from Mars' Jezero Crater on Sunday at 10:54 pm US eastern time (0254 GMT Monday) and hover 3 meters above the surface for a half-minute, NASA said. "The helicopter is good, it's looking healthy," said Tim Canham, Ingenuity operations lead, in a press conference. "Last night, we did our 50 RPM spin, where we spun the blades very slowly and carefully," he said. The plan for today is to have it rise, flying only vertically, hover and rotate for 30 seconds to take a picture of the Perseverance rover, which touched down on Mars on February 18 with the helicopter attached to its underside.

Then the Ingenuity will be lowered back down onto the surface. The flight will be autonomous, pre-programmed into the aircraft because of the 15 minutes it takes for signals to travel from Earth to Mars, and also due to the demanding environment of the distant planet. "Mars is hard not only when you land, but when you try to take off from it and fly around, too," said MiMi Aung, Ingenuity project manager.

She explained that the planet has significantly less gravity than Earth, but less than one percent the pressure of Earth's atmosphere at the surface. The makes it necessary for the Ingenuity to be able to spin its rotor blades much faster than a helicopter on Earth in order to fly. "Put those things together, and you have a vehicle that demands every input be right," said Aung.

NASA captured the test of the rotors in a short video shot from the rover just a few meters away, showing what looks like a small drone. Aung said a second test would be conducted today, with the rotors running at high speed. "The only uncertainty remains the actual environment of Mars," she said, mentioning possible winds. NASA calls the unprecedented helicopter operation highly risky, but says it could reap invaluable data about the conditions on Mars. NASA plans up to five flights, each successively more difficult, in a period of a month. —AFP



In this file photo taken on June 28, 2019, DMX performs at Masters Of Ceremony 2019 at Barclays Center in New York City. —AFP

DMX, rap's explosive, tortured star, dies at 50

DMX, the hardcore hip-hop star whose raw, snarling raps chronicled the struggles of the American street and his own inner pain, has died. He was 50 years old. The rapper's longtime lawyer confirmed DMX's death to AFP, with a statement from his family saying the artist, born Earl Simmons, died after nearly a week on life support following a heart attack.

"Earl was a warrior who fought till the very end," the statement released Friday read, saying the rapper died at White Plains Hospital north of New York City, with loved ones by his side. "He loved his family with all of his heart and we cherish the times we spent with him," the statement read.

The rapper - who reigned over the late 1990s and early 2000s with hits including "X Gon' Give It To Ya" and "Party Up" - was among hip-hop's darkest yet most endearing stars. He laid out his inner demons for the masses in gritty, hard-driving anthems, with a distinctive poetic vulnerability that gained him commercial and critical acclaim.

Raised in the New York suburb of Yonkers, the artist endured a grim childhood, growing up in housing projects with his mother and siblings where he suffered abuse. Simmons was burdened with a reputation as a problem child, and shuffled in and out of homes for troubled boys for much of his youth.

At 14, he began struggling with addiction and entered a cycle of incarceration, both of which would persist throughout his life. Even after achieving international celebrity for his artistry, DMX continued to have run-ins with the penal system, with charges including drug possession, animal cruelty, reckless driving, failure to pay child support and tax evasion.

'A giant'

But while his criminal record made headlines, it was his blunt, confessional raps delivered in his powerful, gravelly voice that would cement the artist's legacy, leaving an indelible mark on hip-hop and gaining him legions of fans.

"DMX was a brilliant artist and an inspiration to millions around the world. His message of triumph over struggle, his search for the light out of darkness, his pursuit of truth and grace brought us closer to our own humanity," said Def Jam Recordings, the label with which DMX released some of his most iconic albums, in a statement following his death. "DMX was nothing less than a giant."

He began beatboxing in the mid-1980s, writing lyrics and peddling mixtapes. The charismatic artist spent most of the 1990s making a name for himself in New York's underground scene, especially in rap battle rings. It was late in that decade that he grew into the blazing,

urgent style of performance that would become his calling card, emanating a singular presence at once hypermasculine and sincere.

In the mid-1990s, he famously battled with Brooklyn's up-and-coming star Jay-Z, who was then primarily an emcee, for hours in a smoky pool hall in the Bronx. "It was dope. DMX, at the time, I had never really heard of DMX. I didn't know who this kid was," the producer Ski Beatz, who was in attendance, told the site HipHopDX. "But to hear him rhyme live, I was like, 'This dude is really ill.'"

'Atomic energy'

DMX's love of dogs was such that he integrated barks and growls into his teeth-baring brand of rap. "Your dog will die for you," he told the Los Angeles Times in 1999. "That's how dogs get down, unconditional love. Humans are not really capable of unconditional love." He released his debut major-label single "Get At Me Dog" in 1998 with Def Jam, which came off his first studio album "It's Dark and Hell Is Hot."

The record debuted at number one on Billboard's top album chart and boasted another hit single, "Ruff Ryders' Anthem," ushering in commercial success that would last for years. Defying his ferocious, testosterone-addled image, DMX also charmed with his goofier side, notably in an impromptu remix of the holiday classic "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" that went viral in 2012.

He was vocal about his commitment to Christianity, even expressing hopes of becoming a pastor. DMX suffered from addiction to drugs including crack, which he said a mentor tricked him into trying at age 14 by lacing a blunt, exposure that led to a life of torment. "Why would you do that to a child?" he said in an emotional interview on rapper Talib Kweli's weekly podcast in late 2020. "I didn't really have anybody to talk to. In the hood, nobody wants to hear that... Talking about your problems is viewed as a sign of weakness, when actually it's one of the bravest things you can do."

Tributes poured in Friday from fans and fellow artists. T.I. called DMX a "cultural icon", as Missy Elliott dubbed the loss "heavy for the HipHop family". "No one radiated more agony, pain, and atomic energy," tweeted rapper Biz Markie. "The struggle incarnate." Snoop Dogg, who last year faced off with DMX as part of the Verzuz series, posted: "What they thought was a battle ended up being a family reunion. Of 2 Doggs who loved everything about each other thank U. X for loving me back." "God's poet," wrote Nas. "I love you." —AFP

Nike agrees to settlement with 'Satan Shoe' maker

The company behind the "Satan Shoes" released in collaboration with rapper Lil Nas X has settled with Nike over the sneakers the corporate giant said were trademark infringement. MSCHE, the Brooklyn studio that developed 666 pairs of customized Nike Air Max 97s - complete with an apparent drop of human blood in the midsole - issued a voluntary recall for the kicks.

In a Friday email the company offered a full refund of the original retail price and shipping costs to customers who purchased either the Satan Shoes or the previously released "Jesus Shoes" - which contained holy water in the sole. The Satan Shoes went for \$1,018 each.

"We have agreed to settle the lawsuit," the MSCHE email read. "As part of the settlement, Nike has asked us, and we have agreed, to initiate a recall in order to remove the Satan Shoes and the Jesus Shoes from circulation.

This is a voluntary recall: it is totally within your rights to choose whether to return your Satan Shoes or Jesus Shoes."

The Satan Shoes sold out almost instantly when they dropped late last month. Their release triggered controversy from some American conservatives, especially those already incensed by artist Lil Nas X's lusty video for the song "Montero (Call Me By Your Name)" whose release was affiliated with the shoes.

Nike alleged in federal court documents that the sneakers prompted boycott calls against them from offended consumers, who erroneously associate the sneaker giant with the bloody soled-shoes due to their trademark swoosh symbol. Details of the settlement beyond the recall were not disclosed. "The parties are pleased to put this dispute behind them," a Nike spokesperson said in a statement. —AFP

S AFRICA'S GANGSTER BABOON COMES TO AN UNTIMELY END

As in any good film noir, the end has come quickly for a notorious South African baboon which went on a vicious crime spree and pushed things just that little bit too far. The alpha-male monkey found himself high on the unwanted list last year after he moved into the scenic Cape Town suburb of Smitswinkel Bay following a stint along a tourist-magnet road.

There, he terrorized residents with more than 40 raids for food in trash-bins, lawns and porches, sometimes entering homes while people were inside. In desperation, locals fortified their homes with "baboon-proof" measures - all in vain. But it was when the baboon started forming a gang that the authorities realized that things were getting out of hand.

In recent weeks, a splinter group of females and juveniles had started fol-

lowing the baboon, placing themselves in danger, and the boss on Thursday had to be "humanely" euthanized, the city of Cape Town said. The conservation group CapeNature "supported the removal of this baboon (and) issued the permit," it said in a statement.

"The city can confirm that an independent veterinarian assisted with the procedure," it said, coyly casting a veil over details of the baboon's demise. Hundreds of baboons live around Cape Town and are often a mugging nuisance as they scavenge properties and attack tourists for edibles - a byproduct of factors including urban areas encroaching into their natural habitats.

The city said the monkeys could be injured or killed, or even contract coronavirus, by being in close proximity to humans. With the death of the leader, Cape Town hopes the gang will return to their natural habitat. —AFP