

# A LEGEND UNFOLDS

HBO AND ELASTIC MAP OUT THE OPEN FOR *GAME OF THRONES*

BY ANDREA KENNEDY

## INTRO

As the credits begin to roll, a boundless map unfolds, its topography springing from the earth. The sun illuminates the bursting terrain, revealing with it the royal history of a foreign fantasy land.

The title sequence of HBO's *Game of Thrones* is as epic as the series of novels on which the show is based. *A Song of Fire and Ice* by George R. R. Martin, a work of medieval fiction, laid the template for the series, so the network needed some sort of legend to orient the viewer to this new territory. To pay homage to the story and its fans, HBO commissioned long-time digital production and design partner, Oscar-winner Angus Wall (Best Editing for *The Social Network*, 2011), to construct a legend of the series' fantasy world of Westeros from mere pixels.

## CONCEPT

With the introduction of *Game of Thrones*, HBO knew it would need to orient its audience unfamiliar with the fictional world to the series in a manner as epic as the drama itself. Two years before the show debuted, Angus Wall, founder and director of design-driven VFX production house Elastic, began talks with the show's creators, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, to brainstorm sequences that establish the lay of the land for viewers by giving them an aerial perspective of the map.

"There was a need for sort of a legend, like what you have in the overleaf of a book," Wall explained. A pioneer of all-digital filmmaking, Wall took the concept and went big. This map, he decided, would be digitally animated, allowing the viewer to explore the landscape and discover the kingdoms.

"We wanted the title sequence to entertain and painlessly inform, to serve the same function as the maps in George's books to which we so often found ourselves turning," said co-creator Benioff.



## pre-production

Wall knew the entire sequence would be fully digital, so to plan the *Game of Thrones* world in terms of a map, he thought far beyond the confines of 2D depictions. "This world had to be curved," Wall said. Instead of working with the limited shooting capacity of a map placed on a flat surface, Elastic created a sphere and placed the map inside of it: an inverse globe. At the center of the sphere, a sun would light the land, revealing true-to-life attributes of the medieval kingdoms.

"The idea is that the map we're seeing is not an abstraction," said co-creator Weiss, "but an actual physical object made of wood, metal, fabric and other period-appropriate materials – a series of da Vinci-inspired automata painstakingly constructed by a group of mad monks."

## production

Designers created Westeros and the surrounding lands using 3D animation software Maya, with each location taking more than a week to complete. Seven territories were animated, and four iterations of the sequence were made based on the locations featured in each episode.

"We would reference the basic shape of whatever the actual location was and turn it into this mechanized model," Wall explained. The open paid special attention to little details that fans of the books would appreciate. The architecture shown in the open is a take on da Vinci's machine models, and the seat of power, which each of the noble families are vying for, is shown with a sigil, the symbol of the ruling house's spiritual animal. Designers used each of those central buildings as great cogs, spinning them to activate each kingdom's dramatic reveal of their respective territory, intricate structures and even specific color temperature.

To keep a foot in reality, Wall decided to stick with the illusion of realistic, although visually engaging, shot angles. "I approached it like we built a 30 or 40-foot model, and we had done a motion control shoot with lenses and with all the limitations of camera," he said.

Staying true to the map motif while also enhancing the enigma, Wall and his team refrained from using human figures in the titles. To insert a personal element to the sequence, they added an elaborate astrolabe – rings swooping around the sun – that document the mythical history of Westeros via relief carving.

"There's a lot of detail in here that you get after repeated viewings," said Wall, "One of the things we really wanted to do was get people who are fans of the books excited that we are really staying true to that world." ➡



(From top) Drawing of Dothrak; Sketch of Winterfell; Sigil for King's Landing; Main title on astrolabe

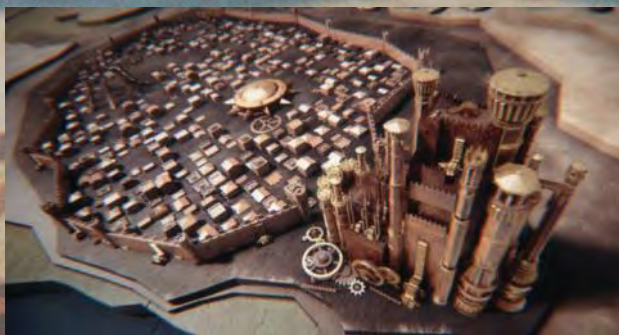


## post

An advantage of working completely in a digital environment, Wall explained, is that much of the traditional post work melds with the design and production process, but polishing did occur after all the different layers were rendered. Scenes were given to Elastic's partner company, VFX studio a52, to composite in After Effects and add final touches to, including diffusion passes, defocusing and color grading, in Smoke.

"At the top of each hour, you get a fun refresher course in the geography of the *Game of Thrones* world, and a little reminder of the history that underscores the current story," co-creator Weiss said.

The final piece is a fully digital, fully epic intro to the world of Westeros. ■



Aerial views of King's Landing taken from the title sequence

## credits

**Client:** HBO

### production company

**Production Company:** Elastic

**Director:** Angus Wall

### post production

**Design Studio:** Elastic

**Art Director:** Rob Feng

**Lead Designer:** Chris Sanchez

**Designers:** Henry De Leon, Leanne Dare

**Concept Artists:** George Fuentes, Rustam Hasanov

**Storyboard & Concept Artist:** Lance LeBlanc

**Production Artist:** Patrick Raines

**Producer:** Hameed Shaikat

**Executive Producer:** Jennifer Sofio Hall

**VFX Studio:** a52

**CG Supervisor:** Kirk Shintani

**CG Artists:** Paulo de Almada, John Tumlin, Christian Sanchez, Erin Clark, Tom Nemeth, Joe Paniagua

**2D Animation Artists:** Tony Kandalaf, Brock Boyts

**Composers:** Sarah Blank, Eric Demeusy

**Smoke & Colorist:** Paul Yacono

### editorial

**Editorial Company:** Rock Paper Scissors

**Editor:** Angus Wall

**Assistant Editor:** Anton Capaldo-Smith, Austyn Daines

**Executive Producer:** Carol Lynn Weaver, Linda Carlson

**Composer:** Ramin Djawadi

**Sound Design:** Andy Kennedy