

GAME OF THRONES: WITH LITTLE ECONOMIC COMPETITION, GROWTH FOUND ONLY IN CONQUEST

by Aeon J. Skoble

For those of you not in the know, the *Game of Thrones* series is based on a collection of fantasy novels set in an alternate world that resembles the Middle Ages, but in which dragons, zombies, and other magical things exist, and in which the seasons do not follow

regular patterns. Besides the magic and the swordplay, there is also plenty of political intrigue as various ruling factions work to undermine each other and everyone seems to be scheming.

A friend of mine started bingeing through the first season in an attempt



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to catch up, and after two episodes, expressed incredulity that their civilization could be several thousand years old yet still be technologically retrograde. I replied that that wasn't a fair criticism, since this is a staple of the genre—it's important to the plot that there be ancient lore and artifacts, so a long history is usually central to the backstory.

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Yet it's worth considering why this is a problem. Our own civilization has seen tremendous growth technologically in the last few hundred years, although it was pretty much *Game of Thrones* for the previous 3,000. But grow we did, so one might wonder about my friend's question.

One answer is that in their world, political leaders tend to be so consumed by their love of power that they fail to consider what is best for the whole country. But since that's true in the real world as well, that can't be the answer. Indeed, many features of their world are reminiscent of ours—conflict between competing religious worldviews, exploitation of the peasantry by powerful elites, power struggles, class conflict, and women's unequal status.

None of this prevented us from developing steam engines, electricity,

nuclear power, antibiotics, and microprocessors. Of course, we didn't have to contend with wizards, zombie hordes, and fire-breathing dragons. There are hints dropped that higher levels of technology have been lost in their world due to these fantasy elements. Is it possible that someone was close to discovering electricity but then was thwarted by magic? That doesn't seem like the right way to think about this.

The reason you get technological breakthroughs is that you're trying to solve a problem, often a problem found in the previous technology. You don't invent a supersonic jet plane until after someone has already invented airplanes. It's only then that you start to wonder how to make a faster one.

But how would you get a plane in the first place?

You would, first of all, have to have the idea that it's possible to fly. If your planet had no birds, this might not ever occur to anyone, but in our world, speculation about human flight is literally as old as civilization itself. Even Da Vinci couldn't quite make it work, but once ballooning allowed people to go up into the sky, it wasn't long (comparatively speaking) until we had planes. Besides the idea of flight, you would also need the idea of scientific method—a reliable way to figure out what works and what doesn't. It would be helpful, too, to have an easy system for preserving and transmitting knowledge: the printing press. The books and scrolls in *Game of Thrones* are hand-scribed,




as in our world prior to the invention of the press.

What do we need in order for ideas to be explored, shared, and experimented on?

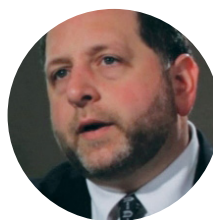
Minimally, we need cultural norms in which this is seen as beneficial and not harmful. Better still, we need cultural norms in which this is rewarded.

In the real world, as societies developed enough to trade with others, they could easily see the role of innovation in fostering progress. A society that was too insular remained stagnant; one that was open—even just a little bit—to innovation and change saw progress. If there's no trade, no economic competition, then the only route to growth is conquest. *Game of Thrones* seems to take place in a world of conquest. It's not so

much that they haven't discovered electricity yet, it's that they haven't discovered commerce.

To be sure, people buy and sell things there, but the only people who think in innovative or entrepreneurial ways are either devoted to conquest, or to sorcery. That, I think, is why they're stagnant. 

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