

Checkmate

Creating a Franchise: “The Queen’s Gambit”

By Claire Kendall Taetz

Checkmate

Chess has been around since the 6th century, allocating the world of chess ample time to cultivate an intellectual culture where brilliant minds can find a plethora of competition, strategy, and introspection. The story of chess-prodigy Beth Harmon originates from the intellectual property of the 1983 American novel, *The Queen's Gambit* by Walter Tevis. The bildungsroman follows an orphan girl who hones her gift for the game as she quickly advances to the world's largest chess competitions. However, the story is not merely about chess. Instead, it expands upon the highbrow culture of chess. Harmon finds herself dabbling in drugs and alcohol with her addiction to the thrill the fierce game gives her. As she navigates her newfound fame and mother's alcoholism, Harmon learns who she is and whom she wants to be in her personal life, as well as the chess realm.

Released on October 23, 2020, Netflix's mini-series, "The Queens Gambit," is the first extension of a potential franchise. This period piece set in the 1960s encapsulates the themes and storylines from Tevis' original IP. The series stars actress Anya Taylor-Joy as Beth Harmon. In November 2020, *The Queen's Gambit*, written and directed by Scott Frank, had been viewed by "62M million households – making it Netflix's biggest scripted limited series to date" (White). The mini-series that expounds upon the novel was and continues to be a streaming hit on the VOD powerhouse, Netflix. The seven-episode mini-series "ranked in its top 10 in 92 countries and No. 1 in 63 countries, including the UK, Argentina, Israel, and South Africa" (White). The mini-series is a global hit.

Why a mini-series? Outside of Tevis' novel, the first published work was deliberately created as a mini-series by Netflix rather than a continuous series. According to UPROXX, a mini-series is:

"a self-contained story, one that expands throughout just a handful of episodes. It has a captivating beginning, a thrilling middle, and (hopefully) a satisfying end. It is a complete binge-watching experience normally filled with prestige actors and award-worthy storytelling. And Netflix is host to more than its fair share of compelling limited series in every genre" (Toomer).

A mini-series creates a story in which viewers can binge-watch in a short period. The fast-progression story is accompanied by riveting content and cinematic spectacles. The mini-series model is already a prestigious experience for the viewer, and with "The Queen's Gambit" being a story of prestige, this Netflix mini-series follows the successful mini-series model to a "T" and is the ultimate binge-watching experience. The success of the mini-series is also conveyed by the surfeit of awards it won. Winning two Golden Globe Awards for "Best Limited Series or Television Film" and "Best Actress – Mini-series or Television Film" for Anya Taylor-Joy, the mini-series sets a high bar for other Netflix mini-series.

Although the mini-series model proved to be an excellent option for the first extension of the original IP, a second season would have ample ideas to expound upon for uber-fans of the show around the world. In the novel and mini-series, Beth Harmon finds herself turning to pills to stimulate her mind during games. However, Tevis and Frank never clarify what the drug is or its complexities. In the novel, Harmon's usage of the drug is "described not as hallucinatory but a sedative: 'It loosened something deep in her stomach and helped her doze away the tense hours in the orphanage'" (Milner). The novel says Harmon takes the drug to calm her anxiety down, just like when she took it in the orphanage. In the mini-series, Harmon takes the green pill to "help her visualize chess pieces; however, the show never gets into the specifics of what the drug is, and what it was prescribed for" (Milner). The mini-series shows Harmon illegally buying and

taking the drug, but the viewers never see the consequences or dangers of a drug. Whether the drug is used as a sedative or a hallucinogen, the addictive pattern has been written into Harmon. If a second season were to be created to extend the potential franchise, a deeper exploration into Harmon and her addictive behaviors would make for a strong storyline.

Another idea would be seeing how the chess-prodigy deals with the concept of losing. Throughout the mini-series, viewers see Harmon win every game. This creative choice was likely made to quickly communicate to audiences that the prodigy is wickedly talented and nothing but abnormal in her intellectual capabilities. The closest Harmon inches toward losing is when she ties with an opponent, but other than that, the audience roots for Harmon, expecting her to win each time yet biting nails in case she does not. Watching Harmon deal with losing competitions and grappling with an addiction could be two loose ends that become one to continue the story; Afterall, she is human.

A second season of the show has plenty of storyline extensions and capabilities, but how would viewers and fans respond to a second season? Would a second season ruin the story and prestige cultivated by creating only seven episodes, or would a furthered storyline be a hit to eager fans? Netflix and its cast and crew for "The Queen's Gambit" have expressed no disdain for creating a second season. According to PopCulture and its findings pulled from vocal fans on Twitter, fans are desperate "to see the story continue from where it left off, while others think it has the potential to re-popularize other games as well" (Hein). Given the fans left yearning for more of Beth Harmon and the awards and financial earnings Netflix gained from the mini-series, a second season could be a success if done right.

A second extension for the potential franchise of "The Queen's Gambit" could be a clothing line for fans of the show. Merchandise has been known to propel a series, novel, or film

into a franchise. Given that Urban Outfitters, a trendy and high-quality retail store, has over 900 relationships with clothing brands, it would be an excellent opportunity for Urban Outfitters to sport and collaborate with "The Queen's Gambit" franchise to create a clothing line for fans. Merchandizing a franchise can serve as a vehicle to advertise the media component (Litwak). The merchandise gives fans a tangible connection and feeling of ownership to the overall story of the franchise. If done right, merchandise can be of great success to a franchise. If the franchise flops, the distributor and content creators do not take the financial fall, rather the manufacturers who buy the licensing rights (Litwak). Furthermore, with established media credibility and a large following of fans, many manufacturers will be willing to invest in the licensing rights to curate merchandise.

Gabriele Binder, the costume designer for "The Queen's Gambit" mini-series, methodically thought out the styles Beth Harmon would cling to as she aged throughout the story. As Harmon makes her way to new cities for her chess competitions, Binder "explained each location — such as New York City, Paris, and Moscow — starts influencing her style" (Ilchi). As Harmon ages and matures into a young woman, so does her clothing. With this in mind, it makes sense to create a clothing line, as it has a lot to work with based on the stylistic choices in the show. Because Harmon ventures out to many cities worldwide, the Urban Outfitters clothing line would stay in its lane with its known urban yet sleek and mature styles. "The Queens Gambit" clothing line would stray away from the cliché/overproduced clothing lines that are featured in K-Mart, Target, or Walmart. Instead, the clothing line would be geared towards more mature styles where it does not have the franchise's name thrown up all over it but embedded within each stitch.

Because the Netflix mini-series gives the potential franchise a distinct color pallet and the aesthetics of the 1950s and 1960s, the possibilities of designs in "The Queen's Gambit" clothing line would be seemingly endless. Various shades and hints of burgundy, browns, reds, blacks and aqua blues and greens, the classic 50s style of collars, modest necklines, and tight-knit sweaters, and the prestige of the game of chess would make for a solid creation of vintage-esq merchandise for the franchise. Urban Outfitters could design a clothing line that hints at these themes in "The Queens Gambit" that would be appealing for everyday wear, rather the person purchasing and sporting the look is a fan or consumer of the trendy and edgy fashion of Urban Outfitters.

Those who delve into the story of Beth Harmon would be interested in these extensions of the potential franchise. With a large demographic reached with the Netflix mini-series, the franchise's vast opportunities to grow. A second season would be needed to push the story further, and other extensions would enhance the ownership aspect for fans. A second season would draw current fans and new fans to the show. With a majority of women watching "The Queens Gambit" and a majority of women shopping at Urban Outfitters, the two franchise extensions mentioned above would be a hit if executed with the quality and prestige the fans expect. The Queen's Gambit was made to be more than a novel, more than a mini-series, and more than a chess fad throughout the world.

Works Cited

- Hein, Michael. "Queen's Gambit' Season 2: Fans Want More Episodes of Hit Limited Series." *PopCulture*, 5 Dec. 2020, popculture.com/streaming/news/queens-gambit-season-2-fans-want-more-episodes-hit-limited-series/#7.
- Ichi, Layla. "A Breakdown of the Costumes in Netflix's 'The Queen's Gambit'." *WWD*, WWD, 29 Mar. 2021, wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-scoops/the-queens-gambit-costumes-inspiration-breakdown-photos-1234652893/.
- Litwak, Mark. "Movie Merchandising." *Entertainment Law Resources*, 2013, www.marklitwak.com/movie-merchandising.html.
- Milner, Sarah Bea. "The Queen's Gambit: The Pills Beth Takes Explained." *ScreenRant*, 21 Nov. 2020, screenrant.com/queens-gambit-drugs-pills-beth-tranquilizers-explained/.
- Toomer, Jessica. "The Best Bingeable Mini-Series On Netflix Right Now." *UPROXX*, UPROXX, 2 Mar. 2021, uproxx.com/tv/best-miniseries-on-netflix/.
- White, Peter. "'The Queen's Gambit' Becomes Netflix's Biggest Scripted Limited Series." *Deadline*, Deadline, 23 Nov. 2020, deadline.com/2020/11/queens-gambit-62m-viewers-netflix-1234620378/.