

Chapter Five

Virtual Storytelling: *The Wheel of Time* World Wide Weave

*One Page to rule them all,
One Page to find them,
One Page to bring them all
And in the Web to bind them.*¹

Modern fantasy literature has generated an enormous amount of critical and creative response to individual works, and to the genre in general, through fandom communities on the internet. However, it should be noted that the phenomenon of readers' intervention into texts is not entirely new. Literature has long generated a sense of ownership in readers that has at times spilled over into a kind of territorialism, where readers would adopt behaviour characteristics from the beloved text, name children after certain characters, engage in a kind of literary tourism and even demand of authors certain changes to their texts.² For example, there is the work of the nineteenth-century author, Anthony Trollope, who reportedly killed off a character (Mrs Proudie, wife of a bishop), following complaints about her from readers.³ With the upsurge of commercial tourism during the twentieth century, readers from many parts of the world have been able to engage with the landscapes of favourite authors, such as Emily Brontë or Thomas Hardy, through organised tours of the regions in Britain from which these earlier writers drew

¹ 'The Compleat Index of *Wheel of Time*-Related 'Net Resources', <http://www.ece.umd.edu/~dilli/WOT/WOTindex/> (accessed 4 August, 2004).

² In the 19th century there was also a woman's outfit, known as a Dolly Varden that was named after the locksmith's coquettish daughter in Charles Dickens's novel *Barnaby Rudge*. Refer: 'Varden, Dolly', (2005) *Britannica Student Encyclopedia* from Encyclopaedia Service <http://www.britannica.com/ebi/article-9341913> (accessed 12 August, 2005).

³ Anthony Trollope, (1883) *An Autobiography*, edited by Michael Sadleir and Frederick Page, London, 1950. Trollope writes that after overhearing two clergymen complaining about Mrs Proudie he informed them, "I will go home and kill her before the week is over." And so I did ... I have sometimes regretted the deed, so great was my delight in writing about Mrs Proudie.' pp. 275-76.

inspiration. Still recognisable landmarks in the countryside (e.g. Stonehenge) encourage the literary tourist, mentally, to superimpose scenes from these earlier texts onto the landscape in which they stand physically. In a sense such tourists are entering into the fictional world of the texts, just as the fans of Jordan's *WOT*, can imaginatively enter their cyberspace construct of the Wheel world.

The term *fan*⁴ (an abbreviation of *fanatic*) has become an accepted colloquialism in our culture, and Henry Jenkins has drawn a similarity between modern fandom and that of earlier times:

What is significant about fans ... is that they constitute a particularly active and vocal community of consumers ... As such, they enjoy a contemporary status not unlike the members of the 'pit' in 19th century theatre who asserted their authority over the performance, not unlike the readers of Dickens and other serial writers who wrote their own suggestions for possible plot developments, not unlike the fans of Sherlock Holmes who demanded the character's return even when the author sought to retire him. Fans are not unique in their status as textual poachers, yet, they have developed poaching to an art form.⁵

By 'poaching' Jenkins is referring to the way in which fans may appropriate or transform a range of texts, and today's computer technology certainly enables fans to achieve this in multiple ways – visual and textual. Although Jenkins is referring to media texts, his words are equally applicable to literary texts, and to the activities of Jordan's *WOT* online fandom communities, which form the focus of this chapter.

⁴ *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, 5th ed., 2 vols, Oxford and New York, 2002, gives the following definition of 'fan': 'a devotee of a specified amusement, performer, etc,' p. 922.

⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, New York, 1992, p. 27.

Warp and weft – weaving a cyberworld

Robert Jordan numbers among a group of contemporary writers of fantasy whose epic series have generated an enormous trans-global following of fans.⁶ In regard to such modern day fandom the critic Henry Jenkins notes that:

undaunted by traditional conceptions of literary and intellectual property, fans raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as a basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions. Fans seemingly blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, speaking of characters as if they had an existence apart from their textual manifestations, entering into the realm of the fiction as if it were a tangible place they can inhabit and explore.⁷

Although Jenkins is speaking here of fandom in relation to mass media texts (television and film), once again his words can equally be applied to the fans of literary fantasy texts. The phenomenon of the internet has provided a tool whereby enormous numbers of fantasy fans can collectively participate in the virtual construction and on-going development of their favourite Secondary Worlds; actions that constitute in part a rewriting or re-patterning of the texts. In turn this creates a highly imaginative, multi-authored, never-ending story in which they have a satisfyingly creative share.

Over the last decade, in tandem with the rapid growth of internet usage, Robert Jordan's fans have spawned an ever-increasing network of web sites and online communities devoted to the *WOT* series, all of which can be interpreted as virtual extensions of Jordan's own fictional world. (Jordan has not named his world but it is known to fans as 'Randland', after the main protagonist.)⁸ These sites have enabled fans to imaginatively enter the world of the Wheel in a way that is other than their initial experience as readers of the written texts, although both modes require a willir gness on the

⁶ Other authors include J. R. R. Tolkien, David Eddings, Ann McCaffrey, Stephen Donaldson, and more recently, J. K. Rowling.

⁷ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, p. 18.

⁸ In similar fashion fans of the television series 'Buffy the vampire slayer' have coined the term 'Buffyverse' to mean the universe in which she exists.

part of the participant to accept mentally the world as an alternative reality. On this point Elizabeth Reid makes the following astute observation in her essay on virtual worlds:

Cyberspace – the realm of electronic impulses and high speed data highways – may be figured as a technological construct, but virtual reality is a construct within the mind of a human being ...Virtual worlds exist not in the technology used to represent them nor purely in the mind of the user, but in the relationship between internal mental constructs and technologically generated representations of these constructs. The illusion of reality lies not in the machinery itself but in the user's willingness to treat the manifestations of his or her imaginings as if they were real.⁹

However, the fans' interaction with their cyber-construct of Jordan's literary fantasy world is more dynamic, communal and interactive than that experienced by them as readers of the literary texts; it becomes more an entry of sorts into the Wheel world and not just an immersion in the pages of a finite written story.

As Michael Heim suggests, in his discussion on virtual reality, we have this ability to 'inhabit cyberspace when we feel ourselves moving through the interface into a relatively independent world with its own dimensions'.¹⁰ The fans' virtual construct of the Wheel world provides such a place. Through the web interface they are enabled to step into their cyberworld representation of Jordan's Wheel world and to experience it in ways that are real to them. It also provides a space where they can construct a multi-dimensional and culturally rich community. The Wheel world of virtual reality has many onion-like layers around it that extend the boundaries of Jordan's text and his fantasy world; for instance, the gaming world of role-play and the writing of personalised fan fiction that position the fans within the cyberspace world through the personae of alternative, virtual identities. Thus the

⁹ Elizabeth Reid, 'Virtual Worlds: Culture and Imagination', in *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, edited by Steven G. Jones, Thousand Oaks, California, 1995, p. 166.

¹⁰ Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, New York & Oxford, 1993, p. 79.

hypertext of the internet lends itself to fans opening up new avenues such as these, which are connected to, and yet have the freedom to move beyond, the pages of the written texts.

Fan participation on the internet forms a burgeoning aspect of literary fandom that has received surprisingly little serious critical attention. Scholarly work sighted to date is largely concerned with fan and cult followings that pertain to mass media (especially film and television), sport and popular music.¹¹ Although some of this work provides the literary discourse in which to situate my study of the relationship between fantasy literature and web-based fandom, my approach differs as it is conducted not in a sociological context but rather in a literary one. The focus is on the fans' reconstruction of a literary Secondary World on the web and their engagement with it, as constituting a way of extending the world and the meaning of the original text.

Therefore, this chapter seeks not only to explore the phenomenon of internet fandom in relation to the Jordan series of fantasy texts, but also to tie the reading of the labyrinth-like web pages back to the main themes of this thesis, to analyse the coalition that exists between the two different kinds of text – the author's writing and the fans' cyber-community interpretation of his world. It is my intention to show how some aspects of the Jordan novels that have been articulated in the earlier chapters, impact on these sites and on the fan-audience, in particular, in relation to storytelling and pattern making, to rites of passage, and to the heroic quest.

It will be useful to draw on some existing theoretical material that relates to fandom and the mass media, but I will not attempt a full analysis of cyber-culture or fandom in

¹¹ There is a wealth of critical material in relation to 'Star Trek', 'X-Files', 'Star Wars', 'Doctor Who', 'Buffy the vampire slayer', and numerous soap operas. Major researchers in the area of mass media fandom include Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*; Joli Jensen, 'Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterisation', John Fiske 'The Cultural Economy of Fandom', and Lawrence Grossberg, 'Is there a Fan in the House?: The Affective Sensibility of Fandom', in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, edited by Lisa A. Lewis, London, 1992; Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination*, California and London, 1998; Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, London and New York, 2002. And in the area of fan cyber culture, Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, New York, 1993; Reid, 'Virtual Words'.

general, since such large-scale sociological studies, although worthy, lie outside the scope of this thesis. As a framework for this present investigation, in particular, I have devised a modification of Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst's terms describing popular media fans as being 'skilled', 'active', and 'communal'. In their analysis of such fan audiences and fan practices these scholars argue that:

fans are: *skilled* or *competent* in different modes of production and consumption; *active* in their interaction with texts and in their production of new texts; and *communal* in that they construct different communities based on their links to the programmes they like.¹²

For the present purposes I define online *WOT* fans as being *skilled* or *competent* in the way they use the template world of the Wheel to construct the framework of their virtual, mirror world, one complete with detailed maps and diagrams, and compile extensive 'virtual' libraries of encyclopaedic material about Jordan's world. They are *active* in the way they position themselves within the virtual construct of the world through self-authoring, using alternative identities, role-playing games and the writing of pieces of fan fiction. They also produce artwork, and set up forums to analyse or criticise the texts. And they are *communal* in that they have woven an astonishingly intricate, cross-linked and trans-global web of communication that braids each person into the socio-cultural context of Jordan's imaginary world, yet also forms meaningful links to their everyday lives. These ties have proven to be so binding that they stretch out into the Primary World of reality, when fans meet in face-to-face situations, as mentioned earlier, and in some cases produce a blossoming of real life romances. A cross-linking of 'derived' moral and ethical values is also apparent between the fans' cyber Wheel world community and that of reality – as will be shown below in discussion of the Dragonmount web site. Dragonmount.com is one of the largest and most active sites and has provided the basis for my interactive

¹² Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences*, p. 127.

research of an online *WOT* community, and where appropriate comments from participating members will be incorporated.

Web sites devoted to an online portrayal of Jordan's fantasy world provide a unique space that exists both inside and outside the original written texts, and forms an interface between the two. Further the cyberworld constructs a trans-global bridging device for fans whose language and customs may differ in reality. As Jenkins notes:

Entering into fandom means abandoning pre-existing social status and seeking acceptance and recognition less in terms of who you are than in terms of what you can contribute to this new community.¹³

In the cyberspace of the Wheel world it is of no concern which part of the real world one may inhabit, and there is no distinction made based on such issues as race religion or gender. The essential common denominator that binds participants together is a passionate interest in the *WOT* series. (In relation to virtual communities Henry Jenkins, in a talk given at Michigan University, Spring, 1998, suggested that 'our investment in fictional characters, in effect, gives us a common set of "relatives" or "friends" that become reference points within conversation'.)¹⁴ Certainly, such sites, which use Jordan's Secondary World as their template, provide a forum where fans engage in lively debate about various aspects of the texts, as well as a virtual landscape wherein they actively and communally engage with the world of the Wheel.

The pattern of the Secondary World provides the background tapestry upon which the fans' (virtual) life-threads are being creatively embroidered. By means of alternate, online identities, based on the format of Jordan's characters, the fans are empowered to colonise the virtual community of the Wheel world and to take up on-going roles within it.

¹³ Henry Jenkins, "'Strangers No More, We Sing": Filking and the Social Construction of the Science Fiction Fan Community', in Lisa A. Lewis (ed), *Adoring Audience*, p. 213

¹⁴ Henry Jenkins, 'The Poachers and the Stormtroopers: Cultural Convergence in the Digital Age', *Red Rock Eater Digest*, http://www.strangelove.com/slideshows/articles/The_Poachers_and_the_Stormtroopers.htm (accessed 13 Sept., 2004).

(In role-play game fans may assume multiple identities.) Cross-gendering is not uncommon, and on this subject Fader6818, leader of the Ogier ‘Org’ on the Dragonmount web community, offers the following explanation:

There are both male and female Ogier. But my view ... is that in a completely anonymous medium, people are more apt to react with their true personalities. Many women would not like to conform to the ‘puppetmaster’ wrap that Aes Sedai have, so they decide to interact as the bold and aggressive Asha’man. This is true of males, who, online, have no shame in expression of having ‘Aes Sedai’ like tendencies. And for those who have a pleasant mix of both (I stereotype solely to explain, not judge) ‘male’ and ‘female’ tendencies, the opportunity to express both without anxiety appreciate the support and acceptance from others who do the same.¹⁵

Yet, at times, an interesting melding of disembodied and embodied identities occurs since many of the fans meet in person at fantasy conventions (where they may also participate in role-play gaming), author book signings, or other arranged *WOT* social events. A good example is the annual ‘Dragoncon’ event in America, which is hosted by the Dragonmount web community. Thus the lines between real and imaginary life have now been blurred or intersected.

Jenkins’ hypothesis on media fandom can also be usefully applied to online fantasy fandom in relation to literary texts like Jordan’s *WOT*. He suggests that modern day fans:

actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions. In the process, fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings.¹⁶

¹⁵ Faedar6818, online conversation with the researcher, Dragonmount message boards (accessed 2 October, 2004).

¹⁶ Jenkins, *Poachers*, pp. 23-24.

Similarly, on the *WOT* web sites, the fans seek to reflect the world as it is found in the written texts, the landscape, political and cultural climate, hierarchical order, societal conventions and morality, to become part of and yet to extend the social organisations depicted in the Wheel world (a point addressed later in the chapter).

As explained in the first chapter, Jordan's world contains 'mirror' worlds, other dimensions of reality that can be accessed by passing through 'Portal Stones', which provide spatially located gateways that are activated by use of the One Power. These 'mirror' worlds form alternative realms of possibility, Wheel worlds that 'might be', or 'might have been', depending on how life-threads are woven into the web of destiny in the primary world of the Wheel. These other dimensions remain empty of human habitation unless entered by one or other of Jordan's characters – or readers – as the Wheel world of cyberspace must be activated or brought to life through the participation of the online users. Thus, the fans have created their own Wheel 'mirror' world, one to which they gain access through the 'Portal Stone' of their online browser. In this realm, although the fans inter-weave their own threads into the patterning of Jordan's world through the introduction of new characters and their exploits, they do so in a context that is not disruptive to the main plot-lines and, as yet, on-going narrative of the author's work.

From my observations of various sites, I believe that the fans seek to find a personal, participatory space for themselves within the Jordan world, but not to destroy the magic of the original story that first brought them all together. In other words they avoid the use of scenarios that, much like an adept's use of 'balefire' in the Wheel world, could burn away threads and cause a fatal unravelling of the Great Pattern of the Third Age.¹⁷ The ingenuity of the cyber-text fan-authoring brings to mind the creative scribblings (and art) of Anglo Saxon monks which embellish the margins of many extant Dark Age

¹⁷ 'Balefire' is formed from the One Power and produces 'a liquid white-hot fire' capable of 'burning anything it touched into nonexistence'. See *Companion*, p. 50.

manuscripts. For the scribes such actions also constituted a means whereby they could personalise and thus write themselves into the scripts they were copying so laboriously.¹⁸

Jordan's fans have a degree of online interaction with the author (jokingly called the 'Creator'), as he personally answers their questions on the official site of his publishers, Tor Books, and participates in various online interviews. A demonstration of the strengthening cyber linkage between author and his fans is apparent in the way that Dragonmount.com, one of the largest and most diverse cyber communities, now works directly with Robert Jordan, with his publisher, and other parties holding licences to the series. In an interesting reversal of roles the author himself becomes the reader, as he admits to visiting the various fan web sites, and to having a 'very, very long list of sites bookmarked'.¹⁹ However, while the author may read some of the fans' online *WOT* 'prophecies' and 'loony ideas', he denies any possibility of a cross-fertilisation of ideas and insists that:

Contact with fans has no effect on my writing with one exception ... This is my story; it will play out according to the lines I want. The only exception was regarding the [fan] 'Who Killed Asmodean' question. I was certain that I had enough internal evidence for anyone to work it out ... but many fans insisted that they could not, so I attempted to find places where I might put in a few more clues.²⁰

Jordan also advises that, while 'there is no active monitoring [of web sites] by him or his publisher', if unacceptable use of his *WOT* material, such as 'slash' fanfic²¹ is brought to his attention – usually by the fans themselves – his publisher's legal department acts to

¹⁸ An interesting discussion on this topic can be found in: Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: the Margins of Medieval Art*, London, 1992.

¹⁹ Jason Denzel, 'ComicCon 2004 Wrap-Up', <http://www.dragonmount.com/Community/Events/comicCon2004.php> (accessed August 3, 2004).

²⁰ Robert Jordan, an email to the researcher, 1st October, 2004.

²¹ 'Slash fiction' is the term for fan rewriting of the relationships between well known fictional characters, such as Spock and Kirk of 'Star Trek' fame, which are given a romantic or sexual twist that is missing in the original media texts.

have it removed.²² Karl-Johan Norén, a Swedish fan who over a number of years developed an impressive personal web site, writes that in 1997 Tor Books ‘demanded’ that he ‘remove *The Far Snows Dance*, [his] take of when Rand and Aviendha made love in an igloo in the *Fires of Heaven*.²³ At times, too, fans take up the role of authors’hip, through the writing of role-playing games and by posting personal theories on the future development of plotlines or on how the sequence of books will finally end. As well as this they write *WOT* related poetry, compose ‘filksongs’,²⁴ and create elaborate artwork, which includes comic strips that parody various *WOT* characters. On the potential fluidity between the roles of fan reader and writer, Jenkins observes that:

Fan reading ... is a social process through which individual interpretations are shaped and reinforced through ongoing discussions with other readers ... [Thus] fandom does not preserve a radical separation between readers and writers. Fans do not simply consume preproduced stories; they manufacture their own fanzine stories and novels, art prints, songs, videos, performances etc.²⁵

Through their re-authoring of Jordan’s Wheel world, his fans are, in a sense, also ‘role-playing’ the author and becoming storytellers and pattern makers, thus complicating the distinction between the two so that at times one bleeds into the other. These online activities have provided the fans with a way to circumvent Jordan’s authorial claim that, like an Old Testament god, he is in total control of his Secondary World and of all events portrayed in it.

²² Robert Jordan, an email to the researcher, 1st October, 2004.

²³ Karl-Johan Norén, (updated 28 Dec., 1999), <http://hem.passagen.se/kjnoren/jordan/about.html> (accessed 12 August, 2004).

²⁴ The term ‘filk music’ is a derivative of ‘folk music’. Fans usually borrow the tunes for their ‘filksongs’ from well known popular or folk repertoires, with a theme taken from favourite mass media shows, such as ‘Star Trek’. Communal ‘filking’ sessions are commonly held at conventions which centre around specific fan interests, and in the case of the Jordan fans, they focus on the *WOT*. This type of creative activity is another way in which fans are able to comment on or extend the original texts.

²⁵ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, p. 45.

Threads that bind: the interlaced cyber-realm of *The Wheel of Time*.

Web sites devoted to Robert Jordan's *WOT* series abound. A search on Google revealed literally thousands of sites in my first two weeks of research. The examples chosen can be classified into a number of distinct types which I will briefly describe and of which I will offer examples (the grouping is a personal one). While this research has not been exhaustive so far it has gleaned a far richer amount of material than it is possible to include in this thesis. As the internet is a hypertextual medium some of the interconnectedness that it displays on screen is lost in the following attempt to describe it on paper.²⁶ Accessing a web site is not the same as opening a book and leafing through the pages from front to back. Rather the web pages form an intricate series of overlays, a kind of virtual palimpsest where one page becomes superimposed upon another. Web pages can be removed and new ones inserted, or the content of existing pages can be altered over time to include updated information. The online reader can cross-refer between different web pages at random and use provided links to explore pages on other related sites, which in turn can lead to even more links. The effect can be likened to the 'intricately knotted', multi-branching formations of Tolkien's great 'Tree of Tales'²⁷ or to a living, ever-expanding coral reef.²⁸

²⁶ Hypertext is a term coined by Theodor Nelson, a computer scientist who described it as: 'non-sequential writing – text that branches and allows choice to the reader, best read at an interactive screen'. Quoted by George, Landow (ed), *Hyper-Text-Theory*, Baltimore and London, 1994, p 4.

²⁷ J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories,' in *Tree and Leaf*, London, 1964, p. 23.

²⁸ J. K. Rowling in her Harry Potter texts is transposing the techniques of the hypertextual medium of the internet to written texts. Good examples are the people in the paintings at Hogwarts School who magically change location and appear in other paintings or the way entrance to the pupils' dormitories is gained by stepping through the frame of a picture. Characters featured in wizard handbooks, newspapers or on public posters can move and talk; staircases within the school can change location, and Harry's magical map can track the movements of anyone moving around the school by displaying their footprints on the paper.

Types of web sites

Publisher's official Robert Jordan site: Jordan's publisher, Tor Books, offers fans a range of information on this site including details of the *WOT* series and forthcoming publications and news relating to the author, such as interviews, media articles, time slots for forthcoming radio interviews, details of book signing events, or conventions which the author will attend. The site also includes a page where the author answers one fan question each week and another that gives stories of real life *WOT*-inspired romances.

Discussion sites: 'The Wheel of Time FAQ' is one of the most comprehensive of these sites. It contains the writing of many fan-authors and is largely devoted to exploring all aspects of the *WOT* series, especially through its 'Frequently Asked Questions' compendium.

Information sites: An extensive site such as 'Encyclopedia *WOT*' contains information on the books, including plot summaries and detailed notes which in turn are cross-linked to an abundance of other sources where such information is also under discussion. The site includes comprehensive alphabetical listings of characters, prophecies, organisations to be found in the Wheel world, as well as historical and geographical material, all of which testifies to the close knowledge and the dedication of the Jordan fans who operate the site. This location also provides links to other information sites that contain complementary material. By contrast 'The Wheel of Time Novice Page' is designed specifically for those who have not yet read the series and offers a synopsis of the story line, details of the main characters, Wheel world organisations and such like, as well as links to other sites that contain similar information. Sites such as 'Ideal Seek' and the '*Wheel of Time* Quote Archive' enable the fans to search the complete Jordan *WOT* texts for specific quotations. The '*Wheel of Time* Character Archive' offers a comprehensive listing of the numerous *WOT* characters.

Cyber-biblio sites: Like written texts that supply bibliographical information related to a particular subject or an author, sites such as these offer comprehensive listings of links to other *WOT* web locations. The most comprehensive of these sites is ‘The Compleat Index of *Wheel of Time*-Related ‘Net Resources’, which groups the links under headings of the type of material to be found on them, for example, ‘All Purpose’, ‘Author Stuff’, ‘Book Stuff’, ‘Sources’ or ‘Games’. Web Rings such as the ‘Wheel of Time Webring’ provide a further chain of interlinked sites.

Comic site: ‘WoT now?’ is an online comic that presents a ‘somewhat irreverent parody’ of the *WOT* series.

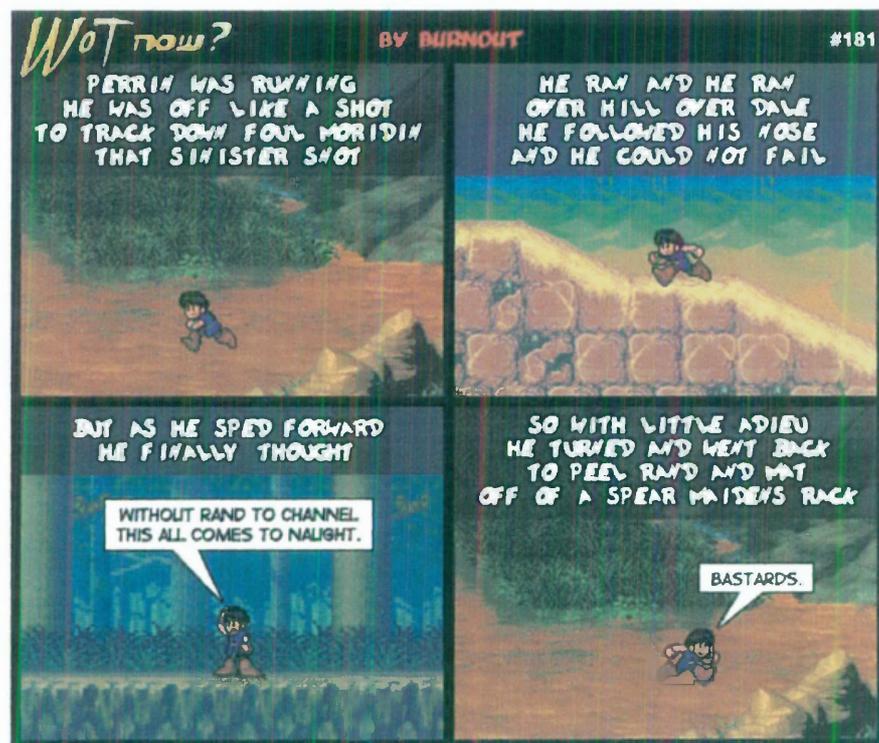


Figure 1: ‘Seuss time’ by ‘Burnout’, from ‘WoT now?’²⁹

²⁹ Image of ‘Seuss time’ comic strip by ‘Burnout’, taken from the ‘WoT now?’ comic web site http://www.shadowburn.com/wotnow/comic.php?comic_id=194 (accessed 3 July, 2005).

This online comic is the inspiration of Dave Doyle, a Canadian who confesses to a ‘love hate relationship with the series’. Within the comic strips he takes the position that:

Rand is an idiot, Mat has only brief flashes of intelligence and poor Perin has to stop his friends from getting him in trouble. You will never see Faile though. She’ll be part of the comic as a jealous, ultra-violent entity that always seems to be just out of the frame. Meanwhile, every sort of evil shadowspawn is out to catch our heroes. The cast will expand over time but I won’t be writing storylines that are as complex as Jordan himself. This is for fun after all.³⁰

The comic strips are aimed at an audience that is very familiar with the original texts and are obviously meant to be taken in a light-hearted fashion as shown in Figure 1 (above) where the artist parodies Jordan’s narrative by mimicking a Dr Seuss-type rhyme. This comic strip also provides an example of the intertextual ‘poaching’ that the fans may use in their own creative interpretations of an author’s original texts.

Game sites: (Role-playing games, Computer games, Multi User Dimension games etc.)

These sites include role-playing games and forums, such as ‘The Grey Tower’ which is modelled on the world of the Wheel. An image of what the game player sees when they are participating in one such role-playing game is shown in Figure 2, which demonstrates how the narrative of the game is constructed from separate, but interconnected postings that form a web of threads.

³⁰ Dave Doyle, ‘About the Comic’, <http://www.shadowburn.com/wotnow/about.html> (accessed 25 August, 2004).

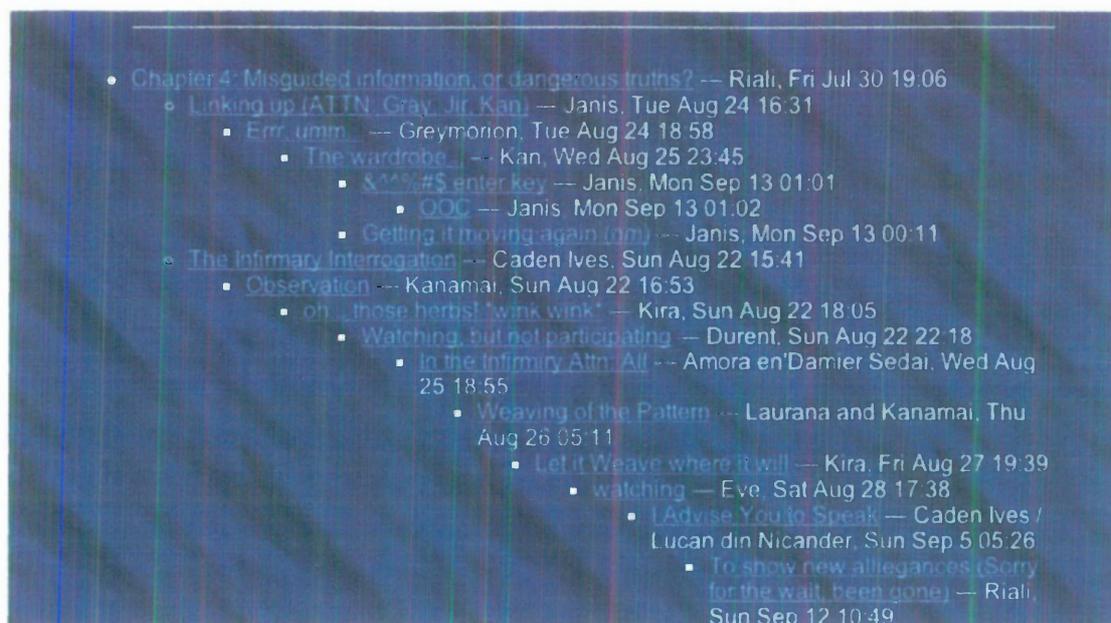


Figure 2: Role-playing game from ‘The Grey Tower’.³¹

The participants take on identities in their virtual world of the Wheel, but they do not use Jordan’s actual characters. Instead, they create characters based on his, but who have their own identities and history. Other role-playing sites include ‘Silklantern.com’, and ‘WoTMUD IV’. Another site is used to market a commercial game titled ‘The Wheel of Time’, and is advertised as a game that mixes ‘first person 3D action with strategy and even a bit of role-playing’. One site offers the ‘Wheel of Time Word Games’, word puzzles based on the Jordan texts.

Personal Sites: These are set up and maintained by one person. A good example is ‘Abbyland’, created by Abigail Goldsmith, a site that offers a range of *WOT* information and artwork and provides links to other sites. The ‘Dragonslibrary’ is another personal site that is specifically interested in fantasy and Sci-fi fanfic. These sites are not strictly limited to the *WOT*, but both of them have extensive pages on this subject.

³¹ ‘The Grey Tower’, a section taken from the Major role-play game ‘The Seals Preserved’, <http://disc.server.com/Indices/220380.html> (accessed 2 Sept., 2004).

Inactive sites: I found two personal sites that are no longer actively monitored but that function as comprehensive archives of *WOT* related material. ‘Stone Dog’s *WOT*’ contains material on predictions, theories, humour, favourite scenes, discussion forums, and links to other related sites. Karl-Johan Norén began his *WOT* web page in 1995 and it contains extensive plot summaries of the series, reports of interviews held with Jordan during the East of the Sun convention in Stockholm (1995), and various critical articles such as an in-depth exploration of Jordan’s borrowings of Old Norse mythology.

Composite sites: These sites are usually described as being ‘communities of real people, who simply use a fictional name’, where fans of the *WOT* series can meet and interact on line. They offer a wide range of facilities to visitors and members that can be accessed from links on their comprehensive home pages. Facilities may include all or a number of the following: message/discussion boards, individual organisations based on those found in the world of the Wheel, role-playing games, prophecies, theories, humour, artwork, articles and essays, interviews with Jordan, reports on conventions and book signings, plot summaries and analysis, information about the author, up-coming publishing details, fanfic, fan poetry and filksongs, online *WOT* stores, book discounts through Amazon as well as links to further sites that offer similar information. Large, well organised and active sites of this type include ‘Dragonmount.com’, ‘TarValon.net’, and ‘WoTmania.com’.³²

Websites focused on in this chapter

To explore the notion of Jordan online fans as pattern makers, storytellers and participants in the heroic quest I draw on a variety of *WOT* websites. The analysis of this material will be within the framework of the earlier definition of online fans as being

³² ‘TarValon.Net’ can be viewed in a number of different languages by clicking on the national flag icons situated on the home page. I have also found non-English language sites in Esperanto, French, German, Russian, Swedish and Japanese.

skilled or competent, and *active and communal*. (The definition of the fans as *communal* is dealt with in a discussion of the Dragonmount online community.) Most of the material is drawn from the following sites: ‘Dragonmount.com’, one of the largest, most comprehensive composite sites; ‘The Grey Tower’, a well established role-playing game site; ‘Theoryland’ and ‘Wheel of Time FAQ’, both of which contain extensive archives of fan theories and prophecies related to the *WOT*, and ‘Dragonlibrary’, an extremely rich holding of *WOT*-related fanfic. A more detailed overview of each of these sites follows but as word-pictures fail to do justice to them, images of some of their web pages appear throughout this chapter.

Dragonmount.com <<http://www.dragonmount.com/main.php>>

‘Sound the Horn! The Hunt is on, and may Dragonmount be your hunting-place!’

The Dragonmount site is a perfect example of fans as a *communal* society. It has been in operation since 1998 and within four years of opening its doors to the internet public, it had ‘exploded with popularity’ to become one of the most ‘successful sites on the internet’ and the virtual, trans-global home to many thousands of dedicated *WOT* fans. Jason Denzel, one of the original designers of the site, makes the following statement on the home page:

Dragonmount is an online Community of people from all over the world who have come here to experience *The Wheel of Time* series to the fullest. We offer discussions of the books, online Organisations that you can join, an in-depth Role-playing Game, free E-mail, and the chance to buy all of the books at reduced cost through Amazon.com.

Dragonmount’s goal is to provide web surfers with an online Community to which they may join and belong to. We offer role-playing here, but the true focus of this site is on the community and friendship we share. We hope that

this site will be a place where one may come on a regular basis to socialise and meet new people who also love reading these incredible books.³³

Faeder6818, the current moderator of the Wheel of Time General Discussion and *New Spring/Knife of Dreams* forums, promises to 'keep the boards clean. This means no offensive language, slurs of racial, sexual or religious nature'.³⁴ These promises are an indication of the standard of person-to-person 'netiquette' that is reflected throughout all the pages of this site.³⁵ An example of the considerate behaviour that is expected by participants on the message boards is reflected in the current policy concerning *Knife of Dreams*, the eleventh *WOT* book, that is due for release in October 2005. Currently a paperback edition of the *WOT* prequel, *New Spring*, including a prologue for *Knife of Dreams*, has become available. But the administrators of the Dragonmount site have a 'strict policy on spoilers' posted to the message boards in relation to the *KOL*. To respect the wishes of those members who do not want any advance details on the plot, all postings on the prologue to this forthcoming book must be prefixed with a 'spoiler' icon. Participants on the message boards can then decide for themselves whether or not to open such messages.³⁶

From the home page links are provided to discussions of the books, *WOT* news (including forthcoming publications, Dragoncon convention dates, author interviews or book signing venues), a general Dragonmount community message board, Role-play games, which occur in two virtual 'Portal Stone' worlds, one set at a time very similar to that of Jordan's books, and another in the prehistory of the Wheel world. Links are also available to *WOT* resources, such as plot summaries of the books, members' articles,

³³ Jason Denzel, 'About Us', http://www.dragonmount.com/about_us.aspx (accessed 3 August, 2004).

³⁴ Faeder6818, 'New Moderator', Dragonmount, <http://www.dragonmount.com/Boards/viewtopic.php?t=9639> (accessed 11 August, 2004).

³⁵ 'netiquette' is a conflation of 'internet etiquette' that has come into popular usage.

³⁶ Davian, Dragonmount message boards, <http://www.dragonmount.com/Boards/viewtopic.php?t=17420> (accessed 12 June, 2005).

essays and a *WOT* documentary video, and an alphabetical listing of FAQ, and extensive links to other *WOT* related sites. There is also an online store to promote a range of *WOT* merchandise such as t-shirts and posters (the proceeds help with the running of the site), DM animated movies and the Dragonmount Organisations, which are based on groups and nations of the Wheel world but do not necessarily slavishly mirror them. A good example is 'The Children of the Light' group who, unlike their counterpart in Jordan's world, are not religious fanatics and instead take 'comedy' as their main theme. Another is the Shayol Ghul group who are not, necessarily, evil Darkfriends but are known to be 'non-conformist' and to embrace all that is 'weird and bizarre'. Membership of all the groups (known as 'Orgs'), is open to both sexes which is not always the case in Jordan's Wheel world; for example, the White Tower is the home of Aes Sedai priestesses, and the Children of the Light are strictly male. The 'Orgs' are described as 'the heart and soul' of this web site and include virtual communities of Ogier, The Aiel, The Children of the Light, Shayol Ghul, The White Tower, The Black Tower, The Seanchan, Wolf Brothers and The Band of the Red Hand.

It is the setting up of these individual, but interconnected communities that helps to bring depth and substance to the virtual world, and to increase the sense of fan ability to colonise the space. Members are free to choose the organisation which they believe most suits their needs, although all groups are unanimous in promoting the importance of friendship, sharing, kindness, equality, and community spirit and they all operate according to certain courteous codes of behaviour. The codes of morality and ethics associated with the various groups and nations in Jordan's texts are, to a large degree, endorsed by the individual 'Orgs': for example, the fittingly ecologically-aware Ogier community, or the Aiel community, one which has adopted the concepts of honour and obligation by which the Aiel are defined in the Jordan texts. The hierarchical structure of the 'Orgs' is patterned

on that of the Jordan world, and status within the cyberworld is to be earned. As Kathana Sedai, leader of the White Tower 'Org' and community administrator explains:

Each Org is different, but in the White Tower Org you earn rank by participating in the Community actively, taking part in our seminars and doing projects to help out around the site. We don't want it to be a meaningless rank, but for you to have a real sense of accomplishment and progression when you are raised.³⁷

Thus, each participating member gains an added sense of true participation in the cyber-community and an enhanced sense of worth as one of its citizens. I agree with Lawrence Grossberg who suggests that:

by participating in fandom, fans construct coherent identities for themselves. In the process, they enter a domain of cultural activity of their own making which is, potentially, a source of empowerment in struggles against oppressive ideology and the unsatisfactory circumstances of everyday life.³⁸

For the Jordan fans their cyberspace identities also effect a cross-over of the morality and ethics of the virtual Wheel world into reality, such as with the Ogier Community's discussions and exchanging of ideas on ways to be more 'green aware' in real time. Similarly, the White Tower Community, in part, uses its virtual existence to set up Ajah-sponsored charities or community services to benefit people in the real world. Thus, the virtual community can be a place where fans are empowered, not only to engage in a 'domain of cultural activity of their own making', as Grossberg so rightly suggests, but to instigate actions in their virtual world that can be transposed to effect positive societal benefits in their everyday lives.

³⁷ Kathana Sedai, online conversation with the researcher, Dragonmount message boards, September 18, 2004.

³⁸ Quoted by Lisa Lewis, *Adoring Audience*, p. 3.

The Grey Tower <<http://www.greytowerrp.net/>>

‘May the Light Illumine you all and the Creator shelter you.’

‘The Grey Tower’ is a large and well-established role-playing society based on Jordan’s *WOT* series. It is also a site where fans have produced a large amount of fanfic – stories set in the Wheel world that mostly concern the exploits of their own online characters. The organisers of the site have conceived of a time-frame for their virtual Wheel world, one where a Grey Tower has arisen that is home to both female and male practitioners (Aes Sedai and Asha’man) of the One Power. The site organisers advise that the fans are ‘making up stories with [their] own characters’, tales set in a period between ‘the cleansing of the Taint and Tarmon Gai’don’ and that the Grey Tower runs ‘parallel to the books.’ Thus players are instructed that:

The Grey Tower is located in the Mountains of Mist, near a town called Elman’s Creek. Your character, who may be from anywhere in the world of the Wheel, has made his/her way, somehow, to the Grey Tower, to begin training as a Warder, Aes Sedai or Asha’man. The exact details of this will be in your biography, which you write when you join.³⁹

Visually, this site is restricted to a portrayal of the Grey Tower and its grounds, while all fan activities take place within the limits of these precincts, but the members bring to this environment their extensive knowledge of the entire Jordan *WOT* world that mentally supplies a richly textured background, enabling them to situate their tower community in the context of the far richer landscape of the author’s original Wheel world. There is a welcoming message for newcomers on the home page who are advised that:

All manner of travellers arrive here hoping to train as Aes Sedai, Asha’man or warders, to meet others and to learn ... Feel free to wander at your leisure

³⁹ ‘The Grey Tower’, ‘Frequently Asked Questions’, <http://www.greytowerrp.net/GTAdmin/faq1.html> (accessed 29 July, 2004).

around the many halls, chambers and gardens of the Tower and see for yourself.⁴⁰

The home page offers links to a complete listing of the Grey Tower's members, the Warders' yard, Out of Character (OOC) message boards, a listing of current role-plays and guidelines, individual home pages for the seven Ajahs, an archive of frequently asked Tower-related questions, joining information and a guest book. The library link, in turn, links to pages containing guidelines for fanfic, fan biographies, transcripts of fanfic, filksongs, poetry and artwork which include detailed maps and diagrams of the Grey Tower and its grounds. (Figure 3, below, shows one of the images available.) These web pages contain extensive information on the various areas and functions of the Grey Tower. The series of maps and diagrams represent a 'coherent view of how the Tower is constructed and laid out, as well as what it actually looks like'.⁴¹ The images, drawn by Sapphire en'Damier, have been inspired by the landscape of the Jordan texts and contain explicit reference to the language of the novels, as the excerpt in the following, attached to the image in Figure 3, notes, 'from the air the Tower would appear as a Great Wheel that weaves the pattern, and the Novice and Soldier Hall appears as the Great Serpent'.

⁴⁰ 'The Grey Tower', home page, <http://www.greytowerp.net/> (accessed July 29, 2004).

⁴¹ Sapphire en'Damier, 'Maps and Diagrams of the Grey Tower', http://www.greytowerrp.net/GTAdmin/Library/grey_tower_art.html (accessed 3 Sept., 004). This web page offers links to each of Sapphire's drawings.

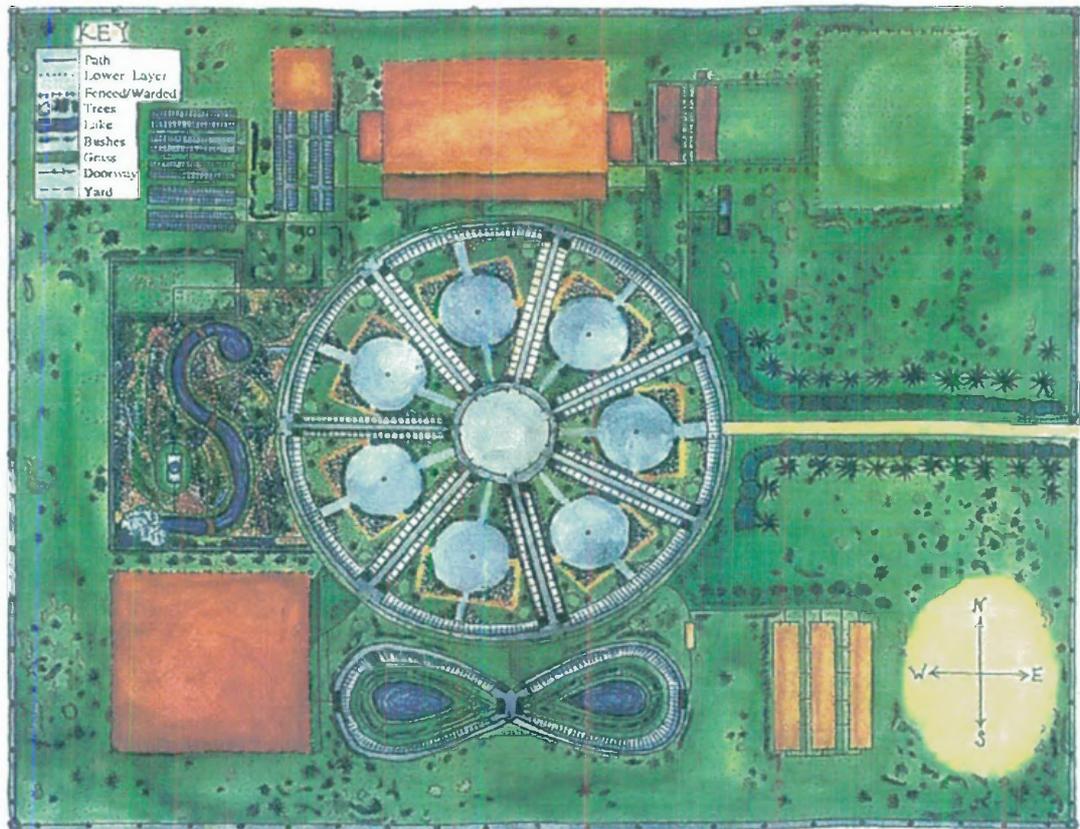


Figure 3: Image from 'The Grey Tower' showing aerial view of Tower and grounds.⁴²

The guidelines to role-play offer general points for the gamers to observe, such as being realistic in terms of Robert Jordan's world, leaving role-playing postings open-ended so other people can join in, not harming each other's characters without their OOC permission, and a reminder not to let In Character (IC) conflicts affect OOC friendships. To encourage new players to feel at home in the community they are assigned an experienced Tower member who acts as a guide and mentor. Role-play games can be short, and are held on the Day-to-Day board while sustained games, referred to as Major Role-plays, are held on separate message boards to which links are provided. Members who will be absent from the site for a period of time may post dates of their intended departure and return on the 'Shara List'.

⁴² Artwork by Sapphire en'Damier. <http://www.greytower.net/GTAdmin/Library/colortowerfinal.html> (accessed 3 Sept., 2004).

The other major activity on this site is the writing of fanfic. The site guidelines, in part, specify that:

Your fanfic **must** be based in the world of the WoT. Where and when it takes place is up to you, but keep it realistic within RJ's world.

Your fanfic does not **have** to be about your own GT character (although most are), but it **can not** be about characters from the actual WoT books.

The events in your fiction should not change anything drastic about the Tower or the [Wheel] world in general. (eg: writing about how you single-handedly won Tarmon Gai'don is a definite no no.)⁴³

A popular theme of fanfic on this particular site is the growth, skill and so the empowerment of the online character, or the telling of a story that fills in the background history of the online character and how they first gained entrance to the Tower.

Abbyland <<http://www.abbygoldsmith.com/>>

'Compiled by Abigail of the Brown Ajah. Well okay ... I'm not really an Aes Sedai. I'm just an animator.'

Abby is both a creative writer and a graphic artist, and she believes that if you 'blend art and storytelling together ... the results are films, comic books, and graphic novels', mediums that are currently becoming an integral part of the work of a growing number of fantasy writers. Abbyland is a personal site that is not exclusively set up for the Jordan fans; however, her *WOT* pages are more extensive and she refers to herself as being 'addicted' to the original series. Abby's *WOT* homepage provides links to Abby's own writings on *WOT* plot synopsis, book reviews, articles and essays, errors and complaints, and her collection of unsolved ponderings and prophecies from the series. As well as these personal compositions she provides links to her favourite *WOT* resources and fan sites.

⁴³ Melabrid Asha'man 'Guidelines and Tips for Fanfics', <http://www.greytowerrp.net/GTAdmin/Library/fanfiction/guidelines.html> (accessed 2 Sept., 2004).

Abby's *WOT* artwork pages include thumbnail images of Jordan's characters, of which she remarks that she 'attempted to capture the personality of each character while remaining true to their literary description'. The artwork pages also display an amusing comic strip featuring Jordan's characters Mat and Tuon that she drew for the 'Wot now?' web comic.

Dragon's library <http://www.dragonlibrary.com/fiction/wheel_of_time/>

'*Wheel of Time* Original Fan Fiction'

The 'Dragon's library' contains an archive of fan fiction and transcripts of role-play games based on Jordan's *WOT* texts. This library collection is divided into sub categories: 'WoT Third Age', the timeframe of Jordan's texts; 'WoT Ages of Past and Future', 'WoT humour', and WoT Role-playing. Unlike the fanfic on the Grey Tower site, these stories are not based on the exploits of the fan-authors' own alternate virtual identities.

Theoryland of *The Wheel of Time* <<http://www.theoryland.com/>>

'More theories than you can stand.'

The home page of this site offers links to reports of media interviews and chats with Robert Jordan, general *WOT* information, and a communal message board where members discuss various aspects of the texts. The site also has links to extensive postings of fan predictions and theories, listed in alphabetical order, many of which are related specifically to a particular character. One of the current theory topics concerns the hero Rand, and what might happen to him in the eleventh volume (*KOD*) which, as already mentioned, is due for publication in October, 2005.

The Wheel of Time FAQ <<http://linuxmafia.com/jordan/>>

‘Surprising what you can dig out of books if you read long enough, isn’t it? (Randal’Thor).

The organisers of this site describe it as: ‘the Wheel of Time Wondrous Masterpiece of Assembled Knowledge, Theories and Discussion’. The site has pages that provide details of possible source material for the *WOT*, such as Norse, Celtic and Christian mythology. However, the site is almost exclusively based on archiving *WOT* theories that have been debated extensively over the years among many fans on the Usenet group. <rec.arts.sf.written.robert-jordan> The FAQ summarises these debates and the conclusions so far reached.

Both ‘Theoryland’ and ‘Wheel of Time FAQ’ sites allow the fan-authors a different way to participate in the understanding of the shaping of the *WOT* narrative through their analysis of various aspects of the Jordan texts and imaginative attempts to foretell how the author might well resolve unfinished threads or unresolved prophecies in the plotting thus far.

**Reading, writing, drawing and gaming in *The Wheel of Time* web:
Jordan fans as pattern makers, storytellers and heroic questers**

The patterning of a virtual world

The fans are both *skilled* and *competent* in their setting up of a virtual *WOT* world. In Jordan’s terms it is a ‘mirror’ world, and therefore a realm of ‘possibility’, where things can be different so they do not have to slavishly follow the patterning of his text. The fans build the virtual world through a combination of literacy tools and visual tools (i.e. maps and artwork). But the tool they most rely on is that of written text and it is largely through

their literacy skills and knowledge that their virtual world is brought into being, and the written text also provides the means by which fans can communicate with each other and thus participate in the cyberworld. This is akin to the MUDders' creation of imaginary places, which as Harold Rheingold observes are also produced and sustained by written text. He refers to MUD (Multi-User Dimensions) worlds as being:

Imaginary worlds in computer databases where people use words and programming languages to improvise melodramas, build worlds and all the objects in them, solve puzzles, invent amusements and tools, compete for prestige and power, gain wisdom, seek revenge, indulge in greed and lust and violent impulses.⁴⁴

In the virtual Wheel world the fans already share in a communal story-board of *WOT* knowledge and have no need to build their cyberworld from scratch, but, rather, can build upon a shared intimate knowledge of Jordan's *WOT* texts, so that not everything has to be described in detail online. Thus they produce a kind of virtual overlay of one world upon the other and are able to create identities for themselves that are derived from those of the *WOT* texts, and to interpret and use the language of Jordan's world to give depth and substance to their own creation.

The online fans use a duplication of the Wheel world's histories and geographies to provide a strong sense of place, and they base their online personae on Jordan's different races and the ranks. Thus they emulate the distinctive dress, codes of etiquette, and the range of mores and ethics of each nation. Yet, in this 'mirror' world of possibility, they have the power to extend the template of Jordan's imaginary world by writing themselves into the world through role-play games and fanfic. They can also introduce contradictions to Jordan's pattern for his world; for example, the Wheel organisations on the Dragonmount site, which encourage membership that has no gender restrictions. And the

⁴⁴ Rheingold, *Virtual Community*, p. 145. Rheingold also suggests that 'the roots of MUDs are deep in that part of human nature that delights in storytelling and playing "let's pretend"', p. 155.

Grey Tower, a blend of Jordan's opposing White and Black Towers, has opened its doors to both female Aes Sedai and male Asha'man. As the ideology of the anti-male Red Ajah of Jordan's pattern (whose main task is to 'gentle' all males with the ability to channel) would be inappropriate in this non-gender specific community, it has been replaced by an Indigo Ajah who seek to uncover lost Talents from the Age of Legends.

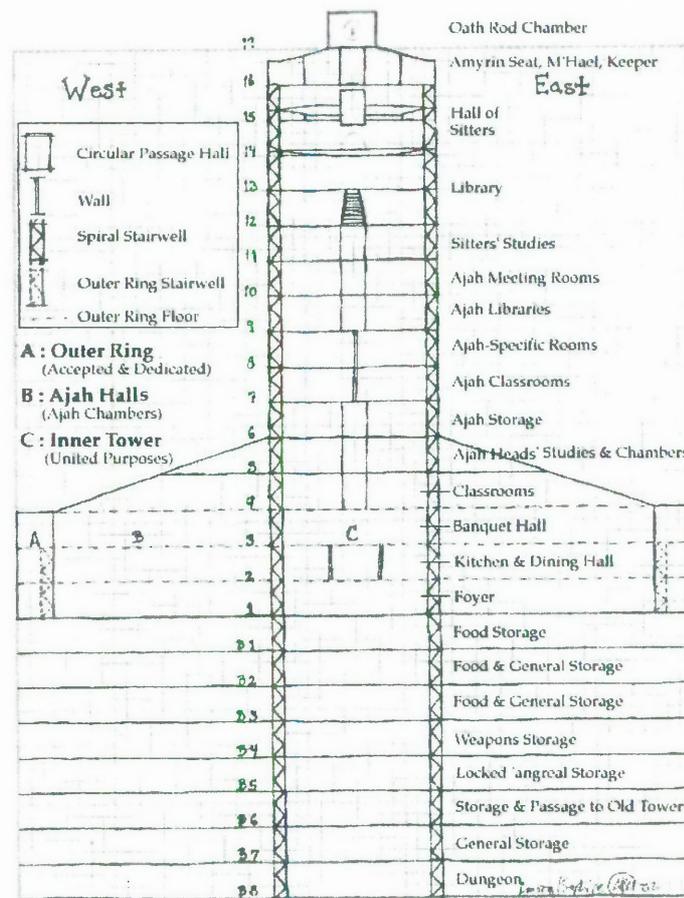


Figure 4: Image of cross-section used in 'The Grey Tower' role-playing.⁴⁵

The Grey Tower itself, which has no existence in Jordan's Wheel world, is given a quality of tangible reality through the provision of a number of meticulously drawn maps and diagrams of the Grey Tower and its grounds. This artwork is useful, too, for

⁴⁵ Artwork by Saphire en'Damier, <http://www.greytowerrp.net/GTAdmin/Library/blueprint.html> (accessed Sept. 3, 2004). A monochrome duplicate of the coloured map of the Grey Tower and grounds (Figure 3), also has a numbered key which gives names/functions of particular rooms and outdoor areas.

orientation during role-play games as the participants choose which routes their characters may feasibly take as they move around the tower. Figure 4 shows a blueprint of the Grey Tower, which is used by participants in active role-playing games, to ensure consistency of the narrative's geography. The levels of the tower are labelled so that characters can name them accurately.

Storytelling within the virtual world

As was mentioned earlier, the interface of the web enables fans to mentally step into their cyber-representation of Jordan's Wheel world. But it also allows them to become *active* participants within it and, by so doing, to become part of the storytelling process and through alternate identities to have an actual role in the unfolding story itself. The fans' virtual community, which is built on narrative, is a vigorous hybrid formed from their original readings of the texts, and their cyberspace interpretations of them, but one more intertwined with their everyday identities. For instance, even the act of logging into the *WOT* websites and interacting on the general Out of Character (OOC) message boards, or the message boards of a particular organisation based on Jordan's world, necessitates the conscious acceptance on the part of the fans that even at this level they must engage in a form of role-play or performance.⁴⁶ They then become part of an enormous, trans-global cast of other *WOT* devotees, which constitutes a braiding of some facets of their mundane existence with those of the imaginary cyberworld.

Yet, in a sense, these realms are the two sides of the same coin as one cannot exist without the other. In an online discussion about the real world and the world of

⁴⁶ Brenda Laurel, in *Computers As Theatre*, (1991), claims that 'the strong identification players feel with artificial characters in a computer database is an example of the same human capacity for *mimesis* to which Aristotle attributed the soul-changing (and thus, society changing) power of drama'. Quoted in Rheingold, *Virtual Community*, p. 155.

imagination, that sometimes is referred to as the ‘true’ world, one of the Dragonmount site members captures this duality well with her belief that:

online communities such as this one help bridge the gap between the [two] worlds. They provide a place where people can enter the ‘true’ world with others. It adds another dimension to the ‘true’ world in that it opens it for discussion with others across the ‘real’ world and, hm, makes it possible to see both worlds in new ways.⁴⁷

Thus, for this particular fan, the symbiotic relationship that exists between the two worlds is viewed as one that brings enrichment to both, as the suggestion is that involvement in the online community brings an expansion of ideas, attitudes and knowledge that can be applied across both aspects of life – the here and now and the timeless realm of imagination wherein truths can be found.

However, it is specifically through their self-authoring and participation in role-play games and the writing of personalised fanfic that the fans are able to actively project themselves into the fictional and fictive world. Role-play gaming on the *WOT* sites is a form of communally written story, although each major role-play is created and driven by its organiser. The organiser sets up a brief scenario for the game and then asks those who wish to join in to supply their character’s name, email, rank within the *WOT* community, and a brief overview of the character’s personality. In real time the messages of the players that build the narrative may be posted on the game board over a number of days, weeks, or even months, but within the virtual world events are considered to be constantly unfolding in the present.

A major role-play game (2004) on the Grey Tower site is the ‘Indigo Ajah Fair’ – a virtual fair designed as an antidote to the tedium of midwinter at the Grey Tower.⁴⁸ This

⁴⁷ Ayeteh el Jara, online conversation with the researcher, Dragonmount message boards, Sept. 2, 2004.

⁴⁸ This game has been created by Llewellyn Phyre Sedai and Dedicated Liam Dakred, <http://disc.server.com/Indices/218131.html> (accessed 2 Sept., 2004).

fair offers traditional amusements such as music and dancing, a kissing booth, magic, and for 'restless warders', the chance to compete in the Sparring Arena. It is designed to suggest that the Grey Tower is a real community, one where like-minded people can enjoy a festal day of recreational pursuits together. Not all role-play games are as light-hearted as this, for others lay down a challenge to prospective players to join in the on-going *WOT* battle between the Light and the Dark, as is discussed in a later section.

The writing of *WOT*-based fanfic is another avenue that allows the fans to take up the role of storyteller and I have identified three types of this writing. On the Grey Tower site, in general, the stories are personal accounts of the writer's own online character. Many of them concern the ordeals of initiation encountered within the three-arched *ter'angreal* whereby novices of the Grey Tower are 'raised' to the status of Aes Sedai and Asha'man. This labyrinth-like rite of passage, one in which the characters must thrice face their worst fears, and to survive the testing must then return through each arch when summoned, no matter what situation they find themselves in, closely mirrors the pattern of the ordeals experienced in the three-arched *ter'angreal* by initiates of the White Tower within the actual Jordan texts. For instance, in a fanfic titled 'Zavian's Raising', Zavian must make the choice to abandon his sister to the mercies of Trollocs, leave a man to be tortured by members of the Dark, and forego the opportunity to reverse his vows to the Dark One that had been forced upon him.⁴⁹ Fans also each write personal stories that fill in details of their character's childhood, and the train of events that sets them on the path to a life at the Grey Tower. Fan stories such as these are ways of both fleshing out the characters, giving an indication of how they think and act, and enabling them to gain increased power and status within the cyber *WOT* tower community.

⁴⁹ Zavian Rasliev, http://www.greytowerrp.net/GTAdmin/Library/fanfiction/savians_raising.html (accessed 3 Sept., 2004).

By contrast, the *WOT* based fanfic held on the Dragon's Library site is not personalised to the fan-authors' alternative characters. In one story titled 'The 4th Ta'veren', the fan-author, Michael Sample, has found a gap in the Jordan narrative of the second volume (*GH*), and inserts an episode that features new characters and exploits, as is explained in a short prologue:

Set during the middle of The Great Hunt, 'The Fourth Ta'veren' is a tale taking place within the boundaries and parallels of the *WoT* story, at least how it was for a brief period, while Rand, Mat and Perrin still hunted Padan Fain and the Horn of Valere, and Egwene, Nynaeve and the other girls who they would later befriend have journeyed to the White Tower. Much does not happen during the four months of the Questors' travel via the Stones, and the tutorage of the budding Aes Sedai. It is in this period, that a secret quest is undertaken by a small band of unsung heroes, following a prophecy which could alter the course of Tarmon Gai'don, and give the Dark One the upper hand in the last climactic battle.⁵⁰

It is because the Jordan narrative contains an ever-increasing number of plots and subplots often set in a number of widely dispersed Wheel world locations, and a vast cast of characters, that such an interposed interlude becomes entirely feasible.

Other fanfic on this site is situated in a time before the 'Breaking of the World', or after the Last Battle, which thus allows the fan-authors the freedom to shape the fresh pieces of plot as they wish. One uncompleted story titled 'The Other Side of the Wheel', conceives of a future age which is a mirror-image or reversal of the Wheel world.⁵¹ In this turning of the Wheel the dragon is female, while another, titled 'A New Beginning', explores Lan and Nynaeve's return to the ruins of his kingdom of Malkier after the Last Battle.⁵² Moreover, Jordan fans are not averse to sending up their favourite series; for

⁵⁰ Michael Sample, (2000), <http://www.dragonlibrary.com/2000/story319.htm> (accessed 22 Sept., 2004).

⁵¹ Sundara, (2001), http://www.dragonlibrary.com/fiction/data/2001/other_side.php (accessed, Sept. 22, 2004).

⁵² Allanon, (1999), <http://www.dragonlibrary.com/1999/story218.htm> (accessed 22 Sept., 2004).

example, a fanfic titled ‘Last Battle Won!’ is composed as a contemporary-style media report from the battle site at Shayol Ghul, where the Dark Lord has died before the Dragon can commence battle with him. In part the reporter writes that:

All over the world, the nations will soon be celebrating at the news that the Light is triumphant. The Last Battle, between the Dragon Reborn and the Dark One has been feared so much over the thousands of years since the Breaking that the outcome seems rather pathetic. Rand al’Thor had an easy victory at 2:30 this morning in Shayol Ghul, the scheduled time and place of the Last Battle. Apparently, Shai’tan himself had a heart attack and died before al’Thor could do much of anything ... Al’Thor sits on a nearby rock with his companions Matrim Cauthon and Perrin Aybara. ‘It just happened! Totally unexpected! Shai’tan just keeled over and I didn’t even realise what was happening. We were both rather sleepy’, says the Dragon (al’Thor), while flipping through a bulging Daily Planner. ‘You see, our schedules kept conflicting, so we had to reschedule the possible end of the world more than once ... but now that Tarmon Gai’don is over, I just don’t know what to do ... I guess it’s time to break the world.’⁵³

The humour of this piece comes from not only the flippant journalistic style, but also the juxtaposition of Rand and the Dark One, the protagonist and antagonist of a pre-industrial epic fantasy, with the concept of the modern day corporate highflier whose busy life and ‘bulging Daily Planner’ make scheduling the Last Battle almost an impossibility. After all, only the end of the world is at stake. A further irony is to have the Dark One die prematurely through the bane of the contemporary Western corporate world – a heart attack.

⁵³ Mierin. (2002), http://www.dragonlibrary.com/fiction/data/2002/last_battle_won.php (accessed 29 Sept., 2004).

Players' delights

Part of the pleasure of all the above ways of re-authoring of Jordan's world must arise from the fans' shared, intimate knowledge of the original texts. An extremely detailed knowledge is required to understand and enjoy how cleverly fan stories are being woven into a space in Jordan's pattern of the Wheel world narrative, or how the fanfic can build identifiable additions to his existing texts. Certainly, the humour of the parodying tales would be lost on an audience that is unfamiliar with the original work, as would fan filking songs such as 'Stop the *Wheel of Time*, I want to get off' (sung to the music from the Billy Joel song 'The Longest Time'). In this song, ironically, the singer complains about aspects of the series, yet confesses to his addiction to it.⁵⁴ In a sense the writers of such fanfic are taking possession of the Wheel world and obviously enjoy shaping certain aspects of events in it to their own desires.

With regard to such 'organised fandom' Jenkins suggests that it is 'perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism, a semi-structured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated, and negotiated'.⁵⁵ This description fits yet another way in which the *WOT* online fans can become actively involved in the creative process of patterning a story. For they propose numerous theories, prophecies and, in their terminology, 'loony ideas' by which means they can collectively debate, argue and speculate on the ways in which Jordan might possibly tie in the unfinished plot threads, in relation to each successive volume or to the core quest. Another interesting *WOT* web site known as 'The Waygate' contains archives of the entries written by fans for a contest in which they competed to predict the possible

⁵⁴ Co-written by Batya Levin Wittenberg and Merav Hoffman, <http://www.fortunecity.com/tattooine/challenger/3/stopthewheelovertime.html> (accessed 25 Aug., 2004). Other *WOT* 'fildsongs' can be found on the Waygate site, <http://linuxmafia.com/waygate/no-haunt/JordanFilk.html> (accessed 22 Sept., 2004).

⁵⁵ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, p. 86.

plot for *FOH*, book five of the series, before it was published.⁵⁶ These types of interactive discussions and writing processes allow the fans to explore the *WOT* literary texts as both critical readers and creative writers. In the early 1990s in relation to the communal quality and effects of fan reading of texts, Jenkins further observed that:

Fan reading ... is a social process through which individual interpretations are shaped and reinforced through ongoing discussions with other readers. Such discussions expand the experience of the text beyond its initial consumption. The produced meanings are thus more fully integrated into the reader's lives.⁵⁷

In the decade following the publication of Jenkins' above-quoted work, the phenomenal growth of fan web sites devoted to particular texts such as Jordan's *WOT*, has provided fans with the tool to communicate as part of a trans-globally linked mind group, which has enhanced their capacity to reshape or extend their personal interpretations of the texts. The web has also given them the means to become participating virtual citizens in their cyberspace construction of Jordan's Wheel world.

Writing oneself into the heroic quest of *The Wheel of Time*

As discussed in chapters one and three, one of the under-pinning themes of contemporary fantasy is the heroic quest, a motif in which the catalyst for the heroic action is the urgent need to rescue the depicted world from some catastrophic event. In reading a book the reader's positioning in such a quest can only be as an onlooker, whereas on the web, through the taking up of alternative personae in role-playing games, the fan-authors are able to project themselves into the cyberworld and feel that they are directly experiencing and changing events. Both mediums are text-based, but in the cyberspace

⁵⁶ 'The Waygate', 'The *WOT* archives', <http://www.linuxmafia.com/waygate/jordan.html> (accessed 11 Dec., 2004).

⁵⁷ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, p. 45.

world of the Wheel, the fans are transformed from the position of vicarious readers, to that of totally immersed readers and writers in a way that is dynamic and active.

In their construction of a role-playing narrative the fans initially propose a problem to be solved that endangers the virtual Wheel world, and through their online personae they can write themselves into the action and thus become part of a heroic quest. In keeping with the under-pinning framework of high fantasy, the players are free to choose to fight as champions for either the Light or the Dark. As the narrative of the role-playing game unfolds, the participants must take the initiative to make decisions, develop a range of skills and cunning, and assume positions of power, which is a mirroring of the attributes to be developed by Jordan's heroic figures, and necessary if they are to succeed in carrying out their given task.

A major role-play game on the Grey Tower site, 'The Seals Preserved' (2004), offers a challenge to players to join the on-going battle between the Light and the Dark. This particular quest story commences with the discovery of a 'mysterious *ter'anÿreal*' in the basement of the Grey Tower that could aid in strengthening the remaining seals on the Dark One's prison, thereby allowing humans more time to prepare for the coming of *Tarmon Gai'don*. However, hidden within the Tower community, secret members of the Black Ajah seek to destroy this talisman of Power as it could hinder the plans of their Dark Master, while those of the Light must fight to keep it safe and unlock the secret of how to use it.⁵⁸

Rather like the lives of the characters in Diana Wynne Jones's fantasy novel *Archer's Goon*,⁵⁹ in *WOT* role-play games the events are being created as the participants type in the words, and have no existence until the words appear on the web page to bring them to life.

⁵⁸ This game has been created by Ji'alantin Antar al'Kadar and Amora en'Damier Sedai, <http://disc.server.com/Indices/220380.html> (accessed 2 Sept., 2004).

⁵⁹ Diana Wynne Jones, *Archer's Goon*, London, 2000. In this novel the words typed by Quentin, the young protagonist Howard's father, literally shape the world in which the characters are living.

Rheingold's observations in regard to MUD worlds seem appropriate to the actions of the *WOT* gamers. He suggests that:

the ability to create places and puzzles for others to explore [is] a form of mastery, a way for people who might lack social status in their real-world community to gain status in their alternate community ... there is a certain attraction to a world in which mastery and the admiration of peers is available to anyone with imagination and intellectual curiosity.⁶⁰

No one can predict how the narrative of such imaginative games will unfold or how they will end, which adds a certain tension or frisson to the situations but also gives each player a sense of authorial control and power. It also enhances the sense of the reality of events within the game world, since in the everyday world, too, it is impossible to predict how other people will react in a given situation or what the outcome may be.

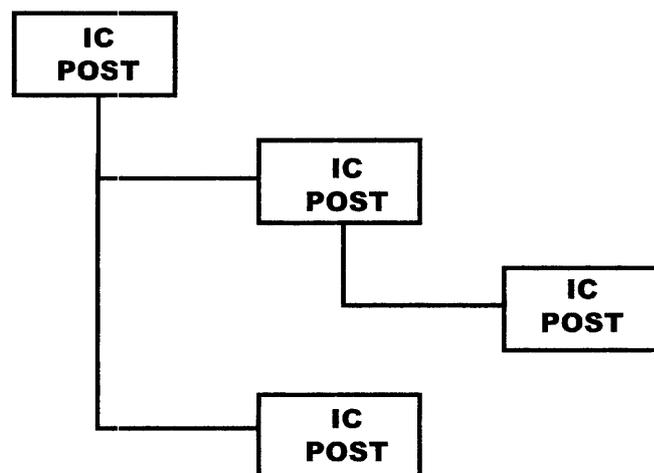


Figure 5: Basic pattern of threads for In Character (IC) posting.

When viewed online (the basic structure is shown in Figure 5), the pattern of the *WOT* role-play games forms a multiple web of threads as players respond to different sections of the postings, thereby producing a number of subplots as they write their characters into the

⁶⁰ Rheingold, *Virtual Community*, p. 153.

unfolding story. In Figure 5, the first posting begins the story, introducing character or events. As other players respond to this posting, continuing the story or adding new characters, their contribution to the story appears on a lower branch. Players can respond to the original posting or to other branches as they appear, thereby producing a configuration of branching parts. A participant may even have a secondary character, who contributes to the story in separate postings. The multi-threaded storyline that such writing produces is a form that reflects the multi-plotted, interlaced narrative of the Jordan texts, and the role-playing story can seem just as intricate.

As with a literary text, the game narrative is also divided into chapters and in ‘The Seals Preserved’, the initial chapter begins with a mirroring of the format of the recurring motif as used by Jordan at the start of each volume of his *WOT* series:

The Wheel of time turns, and ages come and pass, leaving many turned to dust, as many rise from the ashes. In this, it goes the same with powers, as true power lasts not for centuries, but there are rare occasions that a lost power can be found again. Dawn breaks in the mountains, in this age aptly named the Mountains of Mist, and nestled in these simple and wondrous mountains, is the Grey Tower. Aes Sedai and Asha’man alike have learned to live together, and work in harmony toward the greater good. Yet, the wind that blows over the tower on this morning is tainted with one not showing true colors.⁶¹

The use of this familiar motif provides a trigger that helps imaginatively to situate the players and the Grey Tower within the time and space of the well known landscape of the story world of the Wheel, and to enhance the sense of a tangible reality.

⁶¹ ‘The Seals Preserved’, Chapter One, ‘Anonymous’, <http://disc.server.com/Indices/220380.html> (accessed, 5 Sept., 2004).

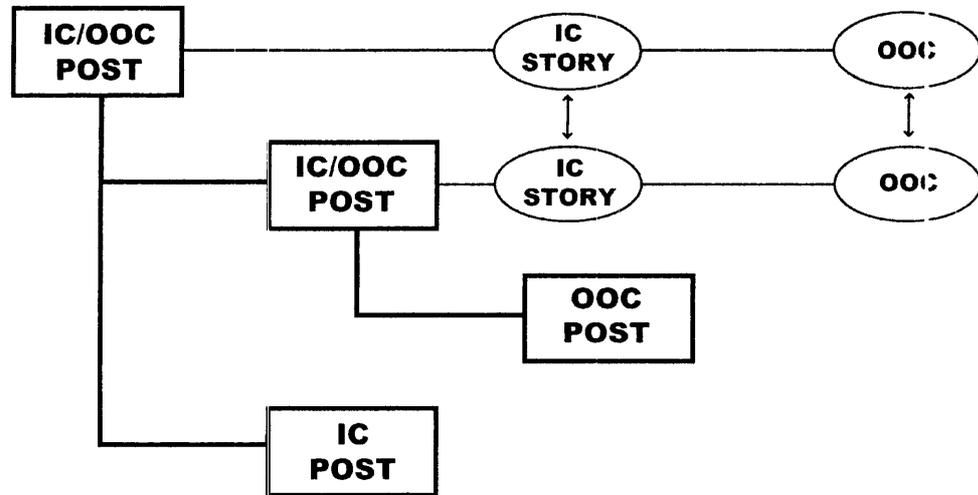


Figure 6: The interweaving of In Character (IC) and Out of Character (OOC) text.

An interesting aspect of the fans' storytelling and make-believe is the ease with which, as the game progresses, they can step in and out of character. Their Out of Character remarks are signalled on the board through the use of the prefix OOC. As Figure 6 shows, OOC remarks can appear within a single posting together with IC story-telling, or they can appear in separate postings; for example, the following extract from the major role-play, 'The Seals Preserved', demonstrates this narrative interjection within a single posting:

IC: Riali makes her way across the grounds slowly, and in an almost timid manner. Her heart raced quickly, and had another Aes Sedai glanced at her at this particular moment, they would have been very surprised indeed. She did not hold the grace that all Aes Sedai prided themselves in, her face a stark white colour, and sweatdrops mingling freely with her hair and running down, the droplets stinging her eyes. Light! She hadn't even told anyone anything yet, and she felt like an unarmed Cairhien walking into an Aiel camp!

OOC: I was a bit rushed with this post, as I have to go away for a day and am leaving in just a few moments. I may not have understood a few things in tying the threads up, and if you have any complaints about how this particular post went, feel free to message me ... Also, if you need me to help find a way to tie in one of your characters, do this as well ... Those that don't have

threads concerning Riali in particular, simply pick up below from where you left off below. Thanks. Antar.⁶²

Subsequent postings can then include responses to either the IC or OOC text, as the first branch in Figure 6 shows. Rather like the voice of an intrusive author in a literary text, or the stage directions of a theatrical play, this OOC code is used in a variety of ways to inform or influence the other players. It may be used for purposes such as the following: to give added descriptions of a character, or additional information on particular incidents that have not been clarified in the narrative; to correct any perceived misunderstanding in the plotting where the internal inconsistency would break secondary belief; to redirect a particular thread; or just to make a cheeky aside. Thus the game participants are always consciously aware that they are taking part in an imaginative story, which is the opposite of the heroic figures in the Jordan texts who often remark that they are not like the heroes in stories. However, this does not seem to detract from the fans' pleasure in the game, or in any way break its spell.

The never-ending story

This analysis of the phenomenon of the *WOT* fandom focuses on one living writer's presence and influence in cyberspace, also revealing the way in which Jordan's richly layered and plotted sequence of texts has been 'poached' by his fans, to provide an extension of the author's original and finite texts. And through these fans' activities on the web, their construction of a cyberworld of wonderful choice and possibility, the fans have constructed a 'cultural and social network that spans the globe', one in which the contribution of each and every participant counts.⁶³

⁶² Riali, Chapter 4. 'Misguided information or dangerous truths?' <http://disc.server.com/Indices/220380.html> (accessed 5 Sept., 2004).

⁶³ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, p. 45.

In this highly creative fandom response to such a popular continuing series we have remarkable evidence of the power of these stories to fire the imagination, to cause readers to identify with the story situation and even, perhaps, to extend the purposes of the author and spend long periods in a world of their choice and of their fashioning. What is so significant is the enfranchisement of readers-of-print into cyber storytellers, artists and pattern makers in their own right. In response to my question regarding the worlds of reality and of imagination, one of the fans on the Dragonmount site replied:

The reason that the internet is such a powerful tool for ‘bridging the gap’ between the ‘real and the true’ worlds is that it allows the fans to create and add onto the world created by the authors, allowing a deeper submersion into a reality different than the one they currently exist in. People desire more than what the world offers to them ... Fantasy can be an escape from the ‘norm’ that haunts many people. It is a way of dealing with the daily grind of life. The internet simply allows the fan to create and add onto to the ‘true world’ that they have come to love and enjoy. Unfortunately, an author cannot write a story about their world forever. They move on to new worlds, or they stop writing altogether. The internet allows the continuation of a beloved world into infinity.⁶⁴

The *WOT* fans’ interaction on the world-wide web, their capacity to weave new stories collectively about the Wheel world, enables them to keep the author’s world alive and thus to imaginatively engage in a type of never-ending story.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Eldar Loial, online conversation, Dragonmount message boards, Sept. 10, 2004.

⁶⁵ It is this infinite nature of imaginative ‘story’ that Michael Ende explores in his well-known novel *The Neverending Story*, London: Penguin Books, 1984.

Afterword

‘Wheel’ World/Real World: The Quest of the Fan/Critic

Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam

Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn. (Keats *Ode to a Nightingale*)

The process of researching and the writing of this thesis, in which I have sought to find my way through the labyrinth of the Jordan texts, has entailed a quest not unlike that of the hero figure of fantasy. The labyrinth, that place of exploration, testing and self-questioning, is a fitting metaphor for the journey in which the critic, like the hero, is searching for knowledge and a deeper understanding of the texts. But the challenge for the literary critic seeking to reach an understanding of the patterning and meaning within the chosen texts, is to look beneath the surface, to do far more than just vicariously participate in the journey of the story. One of the interesting aspects has been that I am writing as a fantasy fan and critic, and the challenge has been to maintain objective distance from the narrative, resisting the temptation just to step through the ‘magic casement’ and mentally co-inhabit the author’s imaginary world – as would a recreational reader – and to engage with the work not only from the heart but also from the head.

With a background in mediaeval literary studies I was aware that the old story patterns are the quintessence of modern fantasy fiction, and wished to explore how they were being reworked by certain contemporary authors. Tolkien warned that when tracing the conventional motifs and techniques to be found in modern fantasy the critic must be careful not to ignore the way authors use these to new effect:

It is indeed easier to unravel a single *thread* – an incident, a name, a motive – than to trace the history of any *picture* defined by many threads. For with the

picture in the tapestry a new element has come in: the picture is greater than, and not explained by, the sum of the component threads.¹

Modern fantasy is not just a simple reworking of old story patterns and conventions. Jordan acknowledges that in *WOT* he uses many sources to form his narrative, which he suggests 'adds resonance to the story', although he has taken 'great care not to follow the older material in any slavish way'.² Writers of 'second-wave' fantasy from towards the end of the twentieth century have produced a type of story that is both of the literary past and of the contemporary world in which they are writing. In particular, I was interested in their writing of complex epic-style high fantasy series, and the cyberspace fandom that has become attached to, and even extended, the works of some authors. For these critical purposes Robert Jordan's *WOT* has proven to be an excellent example of both aspects.

Moreover, Jordan's *WOT* series enacts the central challenges of contemporary 'second-wave' fantasists. These authors are conscious of writing within an established form, with a rich heritage and a popular appeal. But they are also building their Secondary Worlds in the shadow of Middle-earth and other imaginary worlds of the writers who first followed in Tolkien's footsteps. Jordan and his contemporaries have needed to find ways of telling their fantasy stories that both acknowledge the genre conventions and yet impart a sense of originality to the patterning of their own work. Thus modern fantasists draw on an increasingly eclectic range of cross-cultural material, weaving both the familiar and the strange into necessarily increasingly complex patterns. At first glance large-scale high fantasy can seem like a simple templating of an idea or world, in which the characters appear over and over again in the same landscape. Therefore, these texts may be thought to have less to offer in terms of a critical analysis of the fantasy genre. However, the endurance of a single landscape across multiple texts does not necessarily preclude the

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', in *Tree and Leaf*, London, 1964, p. 24, note 1.

² Robert Jordan, cited by Pam Korda in 'Trivial Pursuits', <http://linuxmafia.com/waygate/no-haunt/preLoC-3.html> (accessed, 7 July, 2005).

play of creative originality in the patterning of narratives, nor the depiction of world-changing interaction between the characters and their depicted environments that may reach a moment of eucatastrophe.

This thesis has focused on the mediaeval technique of interlacing as the key structuring device of the *WOT* to unlock the intricate patterning of Jordan's narrative. As I have argued, interlace uses multi-threaded plots, echoes, anticipations and repetitions to give a multidimensional quality to the narrative. The device of interlacing allows the writer to encompass a large cast of characters, locations, landscapes and time frames that impart a sense of solidity to the depicted world. The reader's affinity to texts written in such a manner may in part be explained by John Leyerle's theory that 'the human imagination moves in atemporal, associative patterns like the literary interlace'.³ Thus, it constitutes a literary pattern that seems to mimic our own imaginative thought processes. In the *WOT* the threads of connection between the actions and events are also replicated in the characterisation and roles of the three main heroes, Rand, Mat, and Perrin, and in his conception of an interconnected triple hero figure Jordan goes beyond just interlacing as a plotting device. In the complex patterning of his *WOT* he has woven a rich, colourful tapestry of words, a vast panorama that gives the sense of a Secondary World without horizons. It is one in which seven Ages pass and pass again, and wherein the reader can become imaginatively enmeshed in the current portrayal of events, which are to be seen as both history and story in the making. Jordan highlights the process of events being preserved for the future as 'story' through his portrayal of Thom the gleeman, gatherer and 'teller of all tales', and the Ogier historian Loial, who is constantly writing a tale about his own adventures with Rand and his other companions.

³ John Leyerle, 'The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 37, 1967-68, p. 14.

As I look back I notice that throughout this thesis I emphasise the importance of ‘story’, not only in the Jordan texts, but in our own lives, suggesting that we too live in a story-shaped world. Jordan has privileged the role of the storyteller not only by the inclusion of many embedded stories within his imaginary world, but also through the key role given to Thom, who functions as his alter ego, and there is always a sense of more stories that could be told. Indeed one of the many enjoyable aspects of Jordan’s texts is that they are not just simple linear stories, for in the manner of an interlaced medieval tale the narrative proceeds through many separate yet intersecting paths designed to draw the reader into a more intimate relationship with both the characters and the landscape:

By repetition of pointing signals, or symbols, the author constructs a pattern which guides the interpretation. But in no sense does the writer force the pattern upon the reader ... The story becomes [the reader’s] own story to the extent that his imagination interpenetrates the framework of the story and lives for a time in the world of the story. The insights thereby disclosed to one reader may vary from those disclosed to another reader by virtue of the degree of interpenetration.⁴

Readers thus are encouraged to play an active role, gathering up their own threads of imagination in order to interpret and participate in the patterning of the unfolding narrative – rather like Jordan’s magus figures – and so to engage in Secondary Belief for the duration of the tale. And for the readers this is a unique experience, for the extent to which the writer’s re-authoring of older motifs and story patterns will resonate with them largely depends on the personal knowledge or cultural inheritance that they each bring to the text. Thus the layering of the story can be interpreted by the general reader or by those more historically informed critics, at a number of cultural and narrative levels.

Part of the continuing fascination of fantasy is the writer’s use of the comfortably known and the tantalizingly unknown to entice the reader. Readers of modern epic-style

⁴ John H. Timmerman, *Other Worlds: The Fantasy Genre*, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1983, p. 8.

fantasy have been drawn to the imaginary worlds of these large-scale texts and have established networks of fan-based communities. I have argued that the internet provides a tool with which fans can share their experiences of the original texts and even extend those texts through their own storytelling, artwork and role-play gaming. Jordan's *WOT* series is the locus of a web of internet sites which intersect with the text. The internet with a plethora of web sites devoted to fantasy texts is a particular feature of modern fantasy that began in the late twentieth century and continues to grow.

As writers such as Jordan produce their texts, fans react and interact with those texts in a complex network of emotional response, critical comment, compliment, anticipation of future plot-lines and re-authorship. *WOT* fans write themselves into the pattern of the heroic quest, model characters on those in Jordan's narrative, and become participating virtual citizens in his Secondary World. The intersection of the fan and the depicted fantasy world is part of the modern appeal of such epic-style stories and encourages a critical reading of these texts which takes seriously the multiple layering of text, reader/fan and scholarship – an exciting and under-explored area for academic study. For to date these kinds of popular high fantasy texts, and the fans' cyberspace representations of them, have received little critical attention, either because of the sheer bulk of the work, or because they have been deemed to be only of passing literary value. But as Northrop Frye so far-sightedly noted more broadly of critical responses, 'scholarship' is a 'process of mutation and metamorphosis [for] subjects regroup themselves and other subjects take shape from the shifting relations of existing ones'.⁵ Frye thus suggested that the role of the critic should be to remain open-minded, and willing to embrace different forms of literature as they continue to emerge in society, which itself is constantly mutating, and in this way, perhaps, redefine what we believe literature can

⁵ Northrop Frye, *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society*, London, 1970, p. 4.

offer us. The on-going quest for the critic, like that for the reader of story itself, involves 'the fascination of the desire to unravel the intricately knotted and ramified history of the branches on the Tree of Tales', despite Tolkien's warning that to do so 'is now beyond all skill but that of the elves to unravel it'.⁶ Nevertheless, as Thom is so fond of saying 'that would be something to make a story of'. (*EOTW*, 388)

⁶ Tolkien, 'Fairy', p. 23.

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