

## **A feast for the imagination: An exploration of narrative elements of the text and hypertext of *Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin**

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### **Abstract**

Fantasy novel as a sub-genre of children's literature has crossed over to the adult world resulting in the rapid growth of adult fantasy fiction in the last ten years. George R.R. Martin's ***A Song of Ice and Fire***, consisting of five volumes at present, is one example of extremely popular adult fantasy fiction which has sold more than fifteen million copies all over the world. But what is more remarkable is that ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** has spawned a TV series called ***A Game of Thrones***, as well as a comic book adaptation, a card game, a board game, a role playing game and two video games. In other words, ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** is available for consumption both as text and hypertext.

My paper sets out to investigate the text and hypertext of ***A Song and Ice and Fire*** with a view to gaining a greater insight into the narrative elements common to both genres of text and hypertext, making use of Conceptual Blending theory which offers a general model of meaning construction in which a small set of partially compositional processes operate in analogy, metaphor, counterfactuals and many other semantic and pragmatic phenomena. In this theory, understanding meaning involves the construction of blended cognitive models that include some structure from the input models as well as emergent structures that arise through the process of blending.

**Key words:** Mental spaces, blended spaces, input space, generic space, composition, completion and elaboration.

### **Introduction**

Adult fantasy literature as a genre has proliferated exponentially in the past ten years. Earlier fantasy literature was a sub-genre of children's literature and was largely escapist, formulaic and childish. Adult fantasy literature, on the other hand, is complex, riveting and grim. According to Hunt and Lenz (2004: 3), fantasy literature "continually strives to overcome (or exploit) both genrefication and the fact that commercialism finds it is easier to sell the restricted and restricting rather than the dangerously unclassifiable." While children's fantasy world is a world of magic, wonder and delight, paradisaic in nature, full of creatures who are delightful on the one hand or evil on the other, adult fantasy literature takes its readers into uncharted territories and, unknown and unexplored

realms; where the children's fantasy world is strangely asexual, where romance replaces passion, where food is a substitution for sex and friendship is glorified instead of love, the adult fantasy novel focuses on taboo subjects such as incest, where sex and lust replaces romance and there are graphic descriptions of sex and violence. The invented world of the adult fantasy novel is one that is epic in scope, with Byzantine dynastic struggles leading to political intrigue, and conspiracy and betrayal are the norm. The two main themes of children's fantasy literature are adventure and conflict between good and evil where good overcomes evil to restore harmony in the universe. But in adult fantasy literature these themes become complex and in the conflict between good and evil, it is not the good that always wins.

W.R. Irwin (1946:4) defines fantasy as the "literature of the impossible"; Rabbin (1976:14) as "the polar opposite of reality". Le Guin, herself a famous writer of fantasy novels, states "fantasy is a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence. It is not antirational but para-rational, not realistic but sur-realistic, super-realistic, a heightening of reality" (1992:79). Lucy Armit (1996) states that "fantasy is that intangible source of unconscious fears and desires which fuel our dreams, our phobias and therefore our narrative fictions." She adds, "Fantasy utopias do amalgamate fictive futurism with an utopian re-reading of ancient mythological sources such as Eden or Classical Greek legends, allowing for a thorough deconstruction of the basic structural principles of realism" (p.207). Todorov makes a distinction between the "uncanny" and the "marvellous" in fantasy literature pointing out that the marvellous consists of the hyperbolic, exotic and instrumental. According to Todorov,(1975) the literary fantastic involves "a sense of prevarication that occupies only the duration of the moment of hesitancy - the instant we decide upon a single reading, supernatural over the psychological, or vice versa - we leave the fantastic for "genre fantasy" and place the text in a "box".

### **A Song of Ice and Fire**

George R.R. Martin's novel series called the **A Song of Ice and Fire** consisting of 5 volumes is an extremely popular adult fantasy fiction which has sold more than 15 million copies world-wide. What is exciting about this series is that it has spawned a TV series and online game, a board game and an email game leading to fan fiction, discussion boards and chat rooms wholly devoted to the series. Thus the fictional textual form has crossed over to the different media becoming a hypertext. In order to examine both the text and hypertext of this series I choose to focus on the first novel, **A Game of Thrones** (henceforth **AGOT**) and I make use of Game Theory and Text World Theory for my analysis.

## **Theoretical Framework: Game Theory**

Laure Ryan (2006) in her book, *Avatars of Story*, draws our attention to possible world theory as a method of comparing games and literature in a meaningful way. Whereas in the novel, the text captures events mainly in a temporal order, in a game the focus shifts from the temporal to the spatial dimension. Juul (2005) points out that instead of telling a story, which is the main thrust of a novel, the computer game enables the player to explore and understand the structure of the unreal game world. Further, comparing the fictional world of the video game and a world in the traditional sense, he says, "it would make sense to assume that the characters in that world are generally unaware of their being fictional characters or being part of a game at all" (p. 183).

Laure Ryan (2006: xviii) points out, "narrative is a cognitive construct with an invariant nucleus of meaning but this construct can take a variety of shapes which we may call *avatars* of the story". Thus every narrative can be transposed to a different medium such as TV, film and now, the digital media. Adult fantasy fiction works on the narratological premise as derived from Propp (1975) and others who focus on "function" as a narrative unit that takes the action forward and it is these functions which are used to develop the online game where players take on roles which designate them to act in a particular way to take the action forward. The success of the game depends on two possibilities: (1) The player being external to the game and making his moves from an external position, or, (2) the player takes on the role of an *avatar* and becomes an internal participant in the game. In the former, several moves are possible, but the outcome of the game is predictable. However, in the latter, every move is played against other *avatars* and this human interaction leads to unpredictability resulting in greater pleasure being derived from the outcome of the game. Whereas in the actual joust or tournament of medieval times, it was the physical prowess, strength and quick moves that ensured victory, for the success of the participants in online games, the *avatars* embody the mental agility of the players. The online game also provides an opportunity for players from all over the world who are total strangers to each other to participate in the battle of wits. In most cases the identity of the participant is not known during and even after the game has run its course. When online games are played, they create their own narrative, and when a fantasy novel is read, because it is fantasy, the notion of the *ludic* (or play/game) comes to the fore. Furthermore, each time the game is played, it creates a new narrative and therefore a new world. The games, in a certain sense, become counterfactuals to the text world. This will be discussed in more detail in the analysis of AGOT.

## **Text World Theory**

Conceptual metaphor theory and conceptual blending theory are complementary with similar assumptions about language in Text World Theory. Most metaphors can be described using the source domain and the target domain. As Porto (2007) states, 'creation of new metaphors in a text can produce significant, even if transitory changes on the way we perceive the world around us' (p.58). For my purposes, I wish to use the notion of the Megametaphor, which, according to Werth, represent 'the most prototypical and primitive frames of our culture' (1993, 323). The conceptual metaphor theory also examines the integration that takes place with multiple domains leading to the construction of four mental spaces. That is, the domains become "input spaces" related to each other as well as two more spaces: the "generic space" and an "integrated space". As Fauconnier and Turner point out, "an integration is the product of a mental network within which structure from input mental space is projected to a separate, 'blended' mental space" (1993:133). Mental spaces can be thought of as temporary containers for the relevant information about a particular domain. Spaces are structured by *elements* that represent each of the discourse entities and the simple frames to represent the relationships that exist between them. In order to understand medieval literature, analogy provides a useful strategy in order to overcome the limits of our historical and cultural constraints.

## **A Game of Thrones**

The text world of **A Game of Thrones** (1996 ) consists of the Land of Westeros which is made up of 7 kingdoms, of which detailed maps are provided in the novel, AGOT. AGOT primarily deals with the four houses: Baratheon, Targaeryn, Lannister and Stark with their own sigils: Stag, Dragon, Lion and Direwolf. Each house also has its own motto. The two prominent ones are: **winter is coming** belonging to the House of Stark and the second one is: **The lion roars**, belonging to the house of Lannisters. The House of Targaryen is defeated by Robert Baratheon who ascends the Iron Throne at King's Landing and gains control of Westeros. The novel is about Eddard Stark who is the lord of Winterfell; his wife, Catelyn; sons Robb, Bran and Rickon; daughters Sansa and Arya Stark and bastard son, Jon Snow. Robert Baratheon appoints his childhood friend and confidante, Eddard Stark, as his 'Hand'. Robert's wife Cersei belongs to the House of Lannister and has an incestuous relationship with her brother, Jaime Lannister, the Kingslayer. It is assumed that all her children are born from this relationship. Cersei and Jaime Lannister's younger brother Tyrion, a dwarf, is treated with disdain by his two more beautiful siblings. Tyrion Lannister and Jon Snow strike up a friendship and have mutual respect for each other. Daenerys Targaryen, the daughter of the overthrown king Aerys

Targaryen, is married to Khal Drogo by her brother, Viserys, in the hope that Khal Drogo will give him 10 000 soldiers who can fight for him and thus reclaim his throne.

The most important character in the novel is Eddard Stark for whom family, duty and honour are an inherent part of his nature. He is the one who discovers that the queen Cersei has had an illicit relationship with her brother and the children born from this relationship are proclaimed as her husband's children and proper heirs to the throne. When Eddard Stark reveals his plan to inform Robert Baratheon about this, he is killed, setting off a chain of events which stretch over the next five novels.

Thus we can see that AGOT is a political novel in some sense with the struggle for power being the central theme of the novel. With politics comes intrigue and conspiracy. But at the same time, it must be noted that AGOT is a fantasy novel. The fantasy element forms the subtext of the novel and lurks in the margins. We hear of "the Others", the aurochs, the dragons; but these beings belong to the past and to mythology. It is the human drama that gets foregrounded in the novel combining the medieval with the modern to create a fantasy world.

The concept of blending is crucial to the analysis of the text and game version of AGOT and it works at multiple levels. For the purposes of my paper and due to the constraints of length, I will focus on the use of two metaphors in the novel and they are: The Hand and, Ice and Fire (together). Secondly, I will examine the medieval tropes used in the novel which help to build the fantasy world with a view to linking it to the game version of the novel.

### **The HAND**

Robert Baratheon, the king of Westeros travels to Winterfell to appoint his childhood friend and companion, Eddard Stark, the lord of Winterfell as THE HAND of the king. In the novel the concept of THE HAND can be understood through a process of blending.

Generic meaning of hand: an important and useful part of the body	
Source domain: Hand	Target domain: Executive function performed by the person appointed by the king
Specific meaning: Eddard Stark	

Metaphorically, THE HAND represents the person performing the executive function of governance as assigned by the king; the literal meaning is that the hand of any person, especially a king, is an important limb/part of his body. We talk about somebody being the "right hand" of a person, meaning that this "right hand" is completely reliable and in control. Drawing from semiotics (C.S. Pierce: 1994), THE HAND in its metaphoric sense is *iconic*. However, THE HAND can also be read metonymically in the text as substitution of one linguistic sign for another linguistic sign, in which case, it performs an indexical function. The metaphoric and metonymic meaning of THE HAND in essence provides an elaboration of Eddard Stark's main function in the novel. It is interesting to note that diacritically this is signalled by the use of capitalisation in the novel. There are other capitalisations; Martins introduces several such examples to create the fantasy world, but significantly, they are literal and not metaphorical: The WALL, The SOUTHRON, THE NIGHTWATCH, THE KINGSLAYER, THE LITTLEFINGER and so forth. For example, The WALL is the one that protects the Southron states from the cold north and the people who man THE WALL form THE NIGHTWATCH. These men wear black and are expected to give up all desires to have normal relationships with women and with their families. They live in splendid isolation, having committed their lives to the protection of the realm and King's Landing, which is the seat of the Iron Throne.

The other metaphor used extensively in AGOT is ICE and FIRE which plays a significant role in the symbolism and is the megametaphor in the novel. It must be noted that **A Game of Thrones** is the first novel of the series entitled "A Song of Ice and Fire". Even though it is the first novel, ice and fire figure prominently in the novel. But it must be pointed out that Ice is not really described or mentioned, rather it is the cold that acquires a life-like quality. In AGOT, the seasons last for a decade and children are described as being a summer child or a winter child. Eddard Stark is the lord of Winterfell which is the colder northern region of the land of the Westeros.

Let us take the following passages:

*It was the cold. It steals up on you quieter than Will, and at first you shiver and your teeth chatter and you stamp your feet and you dream of mulled wine and nice hot fires. It burns, it does. Then it gets cold inside you and starts to fill you up, and after a while you don't have the strength to fight it. It is easier to just to sit down or go to sleep. They say you don't feel any pain in the end. First you go weak and drowsy, and everything starts to fade and then it's like sinking into a sea of warm milk. Peaceful like (AGOT:4).*

*She has sensed the truth of it long ago, Dany thought as she took a step closer to the*

*conflagration, but the brazier had not been hot enough. The flames writhed before her like the women who danced at her wedding, whirling and singing and spinning their yellow and crimson veils fearsome to behold, yet lovely, so lovely, so alive with the heat. ...Another step, and Dany could feel the heat of the sand on the soles of her feet, even through her sandals. Sweat ran down her thighs and between her breasts and in rivulets over her cheeks where tears had once run....The flames were so beautiful, the loveliest thing that she had ever seen, each one a sorcerer robed in yellow and orange and scarlet, swirling long smoky cloaks. She saw crimson, fire lions and great yellow serpents and unicorns made of pale blue flame; she saw fish and foxes and monsters, wolves and bright birds and flowering trees, each more beautiful than the last....(AGOT:779)*

Both cold and fire are described metaphorically in the two passages given above. The first passage occurs at the beginning of the novel, whereas the novel ends with Dany submitting herself to the flames as described at the end. The cold is associated with something monstrous. It is a creature that creeps up to you and kills you. Throughout the novel cold is associated with the House of Stark. Littlefinger says: "Here in the South they say, you are all made of ice" (p, 186). Whereas fire is associated with beauty; it is colourful and it reminds Dany of happier times when she was getting married. Even though it scorches, it does not burn her. The novel ends with the fire actually causing the three dragon eggs to burst and Dany emerging victorious from the fire.

The novel, AGOT, which is an absorbing combination of the mythic, the historical and intensely personal lends itself to be developed as a game precisely because several chapters are laid out in the form of an adventure, an exploration, a battle between good and evil, which are both gaming tropes and fantasy novel tropes. While the novel is epic in scope, about dynastic struggle and magnificent in its creation, it is at the same time entirely believable. Thus, it lends itself to being adapted to a game format. It depicts the brutality of the medieval times without sacrificing the human tragedy that unfolds through the actions of the main characters. The fantasy world is created through medieval tropes, which form the building blocks of this text world. Some examples of tropes are the following:

1. Kingdoms: 7 form the land of the Westeros. In AGOT, the 4 main houses are: Targaeryn, Baratheon, Stark and Lannister.
2. Struggle for power and control over the Iron Throne: AGOT begins with Robert Baratheon ascending the Iron Throne after overthrowing Arryn Targaeryn, the Mad king, to bring peace and prosperity to all in the land.

3. Different houses that are involved in this fight: The novel ends with the House of Lannister and House of Stark at loggerheads with each other.
4. Sigil: Sigil comes from the Latin word 'sigillum' meaning seal. In medieval ceremonial magic, the sigil is an occult sign used to represent angels or demons. The modern usage of sigil is derived from traditional lore. The 'hypersigil' develops the sigil concept beyond the static concept and incorporates elements of characterisation, drama and plot. Morrison (2003) points out that "the hypersigil is an immensely powerful and sometimes dangerous method for actually altering reality with intent. The results can be remarkable and shocking". The different sigils for the houses are given as the following: House Of Targaeryn: Dragons; House of Baratheon: Stag; House of Stark: Direwolf and House of Lannister: Lion. It is interesting to note that Martins blends the ancient meaning of Sigil with the modern concept creating a blended space which has new meaning and new identity. Each house acquires the attributes of the animals and the creatures, in turn, represent the actual, inherent attributes of the house. Further, each house has a banner with its sigil on it. In the first chapter of the AGOT, the man of the Nightwatch finds a direwolf which has been gored to death by a stag and she has littered. The five wolf cubs are given to Eddard Stark for his five children. The sixth wolf cub is later found and adopted by Jon Snow, Eddard Stark's bastard son and this cub is completely white as snow. The six wolf cubs are constant companions of the Stark children and they also protect the children. Bran, Eddard Stark's son, who is comatose having been pushed off the ledge by Jaime Lannister who wants him dead because he is a witness to the incestuous coupling of him and his sister, the Queen Cersei, breathes better when his wolf cub is just outside his window and it also protects him when an assassin enters his chamber to kill him. Because AGOT is a fantasy world, the wolves are not just animals, they acquire qualities of their respective owners: Lady, who is owned by Eddard Stark's first daughter, Sansa is delicate, feminine and small; she is killed later on in the novel, thus signifying the death of Sansa's hope; Nymeria, Eddard's second daughter Arya's wolf cub who is driven away by her so that she will not be killed by the knights of Robert Baratheon's court wanders around just as Arya does later in the novel, even though she is the daughter of one of the most powerful houses in Westeros. But the most spectacular and powerful manifestation of the sigil is at the end of the novel when Dany, the wife of Khal Drogo and daughter of Arryn Targaeryn, the true king of Westeros, takes her three dragon eggs into the funeral pyre of her husband and emerges from it victorious and alive with three baby dragons suckling at her breasts.



5. Coat of arms: Each house has its own coat of arms with the sigil on it. All of these are found in the game version of SIFRP (Song of Ice and Fire Role Playing).
6. Mottos: Each house has its own Motto. For the House of Stark, it is: "Winter is coming". This particular motto is repeated several times in the novel. As it gets repeated by the different characters, such as Eddard Stark, Catelyn Stark, Arya and Bran Stark, it moves from being a simple statement of a fact to a warning, a threat, a protective prayer depending upon who states it. When Eddard mentions it, he is stating a fact. When Catelyn Stark, his wife mentions it, it is a warning to her children that they must be prepared for the hard times. When it is mentioned by three eyed crow in Bran's dream, it is a threat and lastly, when Arya Stark utters it, she is telling herself to be brave and therefore it is a protective prayer. Since AGOT is about the Stark family mainly, the motto is significant.

Espen Aarseth (1997:93) points out that in hypertext or text based adventure games the author no longer controls the narrative and the reader no longer identifies with the narratee. In printed texts the spatial patterns remain implicit and may or may not be noticed, but in an online game or board game, the hyperlinks attract the reader's attention and force her to connect them into meaningful units. Literary texts are generally opaque and ambiguous, and literariness is manifest through the creation of such tropes, but in a board game there is a clear goal and end towards which all players focus. Fantasy fiction lends itself best to online games because of the creation of the virtual world which has a close correspondence with a text world. There are common elements in the two worlds: firstly, they are detailed: such as the location (maps), sigils, banners, characters with their psychological and mental strengths and weaknesses, their armoury, their costumes etc are given in all its richness. Whereas the computer games are created with a view to solving a problem or finding a solution, such as the hero being given a mission to kill the dragon and bringing back the treasure (as in Propp's fairy tales), creating a narrative is not a part of the game. It must be noted however, that in the process of succeeding in the game, multiple narratives get created, but that is not the point of the game. Digital games provide an opportunity for players to create an infinite number of stories. For many, becoming a character in the story is the ultimate narrative experience. The flat character in the narrative can be an active character who is interested in exploring the world, solving problems, performing actions and competing against enemies.

In a *role-playing game*, the players take the roles of characters in an adventure story. One of the players, called the *Narrator*, takes on the job of starting the story and telling the others about the situations the characters find themselves in.

The players decide what their characters do, and the game rules determine what moves they can make in order to win. The Narrator then moves the story along by describing what happens next, and so forth. As the game unfolds, the players detail an entire story involving the characters, like the chapters of a novel or the episodes of a television series.

***A Song of Ice and Fire Roleplaying*** (or *SIFRP* for short) is a game based on the best-selling fantasy series by George R. R. Martin, a sweeping epic of war and the struggle for political power and survival set in the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros. In this world, seasons last for years, not months, and family generations can be traced back for thousands of years to the Age of Heroes. Ancestral weapons may be worth more than a lordling's only daughter, and castles may have flown a score of banners in their storied histories. Magic lives mostly in the myths and faded dreams of earlier generations. The learned maesters say it died out a lifetime ago, with the last of the dragons, but others say it still exists amongst the *maegi* and warlocks of the exotic eastern lands. ***A Song of Ice and Fire Roleplaying*** is about Machiavellian court politics, family alliances and enmities, the rise and fall of kingdoms, and the clash of armies, but it is also about honor and duty, family, the responsibilities of leadership, love and loss; tournaments, murders, conspiracies, prophecies, dreams, war, great victories, and terrible defeats. It's about knights, both false and true... and it's about dragons.

## **Conclusion**

Martin's series, ***A Song of Ice and Fire*** is a modern day epic with all the elements of fantasy woven into it. The spectacular reception of the TV series has engendered many discussion fora for a viewer devoted to the series. There are websites which discuss, for instance, the parentage of Jon Snow, who is the bastard son of Eddard Stark. Because it is an adult fantasy, there is no guarantee that good will overcome evil and that good characters will not be killed. Many participants in the interactive groups discussions fora try to predict the outcome of the series and express their opinions regarding the unfolding of the plot very strongly and vociferously. Since the sixth novel in the series is not out as yet, most participants eagerly await its publication. As long as Martin keeps writing we may look forward to many more discussions about fantasy novels. In doing so we are creating new narratives and this can be called the true post-modern condition.

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