

Wolfe's Attitude toward his Readers

The Urth list — 24 messages, 9 voices, 14 Aug 2010

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5712>

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Jack Smith — 14 Aug 2010, 01:12

Lee Berman wrote:

And I suspect that you, David, like me, don't trust Gene

Wolfe further than we can throw him. This is an important difference which creates different interpretations. I detect that Gene wolfe (interviews answers to the contrary aside) has a real streak of disdain for his readers. I actually think there is a conflict set up between reader and writer and, unlike some authors, Gene wolfe really doesn't want us ever to fully win.

I say disdain because we are treated like dogs. That's what people do with dogs and a ball. They say, "here's the ball, doggie" then misdirect the poor creature, "over here, no here, no, here" and the poor dog's nose gets distracted in the feinted new direction over and over again. Perhaps Wolfe is trying to tell his readers to not get distracted like a dog. The bastard.

This is interesting. I can see how someone might feel Wolfe has disdain for his readers, but I don't think that's correct. Instead, I think Wolfe tries--through unreliable narrators and puzzles and ambiguity and lack of information and narrative holes--to produce in his writings the experience we get in real life. In our own lives, we can never be completely sure of the truth or people around us or ourselves. So our author gives us partial views and conflicting information and incomplete information.

I don't think there is necessarily one right interpretation to most of the works, especially the longer ones. I'm not convinced that all the mysteries and puzzles in Wolfe have definite answers. We're often supposed to be puzzled and we can't be sure we've figured a book out, just as we can't be sure we've figured life out.

Best wishes,
Jack

Lee Berman — 14 Aug 2010, 02:21 · follows Jack Smith

Jack Smith:

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views and conflicting information and incomplete information.

I admit to a penchant for the provocative and theatrical, especially online. I hope I am not undercutting your post by mentioning that I did soften this assertion in a more recent post by suggesting perhaps Wolfe has disdain for first time readers but has a soft spot for those who go on to re-read.

An interesting thought about our real lives and ourselves. I feel pretty comfortable and trusting in most aspects of my life and myself. I'm far more trusting in my real life than I am reading a Gene Wolfe book. But I know there are some who seeth with paranoia and mistrust beneath their surface. Could Mr. Wolfe have a streak of this beneath his genial exterior? I think most great artists require great inspiration for their work.

I don't think there is necessarily one right interpretation to most of the works, especially the longer ones. I'm not convinced that all the mysteries and puzzles in Wolfe have definite answers. We're often supposed to be puzzled and we can't be sure we've figured a book out, just as we can't be sure we've figured life out.

I generally agree with this. I think Wolfe has said as much in interviews..that sometimes we readers are meant to conclude that there is no solution to a suggested mystery in his works. Yet, still, I have found some very subtle answers to puzzles which suggest there is some stuff still hidden that we have yet to uncover.

My current favorite glaring example is the grouped sequence of numbers on the Seal of Pas in the Long Sun story. In 16 years I am not aware that anyone has made progress on solving the significance of it. But the intentionally unique grouping and organization of these numbers within the text suggest they do have a solution. I will admit that if I somehow learned (impossible unless Gene Wolfe tells us, of course) that there is no solution to this puzzle, I might be forced to consider that he has some disdain even for his multiple-reading fans.

Gerry Quinn — 14 Aug 2010, 12:10 · in reply to Lee Berman

From: "Lee Berman" <severiansola at hotmail.com>

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has some disdain even for his multiple-reading fans.

I posted on this before: I suggested that the apparent low entropy of the numbers may be in order to add verisimilitude without implying any specific meaning assigned in the text. Indeed this seems the most likely thing to me. I don't see that it involves disdain for readers, even if it does permit some readers to chase nonexistent hares. It's not as if he hints that there's some secret significance to the reader in them.

I think the numbers are supposed to indicate something about the contents of the vault to those with an appropriate key, but there is no hint that the key exists.

"Ora faltig teru dres, ent oru klen rebalen tafu." That looks like a sentence in a foreign language (either originating in or transcribed into the Latin alphabet). It is not entirely random: I made it to seem pronounceable and have a plausible distribution of word lengths etc., even an echo between 'ora' and 'oru'. But it means nothing! I wrote it and I didn't intend it to mean anything, or have any idea of what it might mean. But I intended it to look plausibly like a meaningful sentence in a real but unknown language. If I had occasion to write a story in which the narrator hears a snatch of alien speech, I could use it or a similar sentence.

- Gerry Quinn

Jeff Wilson — 14 Aug 2010, 12:47 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On 8/14/2010 7:10 AM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

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Which is it?

I mean, it can't have zero meaning if it reflects your opinion of what lexical characteristics are believable by excluding sequences that fail to convey that sense. This includes all kinds of contextual information about Indo-European roots and human cognition.

The above "dres" is a fine candidate for "three", for instance. If you had plenty of time on your hands and a sufficient command of what had been actually used as words at some point, you could construct a notional language that included the above phrase that would regardless be as detailed and meaningful as a natural one. Speak friend, and enter!

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

Gerry Quinn — 14 Aug 2010, 13:43 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

From: "Jeff Wilson" <jwilson at io.com>

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It doesn't have 'zero meaning' in the sense you are using it here - but the same can be said of the numbers on Pas's seal, which may reflect Wolfe's knowledge about bar codes on groceries, or something equally irrelevant to the Long Sun Whorl. It is my belief that the codes on the seal have no decipherable meaning that adds to our knowledge of that Whorl.

I can assure you that 'dres' was never intended to mean 'three'; I never thought of that. At the time I made the sentence, I wrote down fairly random 'words', certainly using my feel for languages with Indo-European roots.. Afterwards as I modified them it may be that I imposed some subtle and tentative structure: 'Ora' and 'oru' might indicate two alternatives; 'ent' may be a conjunction such as 'and' or 'but'; the sentence may represent a proverb of some kind. These are my guesses, and nobody is better placed than I to guess! But I still don't know. The sentence has no particular meaning in the sense of a concrete statement about a fictitious world.

- Gerry Quinn

Lee Berman — 14 Aug 2010, 14:00 · follows Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn-

I posted on this before: I suggested that the apparent low entropy of the numbers may be in order to add verisimilitude without implying any specific meaning assigned in the text.

I'm sorry Gerry, I don't understand what you mean by "low entropy of the numbers. Could you explain?

"Ora faltig teru dres, ent oru klen rebalen tafru." That looks like a sentence in a foreign language (either originating in or transcribed into the Latin alphabet). It is not entirely random: I made it to seem pronounceable and have a plausible distribution of word lengths etc., even an echo between 'ora' and 'oru'. But it means nothing!

I must confess that I am one who becomes quickly annoyed by authors who invent alien languages for their text (yes, even you, J.R.R., though you are redeemed a bit by basing Elvish on Suomi (Finnish)). One of my true pleasures in reading Gene Wolfe is that he instead takes pains to use extant words (albeit sometimes nearly extinct words).

If Wolfe wants to depict an undecipherable word he does not tend use our alphabet to do so. He finds a way to describe the undecipherable symbol with color and/or shape and/or descriptors like "gnostic" or "terratoid".

As an engineer, I assume Gene Wolfe finds numbers to be almost as important, symbolically, as letters. I would be unpleasantly surprised to learn he has invented a fake paragraph of numbers when he is so averse to doing that same thing to words.

Gerry Quinn — 14 Aug 2010, 14:15 · in reply to Lee Berman

From: "Lee Berman" <severiansola at hotmail.com>

Gerry Quinn-

I posted on this before: I suggested that the apparent low entropy of the numbers may be in order to add verisimilitude without implying any specific meaning assigned in the text.

I'm sorry Gerry, I don't understand what you mean by "low entropy of the numbers. Could you explain?

You can think of it as jargon for "not random". They are plainly not a completely random string of digits. A random string would have maximum entropy. There are ways of quantifying the relative degree of disorder; somebody posted on it previously.

"Ora faltig teru dres, ent oru klen rebalen tafru." That looks like a sentence in a foreign language (either originating in or transcribed into the Latin alphabet). It is not entirely random: I made it to seem pronounceable and have a plausible distribution of word lengths etc., even an echo between 'ora' and 'oru'. But it means nothing!

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But again - verisimilitude! Would Pas's engineers and quartermasters have used strings of numbers, or a panoply of teratoid icons? I expect that somewhere in Mainframe is a big list of what all vaults on the Whorl originally contained, indexed by number. In a more controlled disembarkation, instructions would be passed down regarding which were to be opened.

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Lee Berman — 14 Aug 2010, 18:41 · follows Gerry Quinn

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Gerry, thanks for the entropy explanation. I understand what you mean.

Still having trouble with your verisimilitude. We understand that Wolfe shows us certain symbols that Severian or Silk is incapable of understanding. My gut feeling is still that if Wolfe wanted to depict a number sequence that WE also cannot understand then he would describe it that way:

"He saw the Seal of Pas and it had a block of incomprehensibly organized numbers". From this description we just as easily can figure out they are vault container index numbers or whatever.

By actually giving us the numbers, organized in sequence, I feel Wolfe is expecting us to be able to figure them out, even if Silk can't. In similar fashion I don't think Severian really knows what teratoid or gnostic symbols are. But WE can interpret that they mean there is something akin to monsters in Father Inire's wing of the House Absolute and that Witches deal in mysterious, arcane knowledge. If he called the symbols an ankh or a swastika, I think we would be expected to come to different conclusions.

As the numbers are organized into 9 groups of four digits, and each group of four digits adds up to a number which is less than 27, my best guess is that it is a cryptogram. Perhaps it lists the initials of the 9 gods of the Whorl. Perhaps the cryptogram solves to the 9 letters- Typhon-Pas. Or perhaps it spells out the 9 letter name of the true monarch and creator of the Whorl, GENE WOLFE. We need more hidden wolves in Long Sun, don't we?

But since I can't figure out a cryptogram from it that makes any of these work, I must defer to your explanation as the best working hypothesis we have going (that I know of).

5553 8783 4223 9700 34
2221 0401 1101 7276 56
SEALED FOR THE MONARCH

Jack Smith — 14 Aug 2010, 19:02 · in reply to Lee Berman

I agree. Wolfe includes these specific numbers for some reason. A lesser sci-fi author might just include meaningless digits, but Wolfe, I'm sure, has some meaning in mind.

Someone originated the idea that the numbers are codes that specify what is in each store room. The fact that one number is "0401" indicates that this is a code rather than a quantity.

If we had more examples, this puzzle would be easier to figure out. But I think we're supposed to be able to decipher the code what the little we're given. The numbers must somehow specify people stored in glass bottles.
But I can't make any sense of them.

On Sat, Aug 14, 2010 at 2:41 PM, Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com> wrote:

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Gwern Branwen — 14 Aug 2010, 20:14 · in reply to Lee Berman

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I would like to be be 'Gene Wolfe' (he is the true monarch of the books, after all!), but if that's the solution, the cipher must be fairly complex - not a straight substitution. Notice that 'Gene Wolfe' has 3 'e's in it, while there's not a single repeated 4 or 2-digit group.

Staring, I don't see any interesting regularities. There is one repetition in the sum of each group: [18,26,11,16,7,7,5,3,22,21]. mod 10 doesn't show anything interesting: [8,6,1,6,7,7,5,3,2,1]. mod 2: [0,0,1,0,1,1,1,1,0,1]. If we drop the 2 2-digit groups to get 00101110, that's an ASCII '-', decimal 046, octal 056, and hex 02E.

Each group begins with a different number, covering 0-9 except for 6 - which has bad connotations religiously, of course. As for end-digits, the 3x2 grid on the left all end in odd numbers - 3 or 1, while the 2x2 block on the right ends in the even numbers 0, 4, 6. But there is so little to go on that this could just be numerology.

gwern

António Pedro Marques — 14 Aug 2010, 20:52 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

Gwern Branwen wrote:
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The last columns look like check digits, but there's an infinite way those could be computed.... 3 to 5 is 2, 4 to 6 is 2, but who can guess what that means.

The first 3 columns all end in 3 above, 1 below. Chopping that out, the first two at least show symmetry - 555/222, 878/040.

I doubt we'll get anywhere from the numbers alone. Though if there is something there to be found, I'd expect it not to be brutally hard. It needs to be hard enough for the passer-by. What do we have different from them that should make it easier to us?

Why is it sealed for the *monarch*? Is the monarch expected to be moving around depot rooms? And how come monarch? He's posing as a god, and his god personality isn't supposed to visit the room, or is it?

António Pedro Marques — 15 Aug 2010, 01:31 · in reply to Lee Berman

Lee Berman wrote:

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I don't think so. It's just that in your life and yourself you've immersed in context. You automagically do all the corrections and substitutions and inferences and what not, so you don't notice it. Wolfe has the rare ability to see through it and presents the reader with unfamiliar settings where all such corrections are filtered out.

Gerry Quinn — 15 Aug 2010, 10:03 · in reply to Lee Berman

From: "Lee Berman" <severiansola at hotmail.com>

Gerry Quinn- But again - verisimilitude! Would Pas's engineers and quartermasters have used strings of numbers, or a panoply of teratoid icons? I expect that somewhere in Mainframe is a big list of what all vaults on the Whorl originally contained, indexed by number. In a more controlled disembarkation, instructions would be passed down regarding which were to be opened.

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But that raises a question. Suppose we convincingly solved such a cryptogram. Now, how do we explain the fact of that particular vault under Viron having a number with this secret meaning?

I think that we cannot, just because Wolfe is the author, assume that some elements of a story are not merely 'colour'. It would be very restrictive for Wolfe. Every time a character booked a hotel room, Wolfe would be constrained from saying "he was given the key to room 167", for fear that readers would waste time searching for some numerological clue.

- Gerry Quinn

Lee Berman — 15 Aug 2010, 10:59 · follows Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn: But that raises a question. Suppose we convincingly solved such a cryptogram. Now, how do we explain the fact of that particular vault under Viron having a number with this secret meaning?

I don't think we have to. In my opinion Gene Wolfe sometimes puts little "in-jokes" into his text which by-pass the characters and go straight from author to reader.

James' Bee as a *"*hymen*optera*" reference might be an example. We cannot expect that residents of the Whorl are using linnaean taxonomy...but we and Wolfe do. And that shared understanding could work without any need for the characters to understand

One of my favorites is in Short Sun. Horn asks the woman on his boat her name and she tells him something incomprehensible. So he decides to give her the plant name which most resembles what she said, Seawrack.

She cannot be speaking English, but Wolfe does and we do. So, if it was an English word she had spoken, which would be closest in sound/spelling to Seawrack?

To me, it is "shipwreck". Later we find that she is a siren and her very purpose for existence is to cause shipwrecks. Again, in my opinion, a wordplay that only author and reader can understand, not the characters.

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For me, #167 could be color.

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is probably not. But such things are an individualized intuition. Some might feel wolfe would never by-pass his characters with an in-joke to his readers.

António Marques — 15 Aug 2010, 13:25 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn wrote:

From: "Lee Berman" <severiansola at hotmail.com>
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It would be breaching the 4th wall. One needs a little fun every now and then.

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Though I also think that the significance of some or even many details can't be determined from
the text, and will never be. I mean, lesser authors sprinkle their stories with random detail (if
they do at all). But in Wolfe's case (as in many other good authors') I fully expect there to be
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James Wynn — 15 Aug 2010, 14:41 · in reply to Lee Berman

Lee Berman-

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that shared understanding could work without any need for the characters to understand

I think Viron must use linnaean taxonomy or a close cognate of it. At least is an old system that
was employed by the Whorl imagineers of Vironese culture in the same way that the old
writings of the Chrasmolological Writings were dredge up willy-nilly. But you're right about the
in-jokes. Auk's brother's name is Bustard. Auks and bustards are not closely related. But there is
a Great Auk and a Great Bustard, both flightless, and both recently extinct.

u+16b9

Gerry Quinn — 15 Aug 2010, 14:54 · in reply to António Marques

From: "António Marques" <antonio at gmail.com>

Gerry Quinn wrote:

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Writing it would be breaching the 4th wall, surely? Of course, Wolfe does that sometimes, but
he does not do it often.

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You have to stop somewhere. If Wolfe writes "Three uhlans galloped towards us", must we attempt to decipher the mystical significance of the number three, or just admit that an uhlan patrol must be made up of some number of uhlans, and the narrator might instinctively count them?

- Gerry Quinn

António Pedro Marques — 15 Aug 2010, 15:21 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn wrote:

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Sorry, my 'would' wasn't meant to use the conclusion to cast doubt on the interpretation, it's just that we're discussing a hypothesis.

Of course, Wolfe does that sometimes, but he does not do it often.

If you do it often, it devolves into comedy.

You have to stop somewhere. If Wolfe writes "Three uhlans galloped towards us", must we attempt to decipher the mystical significance of the number three, or just admit that an uhlan patrol must be made up of some number of uhlans, and the narrator might instinctively count them?

You have to stop somewhere. I don't think details are ever insignificant, but sometimes their significance is only in themselves and there is not point in looking beyond. E.g. the fact that they were 3 means they were 3. Not 2 and a half or 3.14, but 3.

Jeff Wilson — 15 Aug 2010, 19:50 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On 8/15/2010 5:03 AM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

I think that we cannot, just because Wolfe is the author, assume that some elements of a story are not merely 'colour'. It would be very restrictive for Wolfe. Every time a character booked a hotel room, Wolfe would be constrained from saying "he was given the key to room 167", for

fear that readers would waste time searching for some numerological clue.

This can be a valid complaint, but as far as I can tell, Wolfe *likes* this sort of restriction, and takes it as a challenge. How many of his characters does he go leave visibly anonymous? And then there's the whole doctor/death/island exercise.

Conversely, the specifics he does use almost always *are* important clues, like every proper name in every story he's ever written. The strings of digits are essentially the name for that storage area, and there's no reason that this one among all the other storage area numbers not given in the story shouldn't have the a special meaning the way that 666 Saltimbanque has a special meaning despite the zillions of other addresses not given in that story.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

David Stockhoff — 15 Aug 2010, 22:28 · in reply to Lee Berman

I tend to agree with this conclusion, granting that numbers are not words and may be deployed for different reasons. However, digging up and putting to work an ancient word is not analogous to creating a code out of numbers. In fact, one could argue that making up a code itself parallels making up a language, and therefore could be said to be something Wolfe does not do.

If the analogy holds up, this set of numbers already has a meaning outside the text.

Not much of a clue, I know.

Lee Berman wrote:

Gerry Quinn-

I posted on this before: I suggested that the apparent low entropy of the numbers may be in order to add verisimilitude without implying any specific meaning assigned in the text.

I'm sorry Gerry, I don't understand what you mean by "low entropy of the numbers. Could you explain?

"Ora faltig teru dres, ent oru klen rebalen tafu." That looks like a sentence in a foreign language (either originating in or transcribed into the Latin alphabet). It is not entirely random: I made it to seem pronounceable and have a plausible distribution of word lengths etc., even an echo between 'ora' and 'oru'. But it means nothing!

I must confess that I am one who becomes quickly annoyed by authors who invent alien languages for their text (yes, even you, J.R.R., though you are redeemed a bit by basing Elvish on Suomi (Finnish)). One of my true pleasures in reading Gene Wolfe is that he instead takes pains to use extant words (albeit sometimes nearly extinct words).

If Wolfe wants to depict an undecipherable word he does not tend use our alphabet to do so. He finds a way to describe the undecipherable symbol with color and/or shape and/or descriptors like "gnostic" or "terratoid".

As an engineer, I assume Gene Wolfe finds numbers to be almost as important, symbolically, as letters. I would be unpleasantly surprised to learn he has invented a fake paragraph of numbers when he is so averse to doing that same thing to words.

David Stockhoff — 16 Aug 2010, 00:19 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

Typhon was monarch. He built the Whorl.

António Pedro Marques wrote:

Gwern Branwen wrote:

5553 8783 4223 9700 34

2221 0401 1101 7276 56

SEALED FOR THE MONARCH

I would like to be 'Gene Wolfe' (he is the true monarch of the books, after all!), but if that's the solution, the cipher must be fairly complex - not a straight substitution. Notice that 'Gene Wolfe' has 3 'e's in it, while there's not a single repeated 4 or 2-digit group.

Staring, I don't see any interesting regularities. There is one repetition in the sum of each group: [18,26,11,16,7,7,5,3,22,21]. mod 10 doesn't show anything interesting: [8,6,1,6,7,7,5,3,2,1]. mod 2: [0,0,1,0,1,1,1,0,1]. If we drop the 2 2-digit groups to get 00101110, that's an ASCII '-', decimal 046, octal 056, and hex 02E.

Each group begins with a different number, covering 0-9 except for 6 - which has bad connotations religiously, of course. As for end-digits, the 3x2 grid on the left all end in odd numbers - 3 or 1, while the 2x2 block on the right ends in the even numbers 0, 4, 6. But there is so little to go on that this could just be numerology.

The last columns look like check digits, but there's an infinite way those could be computed.... 3 to 5 is 2, 4 to 6 is 2, but who can guess what that means.

The first 3 columns all end in 3 above, 1 below. Chopping that out, the first two at least show symmetry - 555/222, 878/040.

I doubt we'll get anywhere from the numbers alone. Though if there is something there to be found, I'd expect it not to be brutally hard. It needs to be hard enough for the passer-bys. What do we have different from them that should make it easier to us?

Why is it sealed for the *monarch*? Is the monarch expected to be moving around depot rooms? And how come monarch? He's posing as a god, and his god personality isn't supposed to visit the room, or is it?

António Pedro Marques — 16 Aug 2010, 00:40 · in reply to David Stockhoff

David Stockhoff wrote:

António Pedro Marques wrote:

Gwern Branwen wrote:

5553 8783 4223 9700 34

2221 0401 1101 7276 56

SEALED FOR THE MONARCH

Why is it sealed for the *monarch*? Is the monarch expected to be moving around depot rooms? And how come monarch? He's posing as a god, and his god personality isn't supposed to visit the room, or is it?

Typhon was monarch. He built the Whorl.

It's the seal of the god Pas, who created the Whorl,
not the seal of the monarch Typhon, who built the Whorl.

Thomas Bitterman — 16 Aug 2010, 13:46 · in reply to Lee Berman

On Fri, Aug 13, 2010 at 10:21 PM, Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com>wrote:

My current favorite glaring example is the grouped sequence of numbers on the Seal of Pas in the Long Sun story. In 16 years I am not aware that anyone has made progress on solving the significance of it.

I previously posted a description of how some blocks could be used as a checksum for others:
<http://lists.urth.net/pipermail/urth-urth.net/2010-July/016516.html>.

David Stockhoff — 17 Aug 2010, 00:54 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Room #167 provides information. Depending on the hotel, it might be a room on the ground floor or one up. That's basic information.

Gerry Quinn wrote:

From: "Ant?nio Marques" <antonio at gmail.com>
Gerry Quinn wrote:

But that raises a question. Suppose we convincingly solved such a cryptogram. Now, how do we explain the fact of that particular vault under Viron having a number with this secret meaning?

It would be breaching the 4th wall. One needs a little fun every now and then.

Writing it would be breaching the 4th wall, surely? Of course, Wolfe does that sometimes, but he does not do it often.

I think that we cannot, just because Wolfe is the author, assume that some elements of a story are not merely 'colour'. It would be very restrictive for Wolfe. Every time a character booked a hotel room, Wolfe would be constrained from saying "he was given the key to room 167", for fear that readers would waste time searching for some numerological clue.

But in fact I think Wolfe would merely say he was given the key to *a* room if the number had no significance. In real life, if the number had no significance, we'd probably just not mention it. Though I also think that the significance of some or even many details can't be determined from the text, and will never be. I mean, lesser authors sprinkle their stories with random detail (if they do at all). But in Wolfe's case (as in many other good authors') I fully expect there to be some embryo of significance there. Even if it may not never be developed anywhere else.

You have to stop somewhere. If Wolfe writes "Three uhlans galloped towards us", must we attempt to decipher the mystical significance of the number three, or just admit that an uhlan patrol must be made up of some number of uhlans, and the narrator might instinctively count them?

- Gerry Quinn
