Friends who have read the *Lord of the Rings* (I have not and have only seen the films) tell me that one thing they really like about the book is the whole world that is created by the author and the way that they are able to enter that world and get taken over by it. Jan Kooiman’s book aims to achieve the academic equivalent of the *Lord of the Rings* effect. It offers a world of governance comprehensively specified and described into which student and researcher can step. Let me say at the outset that the battle scenes aren’t nearly as good as those in the *Lord of the Rings*. Rarely does the analysis set your pulse, or for that matter your mind, racing. On the whole, I did not find it a helpful or useful world to absorb myself in.

There were some good and clearly expressed insights in the book. I accept that some may want to buy the whole package and become Kooiman fanatics to match the followers of Tolkien. The best thing I can do in this review is give you a summary account of the governance world according to Kooiman. This will enable readers to decide if they wish to join the fellowship in search of the nine rings of governance. I will then indicate why, in the end, it is not a world in which I intend to spend much time. For me, Kooiman’s book, rather like Tolkien’s, is going to remain admired from afar on the bookshelf.

The book is tasked with painting a grand canvass for the study of all forms of governing, but particularly those that involve interaction at the society-state interface. Social-political governance or interactive governance are the phrases used by Kooiman to describe his focus. The aim is not to offer theory but rather a broad conceptualization of the field. This approach is justified by, among other things, the state of flux and development in governance thinking. Although the book does not in practice offer much in the way of a comprehensive review of the literature, the perspectives of others are mentioned, noted, and examined to a degree but not subject to extensive, rigorous analysis. The key issue is whether they can be drawn into and made part of Kooiman’s overarching perspective.

Part 1 of the book sets the scene. Its substantive chapter deals with the concept of interaction, as that concept is seen as central to the governance perspective.
Interactions depend on processes influenced by the capacities of different actors and they take place in a structured environment, a context that can influence the outcomes of interactions. Intentions are not always realized by actors in their interactions, and as a result unintended consequences are commonly features of the way that governance works. Interactions are shaped by the context of complexity and diversity in which they take place. They break down into three types: interferences, interplays, and interventions. The first appears to be about common processes that dominate everyday exchanges in different settings. Interplays are searches for collective action that are horizontal; that is, they do not involve hierarchy. Interventions are about formalized attempts at directing the exchange process. Each of these types of interaction are a focus in the study of governance.

Part 2 of the book looks at some of the background processes of governance. First, there is a need to examine the images, assumptions, and convictions that people bring to any governance interaction. Governance requires a capacity for communication, and this can be through direct exchange or by way of mass media. Governance brings into play various elements of instrumentation. Instruments can be drawn from a reservoir of the familiar and known, or can be newly created. They can involve information management, organization maneuvers, or rule-driven interventions. Each has some strengths and weaknesses. Rule making, for example, can be subject to diminishing returns as they become too complex or cross-cutting, or are not followed. Instruments, in turn, are practiced in settings that affect their operation. Their purpose and focus can be shifted dynamically. They can apply across the whole of a policy field or be more specifically designed for purpose in order to meet the challenge of diversity. They can develop by trial and error in order to cope with conditions of complexity.

Actors are central to governance and offer a variety of roles. These include leadership embedded and practiced in different ways. But there is also much scope for governance to be affected by broad movements of opinion and interaction. A range of groups populate the governance world. A central task for governance performed by actors is coordination. There is a brief and underdeveloped discussion of the complexity of the challenge of coordination.

Part 3 continues the breathtaking pace as we enter a discussion of modes of governance. Self-governance refers to the capacity of people to govern themselves so that actors get together to frame their own collective solutions. There is a brief discussion of self-governance in practice. The case of governing the commons, explored by Ostrom in her work, is examined, but not in much depth. We are treated to the banal conclusion that her contribution is worthy of continuing attention. Co-governance is another mode, and it is about how groups cooperate on a horizontal axis. It includes various forms of collaboration, and stretches over network formation to the practical establishment of public-private partnerships and regimes. The final mode of governance is hierarchical governance, and here the focus is on the steering role of the state in respect to governance. As Kooiman notes, the state has shifted its pattern of steering away from direct legislative intervention and control to more subtle forms of regulation and oversight.

Part 4 of the book then offers a further set of distinctions. There is a look at first-order governance which is about the way that people go about meeting governance challenges on a daily basis. There is second governance, where the issue is about how
to design institutions to meet governance challenges. Finally, there is metagovernance, which is about the broad normative or principles bases that underpin various forms of governance and how they could be communicated and assessed. Governance models are judged according to their capacity to carry a set of principles.

Part 5 brings the book to a conclusion and begins to assess various aspects of governance discussed. Various modes of governance, for example, are assessed against whether they can deliver in the light of diversity, complexity, and dynamics. This discussion covers a lot of territory, but it takes the form more of notes toward a research project rather than a finalized or definitive statement. As the author notes at the end of the book, his conceptualization is part of an ongoing process.

So is the journey worth it? Well, for this reader I am afraid not. I think that it would be unfair to accuse Kooiman of not being able to see the forest for the trees. Indeed, at times it would have been far better if more detailed and careful analysis had been provided of some of the myriad issues that he throws out. But nothing is allowed more than two or three pages before a new discussion is introduced. Such a mapping exercise might be valuable if the sense of direction and signposting were clearer. The problem with Kooiman is that we can not see the paths through the forest, but merely get a bird’s eye view of a green canopy. We get the impression it is vast, that there is a lot going on down there, but we have no idea what to start looking at or how to do it.

Still, the book might have been rescued if nuggets of powerful new insight had emerged. But, I am sorry to say I missed them. The distinctions that are drawn are not particularly original or informative. The identification of three modes of governance in the book parallels that offered by Pierre and Peters in their *Governance, Politics and the State*. And incidentally, despite being published in 2000, there appears to be no reference to that book by Kooiman. Other distinctions and conceptual clarifications made in the book are not exactly earth shattering in their profoundness.

I am not convinced that the book works as a reference or review guide, either. The views and opinions of other authors are never really explored in depth. You get the impression that Kooiman has read a lot, but his main purpose has been to bash and mold the insights of others into his own world view. I will not be recommending the book to students that are looking for a quick way to catch up on the governance debate. This book is not a state of the art review, although in fairness I suspect it was never intended to be that.

Another reason I would be loath to recommend the book strongly to students is that the Kooiman mode of expression is not always crystal clear. For example, we are told on p. 170 that “[m]eta as third-order governance is of a different type. It folds back on theory and practice of governing and governance as such. Meta is like a an imaginary governor, teleported to a point ‘outside’ and holding the whole governance experience against a normative light.” This is not an isolated illustration of failure in a book of otherwise screaming clarity. You can get the thrust of what he is saying, which I think is that a concern with metagovernance is about the principles that underlie governance. But for most students the kind of language used by Kooiman will be off-putting. Nor do the grey boxes with little summary statements of how far we’ve gotten in the argument really help.

The book stops just when it starts getting interesting in the last two chapters. To be honest, I think that much of parts 1-4 could have been covered in a two-chapter
discussion setting out the terrain. This would have left a lot more time and space to develop some of the interesting ideas that are developed as the various parts are brought together in the beginning of a live analysis of governance.

There is much to admire in the scholarship and the attempted breadth of vision in Kooiman’s work. Here is a systematic thinker at work who builds up an infrastructure on which the study of governance could be developed. It offers a highly abstract discussion with little in the way of historical or empirical foundations. There is no consideration in depth about whether this concern is about governance in all countries or whether it is focused on the developed world. You get the impression that it is the latter that is largely in Kooiman’s mind, but it is not clearly spelled out.

In the end, this is Kooiman’s world and you either enter it or remain outside. I think I will be in the latter group, and I suspect so will most of my students and research colleagues. The book really does not engage, and as such it fails. Kooiman has taken a dramatic, exciting arena of social and political analysis and made it boring. I do not think that even if they make a good movie or two on the back of the book that the interest will return for me.

REFERENCE