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Interview

Pry as a Cinematic Novel: A conversation with Samantha Gorman

Pry is a narrative work for iPads and other mobile iOS devices. It is created by Samantha Gorman and Danny Cannizzaro. Part novel, part film, it is designed in portrait ratio and made for personal devices. This invites a private, readerly experience. The title is apt for this personal experience, as readers pry into the mind of a demolition expert named James, who is haunted by the recollections of his wartime military service. The title also refers to one of the many imaginative visual elements. Users pry apart the text. Between its lines they uncover images of James' fragmented memories. Other gestural elements involve braille and image manipulation. Gorman, the writer, also draws upon various literary techniques, such as automatic writing, which was a method developed in part by Andre Breton following his work with soldiers suffering from PTSD after World War One.

Q: How did *Pry* come together and how do we read it?

SAMANTHA GORMAN (SG): There are many angles to this question. I'm going to begin by talking about the writing process. I've recently reflected on my writing practice and where it exists at the intersection of avant-garde interests with current training and experience in the industry in LA and at USC. It takes screenwriting formulas I'm wrestling with such as the three-act plot structure and combines them with my writing practice which includes automatic writing and channeling. This means you have a structured narrative design in terms of how we were thinking the character would evolve and how acts would reoccur to build dramatic tension. In one of the first chapters you have the character experiencing sleep paralysis. The action is internal. In addition to that you have a third, buried space. It's a floating dream space that draws on automatic writing techniques. I try to get into that mind space, however I'm very conscious at the

same time. It's writing with a split consciousness because I have to be lost in the mind space while mentally cataloguing the ways that I'm going to tie the protagonist's thoughts back in later to another looping structure.

Q: You're writing for his unconscious ...

SG: Yes, but it's hard because those lines blur. The unconscious is consciously produced in the writing. In reality, consciousness is more of a spectrum. In *Pry*, tech and structure dictate a greater separation of spaces. Although, there are certainly places where we consciously break that separation. I was interested in this project for this challenge. Also, I've never written a long form fiction before, and that's something that I wanted to try. In the middle of the introductory chapter when the reader is introduced to one of the main characters, it's unclear which space the character belongs to at first: conscious or unconscious. This introduction leaves it hanging after a violent montage and hard cut. The next chapter jumps to the next day and begins with a calm scene. The new chapters we're releasing for the second act start with a recall to the first chapter, except it's a different character that comes in. This time the protagonist is very much aware that he is paralyzed and the inventor of his own sort of torment. At the start of the second act, the protagonist is more conscious of his unconscious, so the writing reflects that. Whereas before the writing was more abstract, this layer is more direct, even if it's still floating between those spaces. The third repeat of the paralysis sequence is the epilog. There is a time lapse which is mostly done in video. It's slightly sped up, but he's waiting in bed and no one ever comes. The day comes, and he gets up. But, there are no real interjections of the subconscious onto his outside world.

Q: How do you reconcile your different creative modes of automatic writing, video and multimedia production?

SG: It's a compromise. We'd write around the footage or shoot around the writing. This means that there were both "scripts" determining video shoots and automatic writing responses to footage we had shot spontaneously. Even the scripts, though, began with automatic writing, I would just write non-stop and try to edit that down, pare it down, pare it down more, and turn it into a list of film clips we'd have to shoot. Then, Danny and I would discuss the film clips, edit them and figure out how it could work, sometimes off the script, sometimes by the nature of the film, we'd shoot ad hoc. We put it together, and then I'd have to rewrite the script to account for both the final layout of media and the text. So, it was just constantly cycling.

Figure 5.1 Beginning *Pry* by Danny Cannizzaro and Samantha Gorman.

Q: And, it seems like you worked in some kind of randomization or found other ways to work with the clips that gave you a little a bit of freedom. Is that right?

SG: There is a chapter where memories filter in between text that can expand. The clip order isn't 100 percent random; it is pulled from a large branching engine we

devised. We're really interested in the illusion of the generative exploratory while still being very authored. So, there are moments in one of our chapters where the character is telling himself a story that he doesn't want to really acknowledge, and the user is sort of going along—we're calling it sympathetic gesture. They're inhabiting his mind space. Through their physical gestures, they manipulate the areas of his mind. A lot of the video sequences we do are very authored. For example, in a text that references Tetris, randomization, and game theory, the first video has planned extreme close-ups of Gameboy, but after that there are segments of different videos that have structured odds of following each preceding video, so it switches, and it just sort of goes off. It has carefully authored and crafted tangents, so it's both randomized and authored in some way. This question also speaks to a literal archive because this one chapter has forty-five minutes total of video below a surface that is archived as different clips with different weights and preferences.

Q: You said you wanted to peel away from the generative toward the authored—what's at stake there for you?

SG: I wanted to experiment with being able to sculpt and shape the experience of a reader where we're still bringing them a story but we're not really tipping our hand as to how constructed it is so, for the reader, it feels responsive and has a legitimately exploratory element. I guess when we talked about exploratory versus authored forms, we talked about them in terms of the users controlling the edits, but also when you're controlling the film and you're controlling the way it's laid out, it's like the edits are really time. How readers control time is the exploratory sense of the larger structure.

Q: So when you look further, it seems like there's an archive of memory and also an archive of desires, but desires and memories function differently, or how to touch them works differently. There's a kind of faith in the unconscious of certain memories, of certain trajectories.

SG: Right, and I think toward the end of the story it's more like you can't cleanly resolve that faith.

Q: I feel like you're making a case for new media offering a more complex form of authoring which on the one hand presents an experience that's driven by all the complexity of the unconscious, memory, desires and that includes chance and spontaneously created ideas, and on the other hand, a work that has a tightly constructed structural geography for the unconscious. So, what does that look like? What's the structure behind this? How are you sorting things?

SG: So I think what you're getting to is how we're creating the idea of his unconscious and how we're actually structuring it to be inhabitable (storywise/technically). This is like a thinking device, a thinking mind in the way you have to design and program it, and you're getting to the under layers of how we're doing that. In many chapters, I'm using the device of an anchor, an obsession, or a progression. An example of an anchoring moment can be found in the expanding text chapter. Each version begins with two lines of a scene. It is the most basic setup. The superficial story is the initial structure. This chapter is difficult because each time the reader pinches apart lines, new related text has to fill inside the gaps. To make things more complicated, everything in this chapter has to have an exact number of characters, so it's all handwritten and hand coded. It's like an extreme expression of writing in constraints, because it has to work within itself but also work with the other lines that will come inside it and in front of it. I take the idea, or anchor, of what the character would want to say (or not say) after each expansion, and then I freewrite that. Each addition needs to be aware of where it resides in the surrounding text. After I start with the rough outpouring, I would create the structure from that and then edit it down so that every line exactly fits. The next pass through, I would write between the lines of the new structure and add text into it. So each preceding stage becomes like a fresh template. I would keep a rough order of events that take place in the character's chronology from top to bottom to orient myself and use that as a grander template goal for the scene. The video also structures how things unfold because it informs the writing and, very practically, is a grab bag of what we have. We'd examine that grab bag for anchoring clips and then for other video clips and possible associative memories or possible moments that could match within those spaces and character intentions. We'd categorize every single video clip or memory the character could be thinking that we had footage of.

Q: And, what are the categories?

SG: These are first just raw source footage. After starting with the intention, we would assign them numbers and comments and try to figure out where they would fit in the structure: are they an anchor, a detail, what do they evoke?

Q: Did you use key words or color tone or content?

SG: Both color tone and content. There's like the whole aesthetic backend which is a separate but related thing to the content of the memory. They'd each have a code, and then from there we would go and decide what we were really keeping, what we wanted to emphasize, which reoccurring themes that this character

Figure 5.2 Screenshot from *Pry*.

would have. It sounds reductive to try to put someone's memories into five different categories. That's really hard to do. From this or that slice or moment in time, what are things we want to emphasize with the story? Then, we would pick a core memory that is associative to the text to be an anchoring stone. In Xcode, each of these core memories would have a rough list of things they could be associated with, and then any item in that list would have another rough list

of things that could be associated with it. Then we'd map the trails. These are the potential trails about this subject in B in A, and these are trails about this subject in B in B, and figure out how to interweave so that they fit within the text sections as well. To me it's really about revisiting something and having it cycle but as you revisit, things change and evolve. So, you're constantly caught in a series of cycles.

Q: Where does the change occur?

SG: It depends on the cycle. Sometimes it's really subtle, adding something in that you won't notice, other times it's abrupt and there's an abrupt switch depending on the moment I'm trying to highlight. The next stage goes from the flowchart to me actually going into an automatic writing stage and trying to jot out a script. The script is color-coded, the text in blue is what we're calling the Young Hae Chang with some of the flashing texts, and then the red is some of the dialogue, and then from that treatment of it, it goes into where I'm actually reducing it into simple cards or simple things the program will be able to recognize.

Q: Is that in spreadsheet form?

SG: We're doing everything in Google docs for record keeping and collaboration between us. We work together closely and are constantly going back and forth. The spreadsheet was really helpful for me but it wasn't as helpful for Danny. I had to do a different treatment for him, having it as a script, so that's where I'm translating everything.

Q: So, Danny working in code, actually writing in code, and you're actually writing in language: writing code and writing fiction. And, there is also the video. I'm wondering about the play between that. How do you navigate that pretty intense kind of collaboration?

SG: Well, we also talk about us being symbiotic in the way you're suggesting. It's important to note neither of us are formally trained in code—we're not from that world, so we've kind of come to it as artists. I used to be the programmer for our team so I know enough of it to be able to translate it into a structure that can be adapted. He a good writer, so he knows enough about the writing to decide, if well, this works narratively but we need to actually try to figure out how to reconcile that in the code. I think us having our feet in these different spaces makes it less hard than it would if one of us didn't. I've worked with other writers who have worked with programmers who have never crossed over before and it can be hard.

Figure 5.3 In some sections of *Pry*, users separate the text to reveal images.

Q: I wonder about various facets of the title, Pry. It relates to that image you always show of prying open the text which is also prying open his eyes so it's a metaphor for the haptic, and it's also a metaphor for intrusion, right? Prying into somebody. It's also one of these words that in English is the same word for the verb and the command—you're telling someone "pry," do it. Pry focuses us on interaction and the physical.

SG: Actually, we hate titling things, and Pry was on one of our first lists of titles. We had maybe 200 options for titles, and it was one of the very first things we

had. Four months later, we came back to it, and it felt right because it worked on all those levels that you were talking about. We felt like it was right because it encapsulates a lot in a short burst. There's a little bit of practicality in terms of how you have to release apps that also dictate title length. The thing that I think—so there's a sort of suggested criticism that's implied here—is in the space of the gimmick without privileging the narrative because there's so many ways that we're playing with text to show potential beyond the eBook.

Q: Yes, Pry suggests that's the thing, you know when I read the reviews, the reviews are all about the gimmick.

SG: Right, well it is designed for different types of readers due to the ecosystem that it exists in. This base narrative and time are sometimes a factor in reviews. There is a base level and a base story. However, there is a deeper, more concerted reading that I've also heard from critics that eventually clicks into place. The unlockable chapter, the "Album," also helps to tie everything together. We like subtleties and wrestling with what it is, but I really want to make sure there is a base layer of accessibility. Besides for the practical concerns, the decision to name it *Pry* was also because I felt like the whole process as a writer and as a reader is a sort of violence, a sort of forcing—you're asking someone to pry into this very intimate space.

Q: Can you explain that more because everyone doesn't necessarily describe writing and reading as violent.

SG: I think writing and reading are so violent (laughs). For me as a writer, it feels really hard.

Q: Like a violence on yourself?

SG: Violence on yourself, you're doing it but also a violence on—in some ways it's not just yourself but inscribing something, you're forcing upon the world, and you're also, you're making the reader try to reconcile, understand and generate their own meanings for what you're writing.

Q: Were there chapters or sequences that were harder to write in terms of how deep you had to dig, or the way you had to dig?

SG: The expanded text chapter in particular, it took four months every time ... we had to write it twice starting from scratch and each one took four months. It's gotten better but it's still not where I'd like it to be. I think there are definitely things I want to go back and revise. I think that's the hardest.

Q: Is the process hard also because of what's going on emotionally with the character in the story?

SG: It relates to that, because it's about voice. There are a lot of character voice changes in this chapter. That happens when something is written over a period of years and didn't initially go in some of the ways I wanted it to. This project has forced me to write more and become better at writing. By better writing, I have gotten to a place where I feel like this works for now. The "for now" is always the goal right?

Q: Traditionally, it's pretty rare for writers to watch people read their work, but it's much more common in theatre, film, and very common in gaming. Do you watch people read this, and could you talk about that experience?

SG: Oh yeah, sometimes they know I'm the writer, sometimes they don't. I honestly am intrigued by all reactions. At the 2015 GDC Conference Expo Floor, I watched 300 people read it in a day. It was actually helpful, because they assumed I was the booth manager. Many users were interested to talk to the person who made it, even if they didn't like it, just to get a sense of what it was like to make something like *Pry*. And, you get different reactions depending on the context. I was most surprised that in the game context many people read every word. Completionist gamers would try to find everything, and you would have to get them to leave because they would be sitting there for an hour with it. Because GDC is a game convention, I assumed that emphasis would be more on the gameplay and interface, but they were really interested in the narrative in a way that was surprising and rewarding.

Q: What have you learned from that about the goals of different readers, the goal of the film watcher, the goal of the literary reader, and the goal of the gamer?

SG: Well, it's very different in each context. Even within film, games, and literature, I think there are many different goals. The goal of the gamer is everything from a superficial read with the interactions to an achievement-based completionist reading. So far, the game audience seems to have the most diverse approaches. I think, when I talk to people in the storytelling industry in film and marketing, they are interested in the base narrative: story as having a "message" and arc. For writers, it's more about process. It's more about understanding how things are put together and interest in the text itself. It's more about looking at what does it mean to write for all the spaces inside the project, I think.

Figure 5.4 Screenshot from *Pry*.

Q: Did you envision an ideal reader or do you design elements for different kinds of readers?

SG: That's really hard. For our ideal reader, I think we always hoped *Pry* would reach a larger, general audience. This is so vague that we anticipated different types of readers: a surface reader that would get some sense of narrative, ideas, concepts and a deeper reader. We try to design for both. This crossover has happened to some extent, probably because of the way it's told, but we have seen that initial interest can be a bridge into wanting to actually read it. Our reviews on the app store, which I try not to look at too much, are pretty positive. We do

have the occasional wider audience free release. This is notorious for bringing reviews down. However, it actually helped, and we had 4.5 out of 5 stars! Though, you do get the occasional funny one. We had one “boring” with twenty letter o’s in it, which is actually my favorite review [laughs]. I kind of loved that. This is basically saying that we can try to anticipate an ideal reader, but the actual readers will always surprise you.

Q: How did making something aimed at a broad audience impact your approach to the technological design and interactivity? It seems very different from other works of yours which have been in CAVEs where only a few people can see them or your performance work?

SG: I think wider distribution interests us because we have interest in how the avant-garde intrudes into a larger culture. That sort of experiment is interesting to us more and more, but we still have the love of doing the strange, one-off installation.

Q: In terms of the industry and the future of the book, do you see your approach in Pry as something that’s repeatable and scalable?

SG: We really don’t feel like it is, or that there is any one “formula” for the future. In writing for digital media, you’re really focused on the materiality and the tools and how that really resonates with the texts, how it all works together to become the project or the art. Everything is hand-designed, hand-coded in order to get the feel. A lot of people in digital publishing have asked about it; they like the idea of making it into an editor or a platform. But, not every text is automatically suited for this. They assume you can re-skin it for something else, and that’s against the theory and the practice of the work.

Q: And you have been constrained by the app store?

SG: Actually, yes. It is a platform in many ways because you’ve got a whole set of constraints that are practical and that end up filtering into the artistic process when you’re an artist creating for the space.

Q: Given the multiple contexts for the work—readings and performances, gallery installations, gaming conventions, film festivals, does the work change meaning for you at all in each of those iterations?

SG: For me it’s very, very different. We actually don’t really prefer to be in a gallery. The ideal reading is a cozy fire armchair reading, but that’s not going

to always happen. I like to perform, but it's a very different project in that case. A lot of the times I perform *Pry* as more of an instrument that I sight read. At those moments, it returns back to some of what I'm channeling in the automatic writing that made it. I might know a rough trail through the performance, but a lot of things are beyond my control, and I have to flow with what happens and improve off of that. It becomes a different project when read in my voice, in how I articulate and move with it.