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Interview

The Generative Archive of *Encyclopedia*: A Conversation with Håkan Jonson and Johannes Helden

Johannes Helden and Håkan Jonson's generative digital Encyclopedia offers a unique kind of storytelling framed within the form of the library card catalog. It is a fictional work that imagines creatures past, present and future. It describes their features and dates of extinction. In their encyclopedia, like perhaps all encyclopedias, we encounter the fragility of species, cultures, and stories, all of which are fated to disappear. Their disappearance leaves nothing but scant details, silence, unreadability. The work addresses a disconnect between our technical capacity to account for, describe, and catalog species, including ourselves, and our inability to grasp the narrative consequences of the anthropocene, its mindsets, its institutions. The work has both a digital form, in which users follow the passage of strange creatures come and gone, and a printed form, as cards for a library card catalog. Helden and Håkan are artists from Sweden, and this work follows upon their previous collaboration, Evolution, which is a database-driven, procedural work addressing authorship and voice.

Q: How did the concept for your project begin?

HÅKAN JONSON (HJ): I think the original idea focused on ecology.

JOHANNES HELDEN (JH): ... the idea of creating a system that in turn would create fictional animals. As we discussed it further, we decided that the animals would already be extinct.

HJ: And there should be something fragile about every animal and species. To achieve the kind of historic or archival feeling we wanted, we realized that each species had to exist at a specific point in time—contrary to just creating a collection of species, so why not model time into the piece itself? Further, we thought about how to visualize a timeline and how to present it in a way that

would be interesting for people to interact with, and so came the idea of geo-positioning.

Q: How does that work, the geo-positioning?

HJ: When generating a species, we work with the categorized dataset that is the foundation of the piece. It is basically a heuristic projection of the data which we traverse to find one out of many possible renditions of the particular species. The geographical aspect is part of the projection, for example whether the species lives on land or in water. What we eventually end up with are actual coordinates on the globe.

Q: And these change with time? Going into the future, to year 3000 or such, there may seem to be almost no species except in the Arctic Circle. There seems to be a movement of where species lived? How did that work out?

JH: As far as I know that's the making of the artwork itself.

HJ: Yeah.

JH: Unless you've been doing something I don't know.

HJ: There's a dramatic narrative in the piece as species becomes fewer and fewer toward the end. And, to spoil it for readers, the planet is eventually blacked out, with the interesting upside that you're actually able to pinpoint the last species on earth.

Q: So do you imagine a user or reader interacting until they arrive at that end? Or, rather, what are some of the ways you imagine people interacting with this?

JH: I would say actually either way. If the timeline and the dramatic curve make people stay until the end, that's nice, but it's not the actual goal of the work itself.

HJ: The point of the piece comes through even if you only read one card. Though it would be nice if a first card triggers people's curiosity, so they actually spend time with it.

Q: Each monster is kind of a whole story, but I could also spend time with many.

HJ: Yes.

Q: I found I was reading it very differently in card catalogue form from the online form, partly because one can shuffle between species and dates quickly in the catalog versus having to peg them to a landscape and close and find the next spot on the map. I'm wondering how you see those relationships?

Figure 6.1 Card catalog image of the species *Fratercula ferox* in Jonson and Heldén's *Encyclopedia*.

JH: Between print and digital? I would say with the material aspect—you get an actual object like a small piece of paper—and if you forget about it, or crumple it up and throw it away then that also gets a symbolic meaning of sort, as if the species only ever existed on that piece of paper. When the card is gone, it's gone forever. This is the only instance of this animal. So, I feel like there's a sort of, how do you say this in English [says a word to Håkan]?

HJ: A fragile feeling to it.

JH: Yeah, the fragility, only existing for a short, brief moment ...

Q: I feel there's an interesting irony; there's a level of extinction that is more pronounced with the card catalogue, which is kind of a collection of dead things.

JH: Yes.

Q: Even though it lasts forever, it's also extinct and also seemingly closed, whereas the online experience comes and goes, but I always feel like I can go back, and it's actually somehow living by itself in some world where generative things live.

JH: That's interesting.

Q: Also the opposite theory: it's fleeting but lives whereas the catalogues stay the same.

HJ: There's definitely a more archival feel to the printed cards. I guess it has to do with how you perceive things on the net, and what kind of expectations you have of content actually staying online.

Q: In some ways, I think your work suggests that the print archive and the net version have different structural relations to life and species and the way those can be iterated; but, what I hear you saying about how things appear and vanish on the net is that the digital version allows us to describe and imagine an end, to imagine a future in a way that the card catalogue does not because it is already closed.

JH: Yes.

HJ: Yes, that's a good point. The idea was also to have these two correspond to each other. They are in communication in some sense. That's why we present them together.

Q: There's a kind of melancholy to the work, a sadness.

JH: That's nice.

Q: I guess it's Kierkegaardian melancholy not just for the species gone in the past but also for the belief in modeling their being and extinctions.

JH: There's also the question—or idea—of the someone making the archive. From the fictional point of view of the work itself, who would make such an archive and when? Did humans archive this or did someone else? And, if you're watching the digital piece, does that make you the archivist, so to speak?

HJ: And, further, what does it mean to take a card home with you—as we encourage people to do? Am I now the archivist or the owner of this particular species? And if I toss it, have I then made it extinct?

Q: I'm interested in how you see the relationship of your work to the database you were drawing on, The Encyclopedia of Life. Do you see your work in a satirical relation? A fictional one? Or, or a sort of parasitic one?

JH: I guess ... it's like an exploration of life. There's a melancholy and a sadness to the piece, but there is also ... I'm not saying we're creating life, but we're creating fiction, and that fiction in turn describes a new life form created via one of the biggest collections of texts about life forms on Earth. I guess, maybe, parasitic is a good term ...

Q: In terms of categories, how did you choose what to include or not include, as a lot of the meaning seems to be suggested in what is excluded or hovers about the scant information that is presented?

HJ: We started out with quite a lot of text but realized quite fast that including too much text takes away from the fictional aspects of the piece. It's more fun to trigger the viewer's imagination about what this species really is. That is also one of the reasons why we chose not to include images or symbols. In the end, we tested with different amounts of text and ended up in some kind of middle road where we thought: this is a suitable amount, not giving away too much but still giving you some sense of what this is.

JH: I'm not sure how much to give away, but for each species we have five categories and basically one sentence for each category.

Q: And it's generatively created, is that right?

JH: Yes, and we decided upon the categories and assigned labels to them, like appearance, behavior, mating, food, interaction with other species.

Q: Was The Encyclopedia of Life open source? Did it have an API that you were able to climb onto?

JH: Yes, it's open.

Q: Did they say anything about your project?

JH: I don't think they have any idea. They have collections of information from other sources too.

HJ: *The Encyclopedia of Life* is like a database of databases, basically. There are a quite large number of databases underneath that concern specific areas: some for mammals, some for bacteria, some for sea life, and so on.

JH: And, they have Wikipedia entries as well, so that becomes part of it, too.

Q: How does the project or process relate to what you did in your prior work together, Evolution.

HJ: To me, the most obvious similarities between the two is that we create something new from already existing material, which is something that triggers our imagination. To use sets of information and do new things with them. Like a remix, in some sense.

Q: Do you have very similar roles in production and how the collaboration works, or has that gone through some changes?

Figure 6.2 Card catalog image of the species *Oniscidea murinus* in Jonson and Heldén's *Encyclopedia*.

JH: Pretty much, we have the artistic vision together. Håkan knows the technology that I don't but yes—*Evolution* was also a different project in some ways like with the print book.

Q: Can you talk about contexts? How you like to show your work? How it's engaged differently in library, online, performance or gallery settings, and what your experience has been in the different venues?

HJ: When we did *Evolution* it was for a long time primarily a digital artwork. We realized that it was fun to have something to show where you can actually turn up yourself, so we did a performance piece around it, and that was fun.

JH: Yes.

HJ: When we did *Encyclopedia* the idea of the artifact was there from the beginning. Something that could work in a physical environment, that could be shipped somewhere and shown.

Q: I know some of your work, Johannes, involves big visuals in different ways from what is in the collaborative work, and I'm wondering about the constraints of collaboration—negotiating what fits and not?

JH: That's a good question, I would say ... not constraints, I would say super inspiring actually. It generates new ideas, I think it's a very generous project to me because it gives me inspiration. Also for the stuff I do by myself because it's ...

HJ: It's completely draining for me [laughs].

JH: [laughs] I have a parasitic relationship to you.

Q: Are these works leading to a next one?

JH: I was just about to say that, we were talking about this yesterday when we were having a beer, that we should do a third one, and it should start with the letter E, too.

HJ: That's as far as it's gotten.

Q: The "E" trilogy.

JH: I don't know, we'll see. We have a list of titles, and we have some stuff that we actually have been talking about but nothing set yet.

Q: One of the most striking aspects of your project is how little is left in catalogs and how much is left to the imagination. Seeing these cards is a very shocking experience. This is all we've got ... we never quite find ourselves, but we find all these other things that might have come and gone around us.

JH: It is sort of post-apocalyptic in a way. I'm not pinning it down to be after the apocalypse but there's that sort of element to it.

Q: Of course if you keep fast-forwarding forward to the future, you end up in the past again, because it loops around. It doesn't just throw you off into the darkness; rather, it kicks you back there to the beginning.

HJ: Yes, that has been a discussion ...

JH: Yes, what would that imply and how should we solve it? I was also thinking about the cards in the catalogue: they're sequenced by year, and if you check out a different drawer, at the end there are no cards left and that could imply ... I guess what I'm saying is that we don't want to close it up too much either. It could imply all species are extinct, and it could also imply that humanity got a grip and stopped making species extinct. Not to be too literal but ...

Q: And stopped cataloging too

JH: [laughs] Yeah, that's the only thing it really means. What's the implication of not cataloging.

Q: It strikes me that there's a way this is a kind of science fiction novel, exploded from itself. Do you think of your work as a database, and, secondly, do you believe a database or generativity is related to what we think of as fiction?

HJ: That's a good question. Personally, I don't see it as a database. To me it is more a work of fiction. The visual elements and how you interact with the piece are, quite obviously, inspired by some of the aesthetics of computer games and science fiction imagery.

Q: In an earlier interview, Sharon Daniel-discussed how working with a database can help create the conditions for multiple-centered stories, which function differently from individual, linear, human-centered stories. For you, does approaching fiction storytelling through the database allow you to make artistic interventions that you see as different from, say, a more conventional approach to writing? I'm wondering how the database, working out of a database, stimulates a different way for you of thinking about what fiction is or what it does.

HJ: When you are working with a database or with generative text there is always the excitement of what comes out of it, which I personally find quite fun. You tend to get hooked up on certain sentences or paragraphs which stick with you.

Q: Do you revise those after the fact or let it go exactly as it pops out?

HJ: We trimmed the algorithm quite a lot. The first drafts of the algorithm, both for *Evolution* and *Encyclopedia*, were kind of rough. Working with the generator, and how it evolves the text, we hit a point where we constrained it too much and had to back up to let a bit more entropy into the process. Again, you find some kind of middle road.

Q: Did you find you generated creatures that you wanted to stay with longer?

JH: Yes, I was thinking about *Evolution*, too, when we were doing that, like you said—you have to relax the rules and back up a little bit and the question arose, if *Evolution* was meant to replace my writing, to emulate a poet's specific style, the discussions we had ... well, it's deceptively simple to speak about your own style and when we started trying to pinpoint what it means, in the end you end up with the question of what, actually, is poetry? What does it mean to us and why are we doing this?

HJ: Yes, working with *Evolution* the discussions got very philosophical at the end. With *Encyclopedia* we were a bit more focused on what we wanted to achieve from the beginning. This was probably the biggest difference in the actual work process. *Evolution* was a more exploratory process, more of a research project.

Figure 6.3 Card catalog image of the species *Phycodurus ornata* in Jonson and Heldén’s *Encyclopedia*.

JH: And, also, in *Encyclopedia*, the source material that it draws from is a specific number of words that will become bigger as we add to it, and that will also change the work, in a way.

Q: You’ll continue to add? At what point are you done with the work? How much more do you have?

HJ: The amount of data that we draw from will probably at least double in the coming months, so the work will continue to evolve. This is a nice feature of a digital piece—it is never the final version.

Q: Evolution ended with a book, right? Will you do the same for *Encyclopedia*?

JH: Maybe. It will be nice because of the similarities between the pieces, *Encyclopedia* ... the archive could be archived.

HJ: When we did *Evolution* the whole piece was surrounded with these questions of authenticity and archiving, and also the question of what it meant that these issues even existed. In that context, the physical book played very well with the digital piece. It felt important to do the book and actually archive it.

Q: There is a strong visual, or even cinematic aspect, to the digital project while, of course, the card catalog is material and textual. The duality offers a very enticing transmedia experience and meanwhile both media forms seem to be pointing to their own extinctions. I'm curious about your choices; how you see that relationship. You talked a lot about going from the database to the card catalogue but I'm talking about the interface, the screen experience.

JH: You see the pale blue dot, maybe you're on a spaceship watching it. As you navigate the globe, you're either navigating the archive or you're an accomplice—because you're the viewer until you click on these species/dots on the globe. When you trigger them, you can't be totally sure that you're not making the species extinct, in a way, by doing so.

Q: You've mentioned this sense that the interactor is perhaps complicit or potentially complicit—that the user perhaps not only has responsibility in constructing the work but also for exterminating the species she creates.

JH: Yes.

Q: Even though you talk about it as ecological, you haven't forced the message.

JH: I hope not. That would be sad if that happened. I guess this follows on what we're talking about before. It is good to keep the work sort of open. It sounds maybe a bit corny, but if it somehow could raise a gentle idea, this is a notion of ecology. We have no illusions, but it is an important thing, and if it's possible to make an artwork about it, this is good. It felt pretty good to do, actually.

HJ: Hopefully the aesthetics of the interface add to the viewer's experience. Looking into space and infinity: that associates well with the thematics of the piece.

Q: You talk specifically about avoiding the pictorial, avoiding depicting the creatures.

HJ: If you are presented with an image, it tends to become very central, which might affect the comprehension of the text in a negative way.

JH: On several of these cards you can't really tell what species or category of species it is. Some could be birds or some could be badgers, so if you're unsure or you're just reading it, the creature forms in your mind—but then you can read the text again and realize well this actually could be anything. That's a sort of fiction, too, like the power of reading a book.

HJ: We want to avoid spelling it out too much. When we thought about how to visualize these species, we ended up with discussions concerning aesthetics and

how such imagery would look. It could not be a photograph; that would not make sense. Should it be a drawing? It became a very hard conceptually to fit in, even though you probably can, problematically of course, create something that would depict what is in the text.

Q: There's a museum in Philadelphia called the Wagner Museum. It is a science museum that was designed to teach evolution in the nineteenth century. Instead of modernizing it, they froze it in time, a kind of museum of a museum. Within its cabinets and crammed into drawers that one can open are hundreds of stuffed animals and other specimens like shells and bones. So 120 years later, one confronts this accumulation. Some sets make immediate sense—a collection of flies or ants or something that. In others, one may just find stuffed birds or other creatures with little explanation. The physical experience is very provocative, stimulating the imagination, along with a very strong sense of decay, death and the passing of time.

HJ: Yes, and there is something really scary about stuffed animals, especially when they age.

Q: But, I think your project is interesting because it points to a different kind of deadness—a deadness that's tied to writing and perhaps to visuality as well. It speaks to the practices of an era. The deadness of a stuffed animal is uncanny. I can touch it. It was moving once. Whereas the deadness of these things in the catalogue is the deadness of an era where we may think digital, archival information would be enough, that cataloging things would be enough. There's almost the sense with the catalogue that all the species could vanish, but if we got the catalogue, then that's enough.

HJ: Yes, we tried to anticipate what you experience when you see the piece and that lonely blue dot in space. All the other familiar planets are gone. Sadness? In the end, it is nice even if someone just picks up a card, reads it, and thinks: "Oh, I would like to see this animal."