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Commentary

The Taxonomy Is Imprecise

Lisa Swanstrom

Samantha Gorman's *Pry* and Håkan Jonson and Johannes Heldén's *Encyclopedia* appear at first glance to be wholly different projects with distinct and unrelated ambitions: the first is an interactive and multi-modal narrative, made for the iPad, about a soldier who has returned from conflict in the Middle East; the second is an art installation, powered by a custom-made algorithm, which re-writes entries from *The Encyclopedia of Life* (<http://eol.org/>) in order to generate textual records, printed on index cards, of fictional animals that have gone extinct in a remote, imaginary future. In spite of their differences, these works have the following in common: both attempt to provide order to a seemingly endless and unruly amount of information that they themselves have generated.

In *Encyclopedia* the abundance of information is created by re-combining data about living things in the real world in order to speak to a fragile and imperiled future. In *Pry*, the data come from a vulnerable and unstable identity, a traumatized man whose recent, war-time memories of violent conflict and desert landscapes bleed into his present consciousness and deep past. Once generated, these compelling yet undifferentiated pools of information are—in both texts—re-constituted through acts of cataloging, indexing, organizing, and archiving. In *Pry*, the protagonist James attempts to catalog, sort, and archive his experiences, even as he recognizes the futility of doing so. The compulsion to curate his own life gives him some measure of comfort and control, “But,” he acknowledges, “the taxonomy is imprecise.” The data of the world exceed his capacity to contain it.

In this short reflection, I propose that in both *Pry* and *Encyclopedia*, taxonomy, i.e., the act of organizing via a system of classification, is a dominant aesthetic technique. The impulse toward classification, however “imprecise,” functions as

a way to unify each text aesthetically, but also as a means to overcome the volatile inner landscapes in *Pry*, or the treacherous natural terrains that haunt both texts. In addition, as a part of this attempt to order, both speak to the potential of the digital imaginary to complicate traditional assumptions about the relation of form to content and, in a likewise fashion, the importance of the natural environment in relation to a larger media ecology.

Pry challenges assumptions about form and content from the very beginning. In the opening chapter, James is prone on a bed, and the reader must pry his eyes open to stir his consciousness to the present. This action paradoxically grants access to episodes from his recent past, his more distant past, and his unconscious awareness. It is initially difficult to parse these different temporal threads, and the sense of disorientation is compounded by the multiple forms of media—sound, text, image, film, collage, photography—that communicate James' disordered consciousness. James' world has overwhelmed him, and *Pry*, strategically, runs the risk of overwhelming the reader. It is not until the reader has a command of navigational gestures that this difficulty is alleviated. The formal constraints of *Pry* require the reader to pinch, pull, squeeze, frame, and scroll to assemble James' experience into a coherent narrative. These gestures are both like and unlike turning a page. Yes, they move the narrative along, but they are also narrative-constituting acts. As Kevin Holmes writes in his review of the work for *Creator*, "the gestures, as well as the iPad's functionality, are integral to the narrative, revealing insights and clues, and helping readers empathize with James' struggles" (https://creators.vice.com/en_us/article/go-inside-the-mind-of-a-gulf-war-vet-with-first-person-digital-novella-pry). It is only through continuous acts of assembly that the reader re-constitutes his story, providing order to his fragmented subjectivity and the work's fragmented form.

A similar deluge of information confronts the reader of *Encyclopedia*, albeit in an entirely different manner. Compared to the beautiful, professional cinematography of *Pry*, *Encyclopedia* offers a bare bones visual experience that is, at heart, text based. As Jonson and Heldén put it in their description of the project, "*Encyclopedia* is a text generator that creates encyclopedic entries for extinct fictive animal species" (http://elo2015.h.uib.no/works/helden_jonson.html). Each creature in their *Encyclopedia* is at once an individual member of a species (albeit a contrived one) and a hodgepodge bestiary, kluged together from disparate entries of *The Encyclopedia of Life*. Each entry includes information about five different aspects of a creature's life: "appearance, behavior, mating, food, interaction with other species" (Jonson, interview 5). Consider, for example, the following animal:

Figure 7.1 Card catalog image of the species *Stegostoma monachus* in Jonson and Heldén's *Encyclopedia*.

Stegostoma monachus is presented here as a representative of a singular species, but it is also an amalgam of a variety of other, incompatible beasts, including beaver (signaled by the creature's propensity to re-route water flow), dolphin (to which it is compared directly), and electric eel (which, even more than the dolphin, is known for its power of electroreception). Its Latin name combines the name for the zebra shark (*stegostoma*) with that of the monk seal (*monachus*). In addition, the fairly large weight of the creature suggests it has some heft to it—an apex predator perhaps—yet this feature stands in contrast to its humble beginnings as “pink, blind, and toothless,” which suggest something more in line with a mole rat. *Stegostoma monachus*, in other words, is a taxonomic abomination, one that, through its absurd specificity, calls attention to the vast schema upon which biological and ecological classification depends. And yet it is its very specificity that makes it legible, offers some measure of order and control—and, perhaps most importantly, a small measure of levity—to conversations about extinction that are often overwhelmingly bleak in their visions of the future.

In a complimentary moment in the first chapter of *Pry*, James contemplates a stain on the ceiling that appears to change shape as he regards it: “[it] looks

like a plaster animal. Some nights beaks, some nights horns. Tonight, a grouse speckled low in the grass. Montana. Home.” As in *Encyclopedia*, this “animal” is a collage, a hodgepodge of conflicting attributes and taxonomic classes—beaks and horns, birds and mammals. But it emerges here not from a database of life-forms but from the disparate contents of James’ own fragmented and conflicted psyche. That this shifting image of the animal is aligned with James is suggested by the word “home” and cemented by the silhouette that appears behind the text in this moment, of James taking a picture. This image, centered upon the text, suggests that he is taking a snapshot of this very textual passage. Because this passage describes an unstable image of a shifting creature that nevertheless reminds him of home, we can read this as James’ attempt to document—to fix into place, to order—his troubled mental state.

Another complimentary moment occurs in the early scenes of *Pry*, in the video prologue. Before James leaves for military service, he spends a great deal of time putting his belongings in order, arranging them with grid-like precision on his bed. On his way out, he has a childhood memory of a family dog and, impulsively, says goodbye to the current family dog, grabbing a pair of scissors and clipping some fur from the dog’s coat as he does. He places the fur into a clear pocket of a photo album that he takes with him when he leaves. He treats the album as a showcase of taxonomic specimens, evidence of his life. As he writes of it in his diary, his “mementos ... are arranged and pinned like butterflies in a case ... the objects arranged like patterns on a wing” (Appendix). The photo album provides an archive of his present, allowing him to curate the physical objects he will want to refer to in order to maintain his ties to his home when he is away from it. James puts the hair of the dog into this clear specimen envelope in order to hold his memories close. It is a touching attempt to control, via ordering, what will turn out be a volatile and violent environment.

While not a part of the actual diegesis of *Pry*, it’s interesting to note that its production process shares a poignant similarity with the form of *Encyclopedia*. In her interview about the project, Susan Gorman discusses James’ different memory threads as if they were notecards:

I’m thinking about all of the archive, all the material I have available to me from my character ... it’s just basically almost a stack of memories in cards and you proceed through the chapters by sorting and dealing the stack of memories until you figure out the trigger, the point where he’ll move on to the next set of cards. (5)

Just as Jonson and Heldén mine *The Encyclopedia of Life* to create their own fictional *Encyclopedia* entries, each composed of discrete syntactical units that are strung together on one index card, Gorman in *Pry* treats James as an “archive” of information, whose individual memories function as narrative units, metaphorized as cards, to be explored and shuffled with other memories that will lead to different narrative outcomes/pathways.

In terms of form, content, and production, *Pry* and *Encyclopedia* share an interest in taxonomy. Yet the attempt to catalog is not merely a formal technique or aesthetic trope, but becomes in both a means of survival, a response to a volatile, threatening environment. Both create snapshots of the world in order to forestall obsolescence. In *Encyclopedia*, the taxonomic cards are an attempt to prevent extinction. In *Pry*, the assemblage of James’ memories into a coherent story is an attempt to make a broken man whole. In *Encyclopedia*, the formal constraints of the algorithm are invisible, but they generate each new creature that the text produces. The form, an index card printed with simple, declarative “facts,” is in sync with its content, suggesting as it does an archive of obsolete creatures that have been recorded with a similarly obsolete inscription technology. As noted in the interview with the artists, “there’s a level of extinction that is more pronounced with the card catalogue, which is kind of a collection of dead things,” whereas “the digital version allows us to iterate and imagine an end ... Imagine a future, in a way that the card catalogue is already closed”.

In both works, then, the digital imaginary elides the difference between form and content—it is no surprise that the critical commentary about *Pry* has focused on the work’s novel use of gesture. Yet both also do something innovative in terms of confronting another persistent problem. All too often, in real life and in art, the natural environment is treated as a formal feature—a container or receptacle of content rather than an active participant in lived experience or textual construction. Both works challenge this notion.

With *Encyclopedia*, environmental intervention was conceived overtly from the project’s inception: “I think the original idea focused on ecological,” Jonson notes in the interview for this collection (1). “It sounds maybe a bit corny,” Heldén later adds, “but if it somehow could raise a gentle idea, a notion of ecology” it would be serving an important purpose (10). The work generates an alternative ecology through its manipulation of a literal taxonomy, complete with species information. The index cards of *Encyclopedia* offer information about the natural world, exclusively so, detailing both the features of the

imaginary creature and its relation to the larger ecology. The entry on *Stegostoma monachus*, for example, includes information about the creature's environmental impact, and the index cards in general are overt in their ecological objectives. With *Encyclopedia*, Jonson and Heldén attempt to create some kind of order and meaning from a volatile and turbulent present. Instead, however, of speculating about the past, the index cards gesture to a playfully tenuous, but hopefully avoidable, environmental future.

In *Pry*, the role of the environment is more subtle, yet it is fundamental to the construction (and disintegration) of James' identity. James is a demolition expert. Most of the scenes from his past take place in the desert; most scenes of his present occur in an oil refinery or at an architectural site that is about to be demolished. But the features of the desert landscape—bright light, expanses of sand—inflect all of the different times to create a unified visual aesthetic. The desert functions traditionally in art as a site of crisis and testing, via temptation, deprivation, punishment, etc. In *Pry*, the austere landscape—sand, sky, scattered plant life that almost blends in to the sand—becomes something that confounds individual integrity with its overwhelming vastness. There is no outside to the desert, and this haunts the main character. In one poignant memory, James is on watch with his friend Luke, and the seemingly endless landscape overwhelms him. Luke sits “on the deck enforcing order out of the gray expanse.” Throughout *Pry*, in all of James' memories, Luke appears as tough, steady, consistently and conventionally masculine. He is able to keep himself intact and the world around him at bay, “enforcing order” upon the overwhelming totality of his environment. In contrast, by the time we meet him, James' ability to maintain a secure boundary between himself and his environment has broken down. His time in the desert eclipses all aspects of his waking and unconscious life. And although the language of this moment refers to water—as evidenced by the words “ocean,” “sail,” and “crow's nest”—this memory is set visually in the desert.

Aspects of the natural environment appear in more subtle ways, as well. In James' bedroom, three slices of a tree trunk hang, like works of art, from the wall, a motif that is repeated in his kitchen. Counting the rings of a cross-section of a tree is a way to learn about its quality and length of life. Their appearance in James' home is appropriate; they are symbolic stand-ins for the narrative events of *Pry*, which do not unfold chronologically but are, instead, revealed in a series of related but distinct cross-sections of time.

Encyclopedia and *Pry* are undoubtedly operating at completely different registers of experience. *Encyclopedia* offers a future world where human beings

are mentioned only as a collective, responsible for the destruction of each species documented on an index card; individual human identities are entirely absent. In contrast, the vast pool of information through which the reader must wade in *Pry* has a single source: James. The reader must sort his confused memories in order to create a coherent picture of his present. In *Encyclopedia*, the stakes are large in scale—global, ecological. In *Pry*, on the other hand, the narrative is so individual and private that the reader must literally “pry” the events from the protagonist’s vulnerable and immobile perspective in order to sort the experience of his waking life from the events of his troubled past. Nevertheless, the frenzied production of information and the need to put that information into order drive both texts. Both attempt to find order and meaning in a chaotic world, even as both fail to achieve anything approaching an integrated and well-ordered taxonomy. Rather, both approach Borges’ efforts in documenting the puzzling, repetitive, and often absurd struggle to make sense of infinity.

Pry at times echoes Borges’ “Del rigor en la ciencia,” in which infinite information is generated and channeled into a cartographic model that cannot keep pace with the information it hopes represent. *Encyclopedia* resonates with Borges’ “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” in which various and incomplete encyclopedias offer tantalizing glimpses of an unknown language with a mysterious syntax. *Encyclopedia* also shares with Borges a sly sense of humor, bordering on parody, perhaps gently poking fun at the text it harvests for its fictional creatures, *Encyclopedia of Life*, which is similarly Borgesian in its attempt at totality, functioning, as Jonson puts it, as “a database of databases” (Interview 5). The result of these efforts in *Pry* is a collage of individual experience, in *Encyclopedia* a collage of large-scale absence. Both are created from fragments and strung together to create a provisional coherence, and both offer the reader a way to order chaotic literary ecologies via a taxonomy that is as imprecise as it is elegant.

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