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Borges' The Library of Babel: A Story For Our (Infinite) Moment

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, June 6th, 2018

Type “library of babel” into your search engine of choice, and you’ll discover something interesting. First, you’ll discover information on the short story, *The Library of Babel*, by Jorge Luis Borges, which is interesting enough on its own accord. Next, you’ll find a website that brings Borges’ idea into the digital realm. The website is libraryofbabel.info and for all intents and purposes, it’s worthless. Or is it?

Maybe you’ve done this with a search engine before, but you could try it at the library of babel website. Go to the site and search for your name. You’ll see a result, but not because there’s any meaningful content about you on the site. Rather, it’s because the site contains “all possible pages of 3,200 characters.” When your name comes up on the site, it comes up at random. The site’s algorithm, a “pseudorandom generator,” takes the 26 letters of the alphabet, along with a space, a comma, and a period, combining them in every possible way. Each page consists of 3,200 characters, and the website’s engine exhausts every possible combination of these characters. When I enter my name in the search field, the result looks like this (arrow added):



Any other word I type in comes up as well. Here, on the library of babel website, you could potentially find entire books, texts that the library reproduces simply because when you combine a finite number of letters in an infinite space, you’ll eventually find all texts, past, present, and future. These texts are generated by chance yet not by chance at all.

Confused? That’s how I felt the first time I read Borges’ *The Library of Babel*. The story details a fictional library with hexagonal rooms.

In Borges’ (translated) words, “The Universe (that some call the Library) is composed of an undefined, maybe infinite number of hexagonal galleries.” In each gallery, or room, there are an equal number of volumes, and in each volume there are an equal number of pages. Each page is filled with random combinations of letters, spaces, periods, and commas. When you combine all the characters in all of the volumes, you come up with everything that has ever been written and everything that could possibly be written. In the Library, when you take a limited number of letters and combine them in every possible way, you end up with every possible combination, which includes every play composed by Shakespeare and every grocery list you’ve ever written, along with every diary entry you will write.

The idea seems absurd and weird, but think about what we're doing with the internet, record storage, and libraries. Bear with me for a moment. Think, however much it pains you to do so, about the nonsense word "covfefe."

Information, Gibberish, Libraries, and Archives

The story of our time is one of archiving, cataloguing, classifying, and searching. It's as if we're trying to preserve the physical moment even as it dissolves. Our senses receive input and our brains interpret it, but by that time the moment we're interpreting is gone. Perhaps it's this distance that drives our urge to collect and catalogue data and produce information. Through documentation, we are always trying to pin down a precise relationship between our interpretive mechanism and the events it interprets. Through finite means, we are trying to capture infinite moments.

We catalogue most everything on the internet, yet [libraries are not in decline](#): public libraries see about 4 million visitors daily, for a total of 1.5 billion visits annually. Librarians, archivists, and curators are 9th on the U.S. government's list of occupations that will continue to see an increase in demand by 2030. This speaks to constant increase of information in book form.

On top of all the documents you can access by walking into a library, there are more business documents than most people care to imagine. In terms of physical [record storage](#), the government requires businesses to keep all sorts of documents *indefinitely*, including articles of incorporation, bylaws, contracts and agreements, and more. That's just physical documents. When it comes to data, [according to the World Economic Forum](#) the world is on track to create 40 zettabytes by 2020, roughly the equivalent of 4 million years of HD video or five billion Libraries of Congress.

There's this thing called block storage that very much resembles Borges' library. With [block storage](#), all data is stored without any categorization besides an "arbitrary identifier." In other words, like the letters in the library of babel, data is strewn about randomly in a storage space. A single datum means nothing — it might as well be gibberish. It's only when you combine a datum with other data that it becomes information.

Speaking of gibberish, the day on which I'm writing this is "[covfefe day](#)." On May 31st, 2017, just after midnight, President Trump tweeted the gibberish word "covfefe," a string of letters that coincidentally appears after the word "oneirocriticism" in the library of babel. Oneirocriticism is the interpretation of dreams. Was Trump interpreting a dream when his word processor went wrong and produced a gibberish word? His presidency seems as random as covfefe, a throw of the dice to see what happens when we make an unqualified reality show host the head of the free world.

Strangely enough, purely by chance, the library of babel foresees every article written about the Trump presidency, and it foresaw the word covfefe before Trump ever wrote it.

We're in the age of babel. You could pore over the website's pages, looking for future texts. But you'd be better off reading Borges' original story instead.

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