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Plotting a Library

A science-fiction fan takes on the task of mapping the genre

By *Xarissa Holdaway*

In terms of presenting large amounts of information quickly and digestibly, an infographic is hard to beat. A good one can give a reader a sense of scale, proportion, and even narrative much more quickly than several paragraphs of explanation and explication. It's the difference between recording your genealogy as a series of "begats" or as a family tree. And today's pictographs are so sophisticated that they can contain essentially an entire cultural history in a JPEG.

Take "Places & Spaces: Mapping Science," a multidisciplinary physical and online art project, running since 2005, that seeks to create a complete picture of "human activity and scientific progress on a global scale." Curated by a group of librarians, information scientists, and geographers around the world, each exhibit features a handful of maps—an older word for infographic—along a theme. Previous years have exhibited maps designed to index information for policy makers, or for cartographers, or economic decision makers.

This year, the theme is [the digital library](#).

One of the entries is a social network of the Bible. Another, "Seeing Standards," is positively meta: It charts more than 100 widely used rule sets for collating data, and sorts them by strength, community, domain, function, and purpose. For example, the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR2) are categorized as "strong" in sorting by Content Standard, Descriptive Metadata, and Libraries, among others, and "weak" in Archives, Rights Metadata, Structural Metadata, and Controlled Vocabulary. If that sounds like gibberish to you, it might be because the "Seeing Standards" map is a highly complex set of jargon for career specialists—and because it's a cleverly executed punch line for librarians.

Libraries face an avalanche of documents, records, images, physical objects, books, journals, audio recordings, video files, film negatives, periodicals, and data sets. Many of them overlap, so a library might have to keep track of both a physical journal and of each article that journal has published in its proprietary online version, with information about type, language, and purpose for each. Old documents and books are carefully photographed page by

page, and each image must be tracked, coded, sorted, tagged for search purposes, and published. Plus, libraries must deploy usable interfaces that allow scholars to know when and how they can access each version. As with the other maps in the exhibit, "Seeing Standards" points out that any attempt to plot the flood of information we are floating in, or even map the ways we map it, is at best a cross section.

One "Places & Spaces" map bucks the trend, imagining complexity in an entirely different way. The distinction? Ward Shelley's "The History of Science Fiction" ([full size version here](#)) isn't pulled from any server's database. In fact, it's charmingly analog.

Mr. Shelley is an artist and a teacher at Parsons the New School for Design. He has become known for what he calls "rhetorical drawings"—visual art pieces that draw on such traditionally linguistic markers as narrative and chronology to illustrate ideas.

"The whole technique started as a way for me to do my biography," says Mr. Shelley, whose first rhetorical drawing was a timeline of his own life. "Even as I expanded into things that were more about society or art in general, I cycled back to personal interests."

One of those personal interests is science fiction. In the 1950s, Mr. Shelley read Isaac Asimov's Foundation series, and continued reading through the New Wave 60s, which saw the transition from sci-fi to "speculative fiction." His interest ebbed for a while, only to return in the 90s, as cyberpunk was gaining steam.

But Mr. Shelley's map goes all the way back to the origins of science fiction, represented as two tentacles labeled "fear" and "wonder." From there it evolves into a fantastic, bewildering beast. Art and technology make their appearances as new tentacles. The creature doubles in size during the Enlightenment, and again after Romantic and Gothic Literature. By 1900, so many strains have developed that it takes real work to track where soft and hard sci-fi diverge, and where low-brow pulp feeds into cyberpunk.

Magazines, TV shows, films, and even video games like Space Invaders have homes, as do Thomas Pynchon and Borges. A tiny channel leads from L. Ron Hubbard's Dianetics directly to Scientology. Through other wormholes exit westerns, crime novels, "Sword and Sorcery," and horror.

Trying to create a visual system for so much material is dangerous, says Mr. Shelley. That's true partly because the borders of any genre or subgenre are subject to bleeding over time. But mostly because fans of science fiction are, generally, not only extremely passionate about genre distinctions—between, say, "Future War Novels" and apocalyptic literature—but very well read. (The map includes a bar noting the various trends in theory and meta-analysis.)


As a fan himself, Mr. Shelley knew there was no way to be careful enough to avoid an internecine showdown. In fact, a showdown was exactly the point. "What I wanted was to provide a larger structure, within which people could have a death fight about what belongs in the canon. And that's what I saw happening, immediately. The piece was posted on one blog, and everyone was asking, not very politely, 'How could you leave this one thing off?'"

As for how the piece might apply to the increasing digitization of libraries, Mr. Shelley doesn't dwell on it. "I have this idea that piece could eventually have some kind of digital format that would make it editable in the future," he says. "Living the way we do now, there are these growing databases that change over time. But for the moment, mine is practically 19th century. It's hand drawn, hand written. I took that position because I wanted it to look like one person's attempt at objectivity, an obviously subjective thing. That's important."

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 **22169082** 1 week ago


It's also beautiful.

[Like](#)

 **mbelvadi** 1 week ago


Cute, but by being analog, it's also unsearchable. It took me a long time to find one of my favorite authors, Larry Niven, whose position I thought would help me understand some of the categorization. I still can't find Spider Robinson on it - he's surely there somewhere. In this case, aesthetics has trumped function, which is usually a poor choice for anyone in the library biz to make.

1 person liked this. [Like](#)

 **jsbutler** 1 week ago

It is a visual essay, not a data base as implied by mbelvadi. Like any essay, it reflects the insights, and weaknessess of the creator. Personally, I'm going to study it, and then send him an email blasting those things I disagree with, and praising those I like. If I aim for improvement, I'll provide a rationale for the critiques.

1 person liked this. [Like](#)

 **mbelvadi** 1 week ago in reply to jsbutler

Perhaps the author of the article shouldn't have called it a "map", if it's only a visual essay. A map implies something more objective about reality, not to mention more functional.

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1 person liked this. [Like](#)



lanedesign 1 week ago

This is a beautiful rendition of the flow of information, as hard to capture as waves in the ocean. It makes a strong point. I think it's brilliant, as well as, beautiful.

2 people liked this. [Like](#)



gguba 1 week ago

Looks a bit like Cthulu...

5 people liked this. [Like](#)



Darcie Callahan 1 week ago

I enjoyed this but found one egregious error: Near the bottom, in light blue: M. Moorcock "ERLIC" should be "ELRIC."

[Like](#)



jamesebryan 1 week ago

I found another minor error - Poul Anderson and Gordon Dickson's "Earthman's Burden" is missing a "T." Like others, I can't find one of my favorite authors, H. Beam Piper ("Little Fuzzy," "Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen"). Also, to my way of thinking an entire sub-genre, alternate history (what if the South had won the Civil War? sort of stuff), which often is related to tales of parallel universes, is missing. Maybe it isn't entirely science fiction, but seems important enough to warrant its own little divergent stream disappearing into a wormhole.

However, I don't want to seem too critical because he has structured an immense amount of amorphous subjective information into a sort of visible order - and given me a lot more titles to put on my "someday I ought to read that" list. Of course his system isn't perfect or all-inclusive, none can ever be. I think many critiques will arise from our typically American dissatisfaction with the intangible that makes us always want to present the qualitative as if it were quantitative, but if I'm not careful I'll segue into a rant about the futility of filling out assessment forms ...

1 person liked this. [Like](#)



desart 1 week ago

And in the New Space Opera area, Jack McDevitt is listed as Joe.

[Like](#)



gsudduth 1 week ago

Interesting creativity: depiction of what visually reads as a biomorphic squid - like from a left - brain point of view. I suppose the mistakes are what drive folks to commentary rather than simply letting their own creativity take over visually. But then for that to happen you'd need to be right brained. Interesting again! While writing this it reminded me of an article I saw in the NY Times several years ago. The author showed Michelangelo's 'birth on man' (in the Sistine Chapel) with God touching man's hand. In the background he thought the shape looked 'like' a profile of the right brain.

Creativity is so

You fill in the blank!

1 person liked this. [Like](#)



dank48 1 week ago

And "Camouflage" is misspelt. Or misspelled. Big deal. This is amazing.

Like



Randy Addison 1 week ago

That is one wide network of how fiction has evolved. An infographic is truly one thing that is hard to beat when it comes to telling a story or pointing a fact. Thanks for sharing this one.

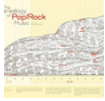
Like



jannettefinch 1 day ago

It is very similar to Reebee Garofalo's Genealogy of Pop/Rock Music chart. It is a wonderful display, but I wonder if it should have referenced Garofalo (if the author ever consciously saw Garofalo)?
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/b...>

ATTACHED FILES



Like