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A Singular of Boars

Tom Tyler

A vast array of virtual animals play a variety of roles in today's video games. In addition to the named *protagonists and characters* who feature in games such as *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Sonic Team, 1991) and *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo, 2001), a catalogue of anonymous creatures appear as *pets and companions* in games like *Nintendogs* (Nintendo, 2005) and *Torchlight* (Runic Games, 2009); as *assets and resources* in *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009) and *Angry Birds* (Rovio Entertainment, 2009); and, of course, as *adversaries and enemies*, in games such as *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996) and *Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011). More often than not, the individual instances of these creatures are identical: within any given game, a single character model is used, whose animation is confined to a restricted range of stereotypical movements, and vocalisations to a small repertoire of calls and cries, and whose physical statistics remain uniform. *Titan Quest* (Iron Lore Entertainment, 2006) permits players to venture through a finely detailed ancient world, stretching from Greece to Egypt, and on to Asia. Centaurs, harpies, undead skeletons and other mythic monsters clutter the landscape, but so too do more common creatures. Players can summon powerful grey wolves, familiars who will fight on the side of the questing heroes, perhaps against the strong, speedy and ferocious wild boar who roam the woods. The detailed graphic realisation of these beasts, like everything else in the game, is exemplary, but each wolf is indistinguishable from her fellows, and the boar are similarly interchangeable. These virtual animals are identical duplicates of one another, individuals and yet entirely generic.

There is a tradition of writing about animals, particularly within natural history, which also serves to align the singular with the general. The *Encyclopædia Britannica* says of boar:

boar, male of the domestic pig, guinea pig, and various other mammals; or both sexes of wild hog species belonging to the family Suidae. The European wild boar refers to *Sus scrofa*, the largest of the wild pigs, distributed over Europe, northern Africa, and central and northern Asia. Long extinct in the British Isles and northwest Europe, it is still found in marshy woodland districts in Spain, Austria, the U.S.S.R., and Germany. From earliest times, because of its great strength, speed, and ferocity, the wild boar has been one of the favourite beasts of the chase. In some parts of Europe and India it is still hunted with dogs, but the spear has mostly been replaced with the gun. The wild boar of India (*S. cristatus*) is slightly taller than *S. scrofa*, standing about 30 to 40 inches (0.75 to 1 metre) at the shoulder. It is found throughout India, Sri Lanka (Ceylon), and Burma, where the spear is used in hunting it.¹

The encyclopedia here characterises boar in what Derrida would call *the general singular*.² The generic noun phrase “the boar” refers to the kind or class to which all boar belong, and it does so by means of that singular, definite article. “The boar” is at once both an individual, an unaccompanied creature, marked off by all the grammatical requirements of the article, and a collective of every boar that did, or does, or might exist.³ English collective nouns for animals, a notoriously eccentric mass of substantives, derive in many cases from a hunting tradition dating back to the late Middle Ages.⁴ The *Book of Saint Albans*, a set of texts on hawking, hunting

and heraldry published in 1486, includes a catalogue of these terms of assemblage under the heading “The Compaynys of beestys and fowlys.”⁵ Mixed in amongst *a muster of peacocks, a murmuration of starlings, and a shrewdness of apes*,⁶ we find a telling group term for that favourite beast of the chase: *a singular of boars* succinctly captures the ambiguity and concision of the discourses on animals to be found in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and its like.⁷

Accounts of this singular animal, “the boar,” this singular of boars, provide knowledge that goes beyond the particularities of any identifiable individual. Their grammar insists on something like an *ideal* boar, a Platonic form that persists outside time and space, no matter that it has become extinct in one part of the world or another.⁸ The commingling of the singular with the general, the individual with the generic, effaces the specificity of distinct creatures who live and die, and privileges an enduring, unassailable essence. The particular boar becomes, if she is acknowledged at all, a mere instance of “the boar,” what Walker Percy called “a rather shabby expression of an ideal reality.”⁹ The corollary of “the boar” is the specimen, a sample of the species *Sus scrofa*. The “sanctity of the *hic et nunc*,” as Adorno and Horkheimer put it, gives way to “universal fungibility,”¹⁰ so that individuals are rendered entirely interchangeable, bare exemplars of their species being. The mythic creatures we encounter in *these* texts, then, in which triumphs of artifice are consumed as triumphs of Nature,¹¹ are abstract ideals. They have flourished not just in scientific discourse, but in widely varying texts, genres and media, from novels to nature documentaries, and they continue to recur today, like footnotes to Plato.¹²

But not in digital games like *Titan Quest*. The term *virtual* derives from the Latin *virtus*, meaning strength or power or capacity, and has come to describe that which is so “in essence or effect, although not formally or actually” and which “(admits) of being called by the name so far as the effect or result is concerned.”¹³ We do not experience the essence or effect of an actual wolf or wild boar when we play *Titan Quest*, of course, but each of the identical, virtual animals repeatedly summoned or engaged throughout the game is encountered by the player not as a specimen of the species but as an individual. In the frenzied moment of battle, as combatants clash and the possibility of virtual death at the tusk or paw of a specific opponent presses hard, there is no sense of a transcendent Platonic presence. The effect or capacity of each animal, their personal strength, speed and ferocity perhaps, reveals them to be an ally or adversary whose particular powers work to our immediate benefit or detriment in the *hic et nunc*. We interact in each case, then, with a single boar, and not, even when several appear together in a herd or sounder, with a singular of boars.¹⁴



Figure 1. "One or several boar? Virtual animals bring their *virtus* to bear in *Titan Quest*."

¹ *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15th revised edition (1984), Micropædia vol. 2, p. 105, s.v. "boar." The Eurasian wild pig (*Sus scrofa*) has one of the widest geographic distributions of all terrestrial mammals and occurs on all continents except Antarctica. Wild populations do in fact exist in Britain and other parts of northwest Europe. Numerous subspecies have been distinguished, including *Sus scrofa cristatus*. See W. Oliver and K. Leus, "Sus scrofa" in *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*, version 2012.2 <<http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/41775/0>> (accessed 30 October 2012).

² Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 40-41, 47.

³ Radden and Dirven suggest that with definite singular generic reference of this sort, as opposed to indefinite and/or plural varieties, "we have...a prototypical member in mind" of the class (species) when we think of the class as a whole. They compare the sentences "A tiger hunts by night" (indefinite singular), "Tigers hunt by night" (indefinite plural), "The tiger hunts by night" (definite singular) and "The tigers hunt by night" (definite plural), which, semantically speaking, are roughly interchangeable. But they draw attention, too, to the divergent grammatical behaviour of these forms of generic reference when it comes to animal and human nouns, which they put down to the appropriateness or otherwise of talking about "essential" attributes. See Günter Radden and René Dirven, *Cognitive English Grammar* (John Benjamins Publishing, 2007), pp. 106-12.

⁴ It is for this reason that collective nouns have sometimes been known as "terms of ventry," from the Latin *venari*, to hunt. James Lipton adopts this term in his popular book on the topic; see James Lipton, *An Exaltation of Larks: or, The "Venereal" Game* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1970). Of the many alternatives--proper terms, terms of assemblage, terms of association, company nouns, collective nouns, gatherings--"agminal" would surely be preferable in the current context, a nineteenth century neologism revived by Hans H. Meier; see Hans H. Meier, "Agminals in English: Group Words in Word Groups," in D. J. van

Alkemade et al. (eds), *Linguistic Studies Offered to Berthe Siertsema* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1980), pp. 181-93 (p. 184). The extent to which the many terms of venery listed in the elaborate treatises of the period have actually be used is a matter of debate; see Meier, pp. 181-82, and note 7 below.

⁵ Dame Juliana Berners, *The Boke of Saint Albans* (London: Elliot Stock, 1881 [1486]).

⁶ It is gratifying for the scholar of animal studies to find that the list records many human as well as nonhuman beestys, including *a laughter of hostelers, a tabernacle of bakers, a multiplying of husbands, a misbelieve of painters, and a superfluity of nuns.*

⁷ The *Book of Saint Albans*' "synguler" seems to have derived from *sanglier*, the term for a solitary adult wild boar, which in turn derives ultimately from the Latin *singularis*, which (like the modern English *singular*) can mean both single and remarkable; *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "sanglier"; John Hodgkin, *Proper Terms: An attempt at a rational explanation of the meanings of the collection of phrases in "The Book of St. Albans," 1486, entitled "Compaynys of Beestys and Fowlys," and similar lists* (Supplement to the Transactions of the Philological Society, 1907-1910), pp. 30-31, 87-88. Hodgkin asserts that "the term *synguler* indicates solely one wild boar of four years and upwards in age, and does not apply to any greater number" (p. 30). Indeed, his monograph argues that, far from being "technical," "fanciful," "alleged" or even "invented" company terms, as was claimed in the *New English Dictionary*, the vast majority of the 164 phrases that appear in the *Book of Saint Albans* are not company terms at all, despite the list's heading (pp. 5, 39-40, and passim). This error of interpretation he attributes to Stephen Skinner in his *Etymologicon Linguae Anglicanae* of 1671. Whether this be true or no, a precision of lexicographers have followed Skinner's account, including Meier and Lipton amongst many others. In the realm of fiction, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sir John Buttethorn, the Knight of Dupplin, has his interlocutors distinguish between *a herd of swine, a sounder of swine, and a singular of (multiple) boars*; Arthur Conan Doyle, *Sir Nigel* (Smith, Elder & Co., 1906), pp. 138-39.

⁸ On the characterisation of biological taxa as natural kinds or Platonic forms, see Stephen R. L. Clark, 'Is Humanity a Natural Kind?' in Tim Ingold (ed.), *What Is An Animal?* (London: Routledge, 1994 [1988]), pp. 17-34 (esp. pp. 21-22, 32-33).

⁹ Walker Percy, 'The Loss of the Creature,' *Forum* (University of Houston), 1958; reprinted in *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man is, How Queer Language is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), pp. 46-63 (p. 59). In the terminology of Peirce, "the boar" is taken to be a *type* rather than a *token*: C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. 4, *The Simplest Mathematics*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), pp. 423-24. For a clear discussion of type-token ambiguity which, perhaps inevitably, includes a number of animal examples, see Helen Steward, *The Ontology of Mind: Events, Processes, and States* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), pp. 120-27.

¹⁰ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 6-7.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France," 1977, in *A Barthes Reader*, edited by Susan Sontag (London: Vintage, 1982), pp. 457-78 (p. 471).

¹² Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, Corrected Edition (New York: Free Press, 1979 [1929]), p. 39.

¹³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "virtual"; Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), s.v. "virtus."

¹⁴ For invaluable help and feedback whilst preparing this short essay, I thank a dependence of friends, including Philip Farnham, Seth Giddings, Ewan Kirkland, André Krebber, Alon Lischinsky, Bob McKay and Constantine Sandis.