

“*Figmentum nonfictumi*, or, What You Get When You Cross Taxonomical Nomenclature with Popular Culture”

In Berlin, in January 2012, museum visitors ushered fiction into the realm of reality. During an event called “Long Night of the Museums,” Michael Ohl and his fellow researchers at the Museum für Naturkunde asked visitors to participate in naming a newly-discovered species of wasp. The choices for the species epithet were four: *bicolor*, *mon*, *dementor*, and *plagiator*. Thirty-eight percent of those who returned their ballots chose the epithet *dementor*, after the fictional characters from the *Harry Potter* series. Per this majority, the newly-discovered species of wasp henceforth bears the taxonomical nomenclature *Ampulex dementor*.

This is not the first time a species is named after a fictional entity. There are dozens of examples ranging from *Otocinclus batmani* (a fish whose tale features the Bat Symbol) to *Spongiforma squarepantsii* (a mushroom that looks very much like a sponge).

This phenomenon is not only wonderfully quirky. It is also, as several researchers put forth, mutually beneficial to both the public and the scientists. Ohl et al note, for instance that “the naming aspect of taxonomy [is] particularly suitable for communicating the process of species discovery to the public...[B]y creating direct opportunities for participation in the discovery of new species for the public, we help visitors feel like partners and co-owners of the content of the museum and the global ‘Catalog of Life.’”¹ In an article on this naming practice, Joseph Stromberg quotes David Roy Smith of the University of Western Ontario, who says, “Scientists are perceived to be serious and stiff...When you put some entertainment and fun into your work, the general public gets a kick out of it, and appreciates it a little more.” Adds Stromberg, “In an age when public funding for science is drying up, garnering every bit of support can make a difference in the long-term.”²

The naming of species after fictional entities is a fascinating example of how popular culture influences science. In this paper, I argue that this practice also bears important narratological implications; it indicates that through media convergence and participatory culture (cf. Henry Jenkins), fiction transontologically leaks into reality. This effect is exemplified when we consider originally fictional entities such as Quidditch (no longer a fictional sport, as it is played on scores of college and university campuses), Klingon (no longer a fictional language now that it is spoken by non-fictional people), and the Wonka Bar (available for purchase in stores that are located outside of the confines of Dahl’s book’s covers). Drawing on narratology and speech act theory, I show that reader/audience participation across media can blur and even bring about crossings of the border between fiction and reality.

¹ Ohl, Michael, et al. “The Soul-Sucking Wasp by Popular Acclaim – Museum Visitor Participation in Biodiversity Discovery and Taxonomy.” *PLOS ONE*. 22 Apr. 2014. Web. 31 October 2014.

² Stromberg, Joseph. “Why Do We Keep Naming New Species After Characters in Pop Culture?” *SMITHSONIAN.COM*. 5 Nov. 2013. Web. 31 October 2014.