

“Units of Expression on Shuffle in Borges, Asimov, and the X-Men”

A unit of expression is the basic building block of an entity, where different combinations of units produce different entities. Examples of units of expression include graphemes that are sequenced to form a word, instructions that are sequenced to form a computer program, and genes that are sequenced to form an organism. While the unit of expression can be further broken down into units of rudimentary information (such as a brush stroke, a bit, and a nucleotide), the unit of expression is the smallest unit that carries **purposeful** data.

This paper considers representations of the combinations and recombinations of units of expression in the science fiction and fantasy of Jorge Luis Borges, Isaac Asimov, and Marvel’s X-Men. Borges’ “The Library of Babel” describes the universe as a library, whose “bookshelves contain all possible combinations of the twenty-two orthographic symbols.” The positronic robots of Asimov’s **I, Robot** are conceivably programmed with combinations of instructions, and it is the specific combination of these instructions that gives each robot his particular qualities. X-Men superheroes such as Professor X, Magneto, Storm, and Wolverine have powers that stem from distinct genetic mutations. In each of these three realms, the recombination of graphemes, instructions, and genes, respectively, forms the narrative’s core – so much so that the shuffling of units of expression might be seen as an SFF narrative trope.

I use narrative theory to explore the workings of this trope in the tales of Borges, Asimov and the X-Men’s adventures, and argue that recombination is a common feature of SFF narratives. Focused as they are on speculation and the extraordinary, SFF narratives often ask what happens when basic building blocks are rearranged such that new and marvelous buildings emerge. By comparing narratives that feature recombinations of different types of discreet units, I distinguish recombination as a recurring device. This allows us to crystallize the phenomenon as a trope, and thus study its machinations and implications.