Digital Games, Science Fiction, and the Death of Literature

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D UE TO THE ONGOING DIGITAL revolution and increasing pressures from STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects, departments of literature across the world are facing a stark reality: a shrinking reading public of literature in society, and dwindling enrollment of literary majors in colleges and universities. The diminishing interest in literature is observed in both Western and Eastern literatures and reveals one universal phenomenon: Literary studies across the world are struggling to survive in the age of digital revolution and telecommunication by eking out their existence through compulsory literary requirements of general education. The situation in society is even more disheartening. In public places anywhere, one may see people intently watching their iPhone or iPad, but few of them are likely reading literary works, be it poetry, fiction, or drama. As a consequence, not a few people predict that in the foreseeable future, literary studies are likely to become an endangered species among the institutionalized academic disciplines. Jacques Derrida, for one, prophesied in the 1980s: "An entire epoch of so-called literature, if not all of it, cannot survive a certain technological regime of telecommunications (in this respect the political regime is secondary). Neither can philosophy, or psychoanalysis. Or love letters."[1]

Echoing Derrida's prophecy for the possible demise of literary studies in particular and of the humanities in general, many thinkers and scholars, including Alvin Kernan, Michael Bérubé, Robert Scholes, John Ellis, Carl Woodring, Edward Said, J. Hillis Miller, and others seriously contemplate and speculate on the fate and future of literature.[2] They have raised some thought-provoking questions, the tenor of which may be boiled down to two practical

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1 Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond,* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 204.

2 See Alvin Kernan, *The Death of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Michael Bérubé, *The Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literary Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); John M. Ellis, *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Robert Scholes, *The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as A Discipline* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Carl Woodring, *Literature: An Embattled Profession* (New York: Columbian University Press, 1999); Edward Said, "Restoring Intellectual Coherence," in *MLA Newsletter*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring 1999); J. Hillis Miller, "Literature Matters Today," in *Substance*, Volume 42, No. 2 (2013), pp. 12-32; and *Literature Matters* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2016).

questions: How can we re-energize the teaching of literature and attract more students into taking literature courses at colleges and schools dominated by STEM subjects? And how can we resuscitate the popular interest in reading literary works in the age of globalization dominated by new media and telecommunications? In this article, I will make an attempt to locate possible practical answers to those two questions by exploring the connections between digital games and literary works and by examining the internal reasons for the recent upsurge of popular interest in science fiction and the role science fiction may play in re-energizing public interest in literature.

Science Fiction as a Bridge between "Two Cultures"

In his renowned lecture delivered in 1959, subsequently published in a book form as *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, C. P. Snow made a keen observation of a trend in the industrialized society of his time and raised his famous argument that the intellectual life of the whole Western society has split into two contrasting and almost exclusive cultures—one of the sciences and the other of the humanities; and that the split had become an obstacle to resolving world problems in the modern age.[3] More than half a century later, the divide between the Two Cultures in Snow's conception has been increasingly widened by the predominance of STEM subjects in the educational system and new media and communications in society. In our efforts to confront the challenges of STEM, our aim is not only to bridge the gap between the Two Cultures, but also to tackle a practical question: How can we

re-energize the teaching of literature and attract more students into taking literature courses? In a recent book, *Thinking Literature across Continents*, J. Hillis Miller and his co-author Ranjan Ghosh have addressed this question and engaged in elaborate discussions of how to re-invent the teaching machine in the global age of science and technology.[4] Their advocacy and critical practice are an admirable and noble effort to rescue literary studies which is hard pressurized by STEM subjects. But in the face of the globalization of technology, will it be able to lure students of STEM majors into taking courses of literature? My common sense compels me to have doubts.

The endangered status of literary studies consists of two basic factors that I have identified in the opening of this article: the declining number of literature majors in colleges and the dwindling interest in reading literature in society. Both factors are duly reflected in one academic phenomenon on college campuses: that is, the dwindling of attendance at public lectures on literature. Nowadays, it is a no small effort to organize a successful public lecture on a literary topic. Except for lectures by big names such as a Nobel Literature Prize winner or world-renowned scholars of literature, most lectures on college campuses are inadequately attended despite strenuous efforts made by lecture organizers for publicity and advertisement. It is not a rare occurrence that a public lecture on literature is attended by a small audience, to the embarrassment of both the organizer and the speaker. But one recent lecture should give us food for thought for re-inventing the teaching machine and for devising practical ways to save literary

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3 C. P. Snow, [1959] *The Two Cultures* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 3.

4 Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller, *Thinking Literature across Continents* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

studies. This speaker was neither a world-renowned author nor a world-renowned scholar. In fact, he is not even a professional scholar of literature. It was a lecture on the translation of Chinese science fiction delivered by Ken Liu, an attorney by profession, an amateur author, and an amateur translator.[5] His lecture topic was on the origins of Chinese science fiction through translation of Western works and his own translation of Chinese science fiction writer Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem*.[6] The lecture was a huge success with the lecture hall packed with standing room only for latecomers. The huge turnout of the lecture had a number of reasons, but the biggest appeal was the topic itself: science fiction. A large number of the audience was composed of undergraduate and graduate students. They came to the lecture simply because it was one on science fiction with a focus on a popular Chinese sci-fi novel *The Three-Body Problem*, which won the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2015, the first translated fiction ever to receive that prestigious honor. I used to have a low opinion of science fiction and could not understand why people, old and young, East and West, are so captivated by *Star Trek*, *Jurassic Park*, *Harry Potter*, and the *Space Odyssey* series. This lecture totally changed my mind and forced me to rethink the significance of science fiction genre both for the sake of the genre itself and for literature as a whole.

In the academic and popular conception, science fiction always has something lowly about it, at least never on a par with refined high literature. It is frequently dismissed as an escapist writing appealing to less intellectual-minded and lowly-educated social strata. In the age of globalization and technology, science fiction has been gaining increasing popularity in society and power to impact our lives and the world. Its popularity and power come from both extrinsic and intrinsic reasons. Extrinsically, as science and technology have become indispensable parts of our lives, we have become cyborgs in one way or another, willy-nilly. While science and technology have improved and enhanced the quality of our lives, they also bring with them side-effects which plunge us into uncertainty and even fear. Science fiction addresses the positive and negative effects of science and technology. It can help us think about the role, value, and ethics of science and technology, forewarning us of its positive and negative effects on humanity and society, and imaginatively projecting its developmental trends and long-term effects and outcome. Intrinsically, science fiction is more effective than any other literary genre in expanding our imagination and exploring the consequences of our social endeavors, moral beliefs, value systems, and educational policies. In a way, it may even surpass philosophical reflections. It is true that science fiction till now is not a highly regarded literary genre, but it has some advantages over other literary genres. It is not only a genre of literature, but also a genre of TV, film, online writing, and other media including computer games and board games. Although one may dismiss it as an escapist genre, yet ironically, it is a genre most directly related to our life, society, and future.

From the perspective of human psychology, the popularity of science fiction in all media may touch a deep dimension of literary psychology and offer hints to a hidden pattern of development in human perception, cognition, aesthetics, and consciousness across cultural traditions. In

5 Ken Liu, "Betrayal with Integrity: Conformance and Estrangement in Translating Chinese Science Fiction." Anlin Ku Lecture, University of Texas at Dallas, October 20, 2016.

6 Liu Cixin, *The Three-Body Problem*, translated by Ken Liu (New York: Tor Books, 2016).

his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye proposes a theory of literature, which, based on a modification of Aristotle's elevation of the characters in the Poetics and an observation of Western fiction, views European literary development in five modes characterized by "the hero's relative power of action": (1) myth; (2) romance; (3) the high mimetic mode; (4) the low mimetic mode; and (5) the ironic mode. In an article, "The Universal Significance of Frye's Theory of Fictional Modes," a scholar conducts a comparative study of Frye's theory in relation to the Chinese literary tradition and argues for the transcultural value of Frye's theory in spite of distinctive differences in the Eastern tradition. On the strengths of the comparative study, he suggests that the compatibility of Frye's theory of literature with Chinese literary tradition "seems to affirm that the developmental model in Frye's theory of fictional modes may perhaps be viewed as a hidden structural pattern in long-term human endeavors such as the movements of history, literature, art, civilization, and culture."[7] He also suggests that Frye's fictional modes form a pattern, which may be repeated in variegated cyclical forms. And science fiction in modern times may be viewed as a modern form of ancient myths and legends. He mentions in particular: "Star Trek, the American TV series, has captivated viewers all over the world, partly because it provides a means to satisfy modern people's (un)conscious longing for the long lost infantile hallucinatory sense of omnipotence."[8] That article was written in 1992 and first published in 2001.[9] Now, 25

years later, as though to affirm the understanding of Frye's insights, science fiction has become the most popular genre in literature, TV series, film, video games, and multi-media.

The popularity of science fiction among the reading public is the consequence of both technological advancement and the innate drives of the human desire to control one's world and destiny in the age of postmodernism. Lyotard defines postmodernism succinctly as "incredulity toward metanarrative," which, he also notes, "is undoubtedly a product of the progress in the sciences."[10] In the postmodern age, Eagleton points out, the solid foundation of modernity built on such Enlightenment norms as truth, reason, identity, and objectivity has slipped away from under one's feet,[11] and in place of the culture of reason is a "style of culture" that offers a "depthless, decentered, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art which blurs the boundaries between 'high' culture and 'popular' cultures, as well as between art and everyday experience."[12] Doubtless, science fiction in the postmodern age fully reflects these characteristic features of postmodernism and radically deviates from early works of science fiction created by Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and others in that it downplays the role of rationality and does not shun themes of the supernatural, thereby coming closer to the traditional genre of fantasy. In a way, it may be viewed as a postmodern form of myths

Ning, eds., *New Direction in N. Frye Studies* (Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001), pp. 239-264.

10 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xiv.

11 Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), pp. 57-58.

12 Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell,1996), p. vii.

7 M. D. Gu, "The Universal Significance of Frye's Theory of Fictional Modes," in Jean Grady and Wang Ning, eds., *Northrop Frye: Eastern and Western Perspectives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 175.

8 Ibid., 174.

9 Gu Mingdong, "Frye and Psychoanalysis in Literary Studies: The West and China, in Jean Grady and Wang

and legends or postmodern Gothic romance. Although it generally orients toward the future, science fiction shares with postmodern works of literature and art what Fredric Jameson calls the "attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically."[13] Moreover, science fiction attempts to think the future imaginatively beyond postmodern fiction. Aesthetically, I believe that science fiction in the postmodern era is becoming increasingly refined and literary, perhaps because much of the imaginative energy for traditional literature is migrating into it.

For both extrinsic and intrinsic reasons, we may employ science fiction as an effective means to save and resuscitate literary studies. Since science fiction has the benefits of both worlds—those of sciences and humanities, I believe, it may effectively serve as a bridge across the gap between the Two Cultures and play a crucial role in turning STEM into STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, mathematics) in education. We should rethink the importance of science fiction, elevate its status among literary genres, and call on sci-fi authors to blend the popular demand for imaginative consumption and the aesthetic requirements of refined literature in their literary creation. In our efforts to re-invent the teaching machine, we should develop new curricula that take into account the popular demand for fun as well as the educational requirements of knowledge acquisition and human cultivation. Through an imaginative use of science fiction, we may be able to reinvent the teaching machine in a way to meet the challenges of science and technology and to lure the reading public back to the domains

of literature. We may even be able to avert the disappearance of literary studies as an academic discipline.

Digital Games as a Portal to Literature

Since science fiction is still a literary genre that has been in existence for over a century, one may say that it is only tangentially related to new media and communications generated by electronic technology. How can we make a connection between literature and digital culture like video games and interface culture, which have taken a heavy toll on popular interest in literature? It is certainly true that digital games, which are played by billions of people around the world, may be the single most fatal cause for the decline of interest in literature. As such, they may be viewed as the first and foremost enemy to literature. If we look deeper into the issue, however, we may be able to find something interesting that might be employed to turn digital games into allies for literary studies. Among digital games, video games are the most popular genre. A video game shares with the novel and epic the qualities of fictionality and extended narrative; with lyric poetry the subtlety of emotions, themes and symbols; and with film and TV series the features of storytelling, movable images, dazzling music cues and visual sights. Moreover, video games possess the strengths of most artistic media without many of their limitations. A formal and technical study may even locate an inner connection between video games and most refined literary works like Joyce's *Ulysses*. As we are lamenting the fact that video games have drastically reduced popular interest in refined literature like Eliot's *Wasteland* or Joyce's *Ulysses*, we seem to have failed to notice the possibility that video games and literature may become strange bedfellows in our time. A look into the inner

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13 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), p. ix.

connection between video games and experimental fiction will be enlightening.

Just as Eliot's poem changed our ideas about poetry, Joyce's novel also changed our notion of what a novel is and what it can accomplish. Joyce lived in the first quarter of the twentieth century when the dominant technology included photography, electricity, internal combustion engine, and newly emerging film. The high-speed communication made possible by electronic technology was yet to come, but there were already enough media types that enabled him to become aware of the interrelationship between art and technology, and to find inspiration for revolutionizing literary creation through novel treatment of the relationship between content and form, media and message. As a pioneer who realized that form is inseparably bound with content, Joyce put into brilliant practice his idea of using form to express content in his writing of *Ulysses*. With the appearance of *Ulysses*, Joyce, perhaps without himself knowing it, engaged in the efforts to create an early form of interface literature, which fuses textual elements from different quarters. In fact, he could be viewed as a technician not unlike Da Vinci or Gutenberg. Some even regard him as a computer programmer. In his *Interface Culture*, Steven Johnson asks a startling question: "When James Joyce published *Ulysses* in 1922 and revolutionized all of our expectations about how books should work, was he so different from Gutenberg himself?" He provides an affirmative answer: "You couldn't see it at that time, but Joyce was a highly skilled technician, tinkering around with a book-machine, making it do things it had never done before."[14] Joyce's contemporaries and readers of our era have all regarded him as a literary man, a verbal artist, but Johnson convincingly argues that "from our vantage point, he could just as easily be a programmer; writing codes for the printing press platform. Joyce wrote software for the hardware originally conjured up by Gutenberg."[15] Johnson also reverses the angle in viewing the issue and suggests that "Gutenberg's reworking of the existing manuscript technology of quills and scribes was a creative act as profound as Molly Bloom's final monologue from Ulysses." What is the logic of Johnson's analogy? He argues that both Joyce and Gutenberg are innovators with startling imagination, playing the dual role of artist and technician: "Gutenberg built a machine that Joyce souped up with some innovative programming, and Joyce hollered up a variation on a theme originally penned by Gutenberg himself." Indeed, if we view Joyce's experimental novel from the perspective of computer-generated multi-platformed texts, we have good reasons to say that Joyce was a pioneer in the creation of hypertext, and his experimental writing that fuses a variety of languages, historical particulars, and formal patterns is not unlike the present-day interface design, which is the fusion of art and technology.

In realizing that how one writes about something changes or determines what one can write about, Joyce came to the same realization as McLuhan's famous saying: "The medium is the message." By employing a wide variety of languages and styles, he endowed his language with the power to create a literary work which comes close to the multi-platformed texts made possible by computer technology. In creating *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce worked more like an interface designer, for the novel is believed by Joycean specialists to be

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14 Steven A. Johnson, *Interface Culture: How New Technology Transforms the Way We Create & Communicate* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 2.

15 Ibid., p. 3.

a huge cryptogram, which conceals a cyclic pattern for the entire history of human civilization in terms of Ten Thunders. In his novel, each of Joyce's thunders consists of a 100-character portmanteau of words. In concocting the portmanteau of words, Joyce was literally engaged in a linguistic game which is not unlike that of computer programming. Interestingly, McLuhan employs Joyce' novel as an inspiration for his study of war in human history and shows how each thunder in the novel is connected to technology which determines the development of humanity in history.[16] Although there is much controversy over what each portmanteau word may mean, a reader must break the portmanteau into separate words, many of which are themselves portmanteau words gleaned

about *Ulysses*. Numerous people have praised the book as a brilliant work of verbal art, and maybe the most refined book ever written in human history, but there is another side to the same coin: there has existed a big gap between the encomia that critics have heaped on Joyce's novel and the real experience of reading and understanding it. Most readers admit that they are unable to make it to the end. Even many scholars of English literature admit that they have not read the book from cover to cover. Why does this happen? Simply put, readers are put off by the language game in which Joyce excels and indulges. For this reason, the book has received criticism from people who dismiss it as a boring linguistic game which takes fun out of reading a literary work.

Joyce is creating a word game, not unlike the video games created by interface designers.

from different languages. In the true sense of the word, Joyce is creating a word game, not unlike the video games created by interface designers. As a work "where every sentence opens a variety of possible interpretations,"[17] Joyce's novel is both literally and figuratively a literary game.

For this reason, however, what he created has often been dismissed as language games. In terms of interface culture, he may be viewed as a precursor of the kind of educated people in the postmodern, post-human, post-literary, and post-technology age. But in terms of our concern with the likely death of literature in the traditional sense, there is something tricky

Both Joyce's novels and digital games share a commonality in being games, but there is a big difference in terms of their outcomes. While the former is a brilliant failure, the latter is a ruinous success. Joyce's novels are brilliant as the most refined masterpieces of fiction, but fail to attract readers into reading them. Computer games are ruining the lives of millions of people, old and young, but they have achieved spectacular successes in attracting game players across the world. If Joyce was doing something not much different from that of an interface designer, why do readers feel put off by his novels? By contrast, people, both old and young, especially the young, are never bored by video games. I suggest that the literary game created by Joyce does not benefit from interface technology which was yet to appear. Joyce lived and wrote in a historical

16 Marshall McLuhan, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (New York: Bantam, 1968), p. 46.

17 Bernard Benstock, *Joyce-Again's Wake: An Analysis of Finnegans Wake* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, (1965), p. 6.

period when digital technology was still a remote thing in the future. If he lived in our present age of telecommunication, it is an educated speculation that he might have put computer graphics, video games, and interface culture to work in his revolution of fiction composition. Joyce's novels may be too esoteric to sustain the reader's interest, but they are writerly texts in Roland Barthes' conception. In the post-structuralist advocacy of reading, an ideal literary text is one that encourages the reader to come out of a passive, consumptive position and engage in a negotiative mode of reading which produces meaning out of the interactive relations between the text and the reader. In this mode of reading, the reader's initiative and imagination are utterly indispensable. Video games are quite effective in bringing into play the reader's initiative and imagination. Roland Barthes distinguishes literary works into two kinds of texts: readerly texts and writerly texts.[18] While the former encourages the reader to digest passively what is coded in a text, enjoying the fun encoded by the author, the latter stimulates the reader into an active participation in the process of reading so that he or she becomes a co-writer of the text and a co-producer of meanings. I venture to argue that a video game with extended narrative is a writerly text, for a player will have fun only when he or she both reads and plays while using his imagination and ingenuity. If a player passively plays the game, the game will not only become boring but also cannot even continue. Similar to reading a writerly text, the fun of a video game grows out of active participation by the player. Like literary works, video games can perform the didactic function of moral education as well

if a video game incorporates a classic literary work into its designing. Its educational function will be heightened if the video game designer self-consciously inputs a moral sense into the game designing. If this happens, computer games will play a vital role in enriching people's life rather than a destructive menace.

In our everyday life, video games have already made their cursory entry into the domains of literature. In the past ten years or so, video game designers in Japan, Korea and China have designed video games based on characters and episodes in the popular classical Chinese novel, *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*.[19] These games have attracted millions of people, both young and old, in the Far East. Video games at present are still limited in the extent to which narratives of literary works are incorporated, and they are in most aspects literal computer-generated games. As such, they are blamed for ruining the life of numerous young people across the world. But I believe, so long as video game designers give adequate coverage to narratives of literary works and pay enough attention to the functions of literature, there will appear a kind of interface literature that fuses video games, science fiction, and literary masterpieces which may work as a healthy alternative and save those helplessly and hopelessly indulging in video games.

For all the above reasons, some people believe that video games are endowed with the potential to become the best suited form of storytelling for our time. In my opinion, however, for video games to become a post-literary text, theories of computer games need to reformulate their ideology and doctrines. Right now, there are two schools of game theories: ludology

18 Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 4.

19 Luo Kuan-chung, *Romance of the Three Kingdom*, translated by C. H. Brewitt-Taylor (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2002).

and narratology. Narratologists recognize the role of video games as a storytelling medium, although its narrative function is based on cyberdrama and interactive fiction, in which a video game presents a simulated story world where a player engages in responding to what happens to him or her. Ludologists argue that a video game is first and foremost a game and should be understood and designed exclusively with the ludic logic of play and entertainment in mind. Although they do not deny the elements of narratology such as characters, plots, events, and traditional aspect of narrative in video games, they strongly believe that the narrative function is secondary, if not incidental, to video games. Clearly, the former is friendly to literature and literary studies while the latter is not. But neither is preoccupied with the educational and moral functions of traditional narrative in literature. This can be clearly observed in the discussions and debates among theorists and scholars of game studies. In the discussions and debates among game studies scholars, the time-honored didactic function of narratives was generally overlooked and the attention was almost exclusively focused on the technical aspects of games.[20] The

neglect should be held responsible for the grave consequences for video games in society.

For video games to become friends to literature, they need to integrate more canonical literary works into the process of design, and take into account the traditional function of literature as a medium of moral education. Up to the present, only a few classical works have been transferred into video games. Although the integration of canonical works and computer games has aroused scholarly concern over whether this is a rebirth or degeneration of classical literary works, at least, the practice has provided an opportunity for refined literature to revive itself under the pressures of STEM. It is therefore necessary to explore the gamification of literature further. I believe, if the corporate creators of computer games do not completely surrender to the profit-driven policies and fulfil their fair share of social responsibilities, a combination of digital games and literary works will give rise to a new literary genre that can rival traditional literary works. But can they resist the working logic of late capitalism and brush aside the invisible hand of the market? This is the crux of the matter! ◢

20 See collected articles in Mark Wolf & Bernard Perron, eds., *The Video Game Theory Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003); and especially, Gonzalo Frasca, "Ludologists love stories, too: notes from a debate that never took place," in Marinka Copier & Joost Raessens, eds., *Level-up: Digital Games Research Conference* (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 2003).