

A Thesis Presented to  
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Storytelling and the Future of Books

by

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## **Introduction**

Storytelling is an art which has been practiced through numerous media and with countless subjects. From oral tradition, to written word, to audial and visual methods, storytelling has progressed through many changes in technology. Books, and specifically novels, have been held up as the highest standard for fictional storytelling for the last few centuries. Now, however, their position as the top tier medium is in question. Digital media have changed nearly every facet of the world, and the literary world is by no means exempt. Not only do film and television compete with books as stand-alone media, but the convenience of accessing and consuming them has also been amplified by digital technology and the Internet. Netflix, YouTube, and Amazon are only a few of the numerous sites and services that can make ordinary print books seem like a thing of the past. Video games provide perhaps a unique sort of competition for books, as they allow players to step directly into the role of the main character, making choices and performing actions which inspire a level of involvement difficult to achieve in any other media. The new ways of storytelling that technology has enabled are so dynamic that they do seem to leave plain paper books—and even e-books—behind in the dust. However, other evidence suggests that this is not the case.

The object of this paper, ultimately, is to analyze the past and examine the present in order to speculate about the future of storytelling and books. It will survey the history of information and entertainment media in order to identify patterns in technology and discern what content we find worthwhile to read, watch, and listen to. Section one will discuss the nature of “content” and “media” and examine the relationship between them. Section two will provide a brief history of technological advancements that have affected media, paying

particular attention to the six “information revolutions.” Section three will focus again on content, analyzing and commenting on the types of stories which have the highest appeal today. Section four will look at the book business, particularly the decline of traditional bookstores. It will also cover the rise of the online retail giant, Amazon, and its effect on the book industry. Section five will examine video games as competition for books, as a storytelling medium that uses modern technology to enhance the experience. Section six will look at data regarding reading rates as well as conjectures on the future of books from professionals in literary fields. Finally, the conclusion will extrapolate on the future of books based on the research in sections one through six.

Books have seemed endangered for decades, but they still stand strong against obsolescence. Books do indeed have a place in the future—perhaps not the same place they have held in the past, but a significant place nonetheless.

### **Section I: Content and Media**

From the oral tradition of our early ancestors, our storytelling media have progressed to carvings on tablets, scrolls, and letters, to plays and novels, to radio and television, and finally to digital media and all the forms it envelops. While it may seem that everything has changed, a closer look reveals certain patterns and constants, even in the very words we use to name our written media. We’ve gone from reading scrolls to scrolling newsfeeds, for example. We used to cut figures into clay or stone tablets; now we read and write digital text on electronic tablets. And one thing that hasn’t changed a bit is that we still love a good story. People young and old still revel in imagining themselves as the protagonist of an exciting narrative, by reading books and also by listening to the radio, watching movies, and/or playing video games. We still crave stories, but we partake of them in different ways

and from different sources than we used to, because there are so many new ways to experience stories. The new media that fill our need for stories all come with their own quirks and implications; a tale told in one medium is different even from the same tale told in a different medium. One simple example of this is the way a movie adaptation of a book is always much different from the book on which it is based. Even a faithful adaptation is consumed differently and creates a different experience. Medium always affects and alters the content it carries.

Marshall McLuhan, in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, forms a pressing argument for medium being more significant than content in the study of media. McLuhan published this book in 1964, but the topics and points he emphasizes are just as relevant today as they were then, if not even more. He discusses media and people, content and culture, all as intertwining and interacting parts of a whole. The only way to achieve a full understanding of the media, he declares, is to study the media themselves and the cultures in which they work: "...so the latest approach to media study considers not only the "content" but the medium and the cultural matrix within which the particular medium operates" (McLuhan 11). McLuhan asserts that if those who study the media focus only on the content, they miss a huge part of the messages being conveyed. The very title of his book spells it out—media are extensions of man. As such, they themselves, regardless of content, relate directly to the condition of civilization. Media constantly influence and are influenced by culture.

If we were to characterize today's culture by one thing, it would probably be immediacy—presentism. We get our news as it's breaking, whether from credible news sources or citizen journalists on social media. We order our food online and have it

delivered to us within half an hour. We binge-watch television shows on Netflix and avoid having to wait a week for the next episode to come out. Media scholar Douglas Rushkoff's 2013 book, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*, explores the implications of a world in which everything seems to be immediately accessible. He describes the 1990s as a time when everybody was looking forward to the new millennium with great anticipation. Then when that new millennium arrived, the focus shifted to the here and now. That shift came with impatience and confusion, as Rushkoff describes:

Add real-time technologies, from the iPhone to Twitter; a disposable consumer economy where 1-Click ordering is more important than the actual product being purchased; a multitasking brain actually incapable of storage or sustained argument; and an economy based on spending now what one may or may not earn in a lifetime, and you can't help but become temporarily disoriented. It's akin to the onslaught of changing rules and circumstances that 1970s futurist Alvin Toffler dubbed "future shock" (Rushkoff 3-4).

In the throes of such disorientation, when such a sense of urgency is almost palpable, the most popular storytelling media is hardly a 500-page novel that takes hours to read.

According to a culture of immediacy, it would take too long to consume the information, and besides, it couldn't possibly be current enough to be relevant anymore. Videos such as those on YouTube, in contrast, present stories in a way that is quick and exciting; the experience, for many, may feel more gripping and present than that of reading words on a page, unilluminated and plain. Books never died out because of this, but they had some major competition.

For many, the millennial generation exemplifies the need for instant gratification. According to the stereotype, members of this generation lack focus and patience because of modern distractions like texting and social media. This may not be entirely untrue; however, it is important to understand that the desire to take in everything at once is much older than the millennial generation. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan looks back as far as the early 1900s and discusses cubism as an artistic form that shows all sides of one thing. He says that cubism drops all pretense of perspective in favor of “instant sensory awareness,” and therefore makes the statement that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 13). McLuhan goes on to connect that concept to the progression of communication. Indeed, we as a society now want increasingly more out of individual media, and technology has increasingly enabled us to make that desire a reality. Since the advent of digital media, new and faster technologies have been created which allow people to see and do more with one medium. In the past forty years, the dominant form of audial media has gone from cassette tapes, to eight-track tapes, to CDs, to MP3, and then to iTunes, Spotify, and Pandora—digital and online media. In the past twenty years, the dominant film technology has shifted from videocassette, to DVD, to Blu-Ray, and then to Netflix and other online video streaming services. Digital technology makes media accessible to the point where it is possible to access many different messages and types of content through one device—a tablet, computer, phone, etcetera. We look at one thing—an electronic screen—and see many things at once. Side effects may include shortened attention span and increased impatience as we expect more out of our media. Thanks to rapid advances in media, for better or worse, we have taken the multifaceted perspectives of cubism into the mindset of modern life.

## Section II: Technological Advancements in Media

Storytelling media through the ages have progressed logically, each building off the last. Every innovation in information technology has created new opportunities for stories to reach people more quickly, clearly, or vividly than the last. Broadly speaking, these innovations may be categorized into six information revolutions, which Irving E. Fang identified and analyzed in his book, *A History of Mass Communication: Six Information Revolutions*. The revolutions, as Fang defines them, are writing, printing, mass media, media as entertainment, the “toolshed home,” and the information highway. At each point in history, not only storytelling but worldview itself was dramatically altered as a result of the media revolution. We should note that these revolutions took hold at different times in different parts of the world. For example, the first movable type printing press was invented in China at least 400 years before Gutenberg’s press came to be (Clair). Historians credit Gutenberg with the groundbreaking invention largely because movable type is far more useful in alphabetic languages like German and English than in ideographic ones like Chinese. Of course, this also occurs because the history we know is told from a western point of view and emphasizes western achievement.

Humans began to write circa 3000 BCE in Mesopotamia, carving figures into clay or stone tablets primarily for record-keeping purposes. The next step was to keep records on scrolls, then in codex form, then in books (Out of Print). As writing and reading grew more widespread, fiction was born. The writing revolution as Fang defines it began in Greece around the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. with the use of a phonetic alphabet (Fang xvii). This is debatable, as systems of writing with phonetic qualities emerged in Mesopotamia and Egypt as many as 2000 years earlier. However, when and where the first phonetic alphabet was

used is less important in the context of this paper than the long-term effects of its existence. Today, we largely take reading and writing for granted, but when the written word was an entirely new concept, its implications were so profound that it shook the world (Fang xvii). We might consider writing as an extension of the human memory; it signifies that knowledge need not be limited by how much can fit in one mind. Put simply, writing is to the human mind as an external hard drive is to a computer; it is a place outside of ourselves where we can store thoughts, which may then be read by others. Each information revolution that happened after the birth of writing builds upon it; in fact, without it, none of the others would have been possible.

The second revolution, printing, arguably began in Europe in the late fifteenth century when Johannes Gutenberg created his moveable type printing press in 1450. In 1455 the printing of the 42-line Gutenberg Bible was completed at Mainz, Germany. The process of printing this book likely took a year or more (Clair 9). In the ensuing years the process was honed and made more efficient. Movable type printing quickly enabled written information to proliferate and spread on an unprecedented scale. It influenced religion with the printing of Bibles for personal use, which enabled the Protestant Reformation because people no longer had to rely on Church officials to read and interpret Scripture for them (Out of Print). Printing also allowed more people to educate themselves and to learn about places and people they may never see in real life. It enabled mass production and mass dissemination of literature, which leads to the next revolution.

According to Fang, the mass media revolution began in Western Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century. Some would argue that it began much closer to the invention of the printing press because that innovation enabled information to be replicated



and disseminated with speed that was never before possible. Fang's logic is that the inventions of the nineteenth century made mass media incredibly fast and effective compared to what came before (Fang xvii). The invention of the telegraph in the early 1800s increased the speed and frequency of communication over enormous distances. Newspapers and magazines could learn about things happening far away before the stories got cold; they began to reach out to wide audiences, informing common people about local, national, and global events. Photography supplemented stories and made them more eye-catching and engaging for readers. Literacy became more widespread as public schools grew in number across the western world. Middle classes grew in both Europe and the U.S., which meant an increase in the proportion of people with adequate leisure time in which to write and read for pleasure.

The fourth information revolution Fang defines is the entertainment revolution, which began in Europe and the U.S. almost right on top of the mass media revolution. From news to nonfiction to novels, all kinds of stories were printed and sold at affordable prices. The nineteenth century became the heyday of the novel. In England, publishing houses like Minerva Press, which specialized in Gothic novels, bought stories from authors and sold them in "blue books," paperback editions which were flimsy but affordable (Publishing). Previous to this time, new books were largely only obtainable for people wealthy enough to have their own private libraries. Circulating libraries also came into being. Much like modern-day libraries, they were collections of books which people could borrow for a period of time. Many specialized in specific genres and catered to niche markets. A new form of entertainment also emerged through photographs and films. As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. How many words, then, must a motion picture be worth

as it moves fluidly from one image to the next? The earliest motion pictures were made in the nineteenth century. Some of the first were created by Thomas Edison—short, one minute clips of people engaged in activities like playing football, dancing, and swinging clubs (Reilly). One of the first films to go beyond mere documentation and emphasize storytelling was *A Trip to the Moon*, the 1902 French silent film by Georges Méliès.

The fifth information revolution is identified by Fang as the communication toolshed home. The term means that information consumption was centered in the home; all the necessary tools were there to enable easy access to information. Around the mid-twentieth century, this revolution came about as ordinary, average people could listen to the radio, watch television, and have newspapers delivered right to their doorsteps. News and entertainment alike were practically at their fingertips. Following this era is the sixth and final information revolution defined by Fang: the information highway, referring to computer technology and the Internet. This revolution came about in the late twentieth century and particularly the 1990s. We also refer to this time as the digital revolution or the digital age. Fang's commentary ends there, as his book was published in 1997. Since 2000, the Internet has only grown in size and influence, and digital media have subsumed many traditional media to varying extents. Tablets and laptops can be used to read books, watch movies, make two-dimensional and three-dimensional paintings, listen to music, record music, keep in touch with family and friends far away, consume news and entertainment from the other side of the world... the list goes on.

### **Section III: Content—the Stories We Tell**

As storytelling media have changed and evolved with time, so too have the storytelling styles we favor. In his essay, *Where Do We Go From Here?: The Future of*

*Fiction*, Saul Bellow considers the opinions of several prominent writers and examines shifts in what stories and storytelling styles interest people today. Bellow first talks of the novel as an art form which focuses on the individual, and he remarks with some disappointment that modern storytelling seems to have gotten away from that. The protagonist has gone from being a whole person to a mere shell, a “presentation self” who is relatable but not compelling (Bellow). One might picture Bella from the *Twilight* saga. She has little personality to speak of, but this allows the target readership of teenage girls to easily project themselves onto her. It only makes sense that this kind of easy-access character has become prominent in an age of mass-production and fast media. We have become accustomed to getting what we want quickly. Why take time and effort to get to know a complex character when you could simply step into an attractive shell and make it your own?

The main character who can be easily identified with represents one prominent type in today’s popular literature; another type is simply a character that has been created before, only changed around a bit. Bellow muses on the idea that novels have done all that could be done with character and everything new that is created only echoes what came before: “The old figures move ritualistically through the paces, finding now and then variations in setting and costume, but they are increasingly remote from real reality” (Bellow). This second type of character has a complex personality to get to know, but one that has been done a million times over. Characters like Katniss in *The Hunger Games* and Tris in *Divergent* have unique qualities, but they still fit into the same mold of strong female protagonist who has one incredible skill and a lot of social anxiety. These characters must be explored by the reader, but just like with “shell-type” characters, it doesn’t take much effort to do so since they are essentially reimaginings of characters we already know. If novels are based on

character, then, and characters are turning into mere shells or molds, novels as we know them may be on their way out. Then again, writers and literary critics have bemoaned the state of literature many times since the invention of books, and books have not yet ceased to be.

Douglas Rushkoff, in *Present Shock*, focuses on narrative structure rather than character as the central aspect of storytelling, dedicating an entire chapter to “Narrative Collapse.” He writes that narrative is still important to hold the interest of media consumers, but that the kind of narrative that society now craves relies on shock factor rather than depth. Reality television shows provide a prime example. People watch them to find out what happens next, which indicates a need for narrative structure—yet, there is little real structure to them. What happens next almost *shouldn't* make sense, in order to keep the viewer interested. The result is a choppy, sensationalistic narrative style formed with the goal of captivating viewers in a striking moment. Rushkoff is particularly troubled by this trend because the shows must become increasingly outrageous and cruel in order to stand out and attract viewers. In his words, “What images and ideas can stop the channel-surfer in his tracks? The extent of the horror on screen is limited only by the audience’s capacity to tolerate the shame of its own complicity” (Rushkoff 37). Interestingly, as popular as reality television is, the general consensus seems to be that it’s rubbish. Many people refer to reality TV as their “guilty pleasure.” No one seems to be proud of liking it, but we watch it all the same.

“Reality” is not only in demand on television, but in books as well. Fantasy writer George R. R. Martin comes immediately to mind. He has said that he writes as realistically as he can to create the fantasy world of his *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. In plain terms, he

kills characters with a rapidity that would outdo Shakespeare in the last act of a tragedy, and with a seeming disregard to whether they are on the side of good or evil. In Martin's words, "Some of the fatalities will include sympathetic viewpoint characters. I want the reader to feel that no one is ever completely safe, not even the characters who seem to be the heroes" (Fichy). Thus, grim realism has become one of the latest trends in the fiction genre, whatever the medium. Perhaps we have the digital age to blame for that. Being more connected with more parts of the world than ever before has many wonderful advantages, but it also has consequences. We learn amazing but also terrible things—wars in other countries, terrorism, genocides, natural disasters, oppression of human rights going on even as we watch or read about it on our devices. Our worldview is turning grim, and our taste in entertainment reflects that.

The length of reading matter has changed as well. Novels are still novel-length, but fewer people are willing to read a book cover to cover. We have become accustomed to receiving information in small bites that are easy to swallow—blog posts, news articles, glib headlines, Sparknotes, etcetera. Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon, said the following in the 2012 documentary *Out of Print*: "I think there has been a shift over the past twenty years away from long-form reading—book length reading—and toward short-form reading." His statement was followed by professor of child development Maryanne Wolf, who described the immensity of information available to read online and asked, "Are we reading better, or are we just accruing information without true knowledge?" (*Out of Print*). Children are less inclined to read, and it shows in their ability—or, more accurately, their inability—to think critically. Children who engage only in short-form reading may be able

to decipher words on a page and sort through information, but they are largely incapable of thoughtful reflection and complex arguments (Out of Print).

Data collected by Scholastic in 2014 supports the claim that children are engaging in reading less than in previous years. The State of Kids and Reading Report shows that the percentage of children who read books for pleasure 4-5 days a week decreased nine percent from 2010 to 2014, while the percentage of children who use smartphones and other electronic devices for games, apps, and social media increased dramatically, especially in the younger age brackets (State of Kids and Reading Report). There may not be a causality, but there is certainly a negative correlation between reading for fun and use of electronics for fun. One reason may be that digital media are more dynamic than books. In this culture of immediacy, an ever-changing electronic display may capture children's interest more easily than words on an unchanging page. There is hope, however, in that many children and young adults are still avid readers of popular fiction novels such as the *Harry Potter* series. Stories with the most popular appeal also tend to be more inspiring and hopeful, in contrast with the dark realism of series like *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

#### **Section IV: The Book Business in a Digital Age and the Effects of Amazon**

The Authors Guild is concerned currently about the cultural situation regarding books. Literacy rates are decreasing, people are less inclined to pay for reading content, and more technologically advanced storytelling media provide fierce competition. President of the Authors Guild Scott Turow said in 2012, "People will always burn with the urge to write, but they won't always make enough money to support themselves" (Out of Print). In the early 2000s, Google struck deals with libraries and other written resource centers to create Google Books, a collection of scanned texts available to anyone in snippets online. It

was created with the intent of forming a massive online archive of written word while at the same time allowing partial access to an incredible number of books to an incredible multitude of people. This kind of free access to books online along with predatory pricing from sites like Amazon has caused books to be monetarily undervalued. The industry is highly lucrative for the relative few bestselling authors; for the rest, income from writing is seldom enough to live on (Out of Print). With the prospect of making money as an author quickly becoming a thing of the past, writing novels is far less appealing than it has been in past years. Self-publishing, a popular option nowadays, has given some authors the start they need, but most new writers who self-publish actually lose money to see their books in print.

E-books have played a huge role in the depreciation of books. Because they do not require time for manufacture and shipping, they are cheaper and more accessible in most cases than print books. This is a positive for readers because they can get books that may be difficult to obtain in physical copy, and they can often buy subsequent books in a series without needing to travel to a bookstore—which may be far away for some who live in rural areas (Out of Print). On the negative side, e-books are putting small bookstores out of business. In 1991 there were approximately 6500 independent booksellers in the U.S. That figure had decreased by 70% by 2012 (Out of Print, American Booksellers Association). The result is not only a loss in jobs for the booksellers but also a loss in personal connection for the readers. Bookstores have traditionally been a place for making connections, getting recommendations from the staff, and discovering new talent. Conversations with booksellers can still happen on the Internet, but at a distance. Text on a glowing screen is not as real as text on a physical page; it vanishes with the touch of a button.

Recommendations online are not as genuine as those submitted in person—at least not usually—because they feel more like advertisements than true human connection. And as for making connections... that simply doesn't happen when buying a book with one or two clicks.

Even with the advantage e-books have over print books, many publishers have been slow to pick up on digital publishing, which has hurt them in the long run. Jane Friedman, CEO of Open Road Integrated Media, said that most publishers at first wanted to ignore the rapid changes in technology and realized too late that they could not (Out of Print). The immensity of the Internet and the growing potential of digital technology were overwhelming, and Amazon only sped up the decline of private booksellers. The business of buying and selling books was changed irrevocably with the advent of Amazon, the online bookstore turned superstore. Jeff Bezos has said, “Amazon isn't happening to the book business. The future is happening to the book business” (Stone 11). The future, with its huge corporations and new digital technology, was indeed happening to the book business in 1995 when Amazon.com went live. Entering the age of “everything happens now,” an online company from which people could buy books without having to leave their homes clicked right into place. For readers living in rural areas far from bookstores, Amazon provided a convenient way for them to order new books without travelling fifty miles or more. In the early years of the company, Amazon received numerous calls from grateful customers who reported what a positive effect the online bookselling service had had on them (Packer, Stone 38).

In the early 1990s, books were already facing a crisis for a number of reasons—and Amazon would become one of the top reasons just a few years down the road. Books were



not in obvious danger of going obsolete, but the Internet was taking its toll while simultaneously large chain bookstores held sway over publishers and independent booksellers (Packer). Publishers knew that if they wanted their books to garner high sales, they would need to be marketed and sold through large retailers. One major downside of selling to chain bookstores, however, was that publishers would be obligated to buy back unsold inventory, a practice an ex-Amazon employee called, “an inefficient model, worse than my uncle sending his laundry home from college” (Packer). Amazon offered some relief to publishers at its outset. The new online bookseller appeared as a valuable new source of sales that hardly ever returned inventory. However, there soon proved to be ways in which Amazon was just like the chain bookstores, and, in fact, even worse.

It was common practice for booksellers to charge cooperative promotional fees to publishers for better product placement. In a physical bookstore this would mean better location within the store, perhaps on one of those islands in an area that gets heavy foot traffic. In an online bookstore, it meant being featured on the homepage or coming up first for certain search terms. This made product placement even more important online, because that homepage and those searches are the primary ways customers find books to purchase. There isn't a way to browse bookshelves on Amazon, so if a book isn't featured or if it doesn't come up high in searches, its chances of being sold fall sharply. Because of this, Amazon became very good at negotiating co-op promotional fees, charging as much as ten thousand dollars to have a book prominently featured (Packer). Then as Amazon grew more successful, instead of raising prices on its products, it charged its suppliers even steeper co-op fees and demanded better shipping terms. At this point, Amazon was such an influential retailer that publishers were pressured to comply, lest their books become less prominent in

the website's search engine. As Amazon grew, it also began selling more than just books. Jeff Bezos used analysis of book sales to figure out what Amazon customers were interested in purchasing and what the best marketing strategies were to sell it to them. John Sargent, the chief executive of Macmillan Publishers, said of Bezos, "I thought he was just a bookstore, stupid me. Books were going to be the way to get the names and the data. Books were his customer-acquisition strategy" (Packer). So, with a shrewd business strategy combined with technological savvy, Amazon became a multibillion-dollar company and a prominent threat to the very industry that gave it its start.

Many of the bookstores that are still around today have responded to the threats of online booksellers and e-books by offering a unique experience. Barnes and Noble represents a prime example of having created a stable niche market (Gefvert). Coffee shops are located inside the stores, adding a pleasant, upscale café atmosphere for customers who want to browse for books and socialize with a cup of coffee. Because of this simple addition, the company is not only selling books, it is selling a comfortable, coffee-infused experience of book-shopping and reading. Barnes and Noble has also helped ensure its survival by embracing the digital age. Amazon came out with Fire tablets; Barnes and Noble came out with Nook e-readers (Gefvert). The company also took another page out of Amazon's playbook in that it now sells more varied types of products besides books. The goods for sale still consist mainly of gift items and book-related merchandise, but even just those small departures from exclusively selling books have helped the company survive.

### **Section V: Video Games—Competition for Books**

Video games may not at first sound like they belong in the same category as books. Books are a time-honored, traditional medium while video games are known more as a

hobby or a bad habit for children and young adults. The storytelling power and potential of video games, however, is undeniable. Video games put the player directly in the position of the protagonist, with an immediacy not everyone can experience while reading a book.

Robin Burks, a writer for Tech Times, stated the following in an article titled, “How Video Games Have Become the Perfect Storytelling Medium:”

“Video games achieve something that other forms of storytelling just can’t,” says Dave Gilbert, founder of Wadjet Eye Games, the producers behind Technobabylon and the Blackwell series. “They put you IN the experience. You are making the events happen, or the events are happening to you. It’s not easy to pull off, but when it’s done right there is no experience like it” (Burks).

The level of involvement that video games require makes them powerful competition for other storytelling media that simply tell us to sit back and take in the events of the plot.

Many role-play games, such as Skyrim, also allow character customization for the protagonist’s physical appearance and voice, which can cause the player to identify more with that character and deepen the immersion. Video games also have the ability to offer something books usually do not, which is to give their players a sense of agency. In story-based games such as Mass Effect and Until Dawn, the player doesn’t simply go through the motions of the plot; dialogue and action options allow the player to actually change the way the story plays out (Burks). Choose-your-own-adventure books did the same thing, but video games were able to take the concept to a new level.

Most people who love to read would agree that the experience of reading a captivating novel feels like being immersed in its world. The imagination does wonders to bring the book to life. Yet, there is really only one sense involved: sight. Video games

employ music to define the mood of a scene, spoken dialogue and sounds to convey emotion and progress through the plot, and ever-improving graphics to create a world that looks ever more real, no matter how fantastical it may be. Virtual reality is also becoming more advanced every day, and technology already exists that can make a gamer physically feel sensations similar to what a character in a game is experiencing (Westwater, Rose). With video games, the world of the game doesn't have to be imagined—it's given through multiple senses. The negative side of this is that players don't get to imagine the character and the world the way they want to, which creates a kind of disconnect right off the bat. On the other hand, that same initial disconnect makes it easier for some to enter the world of a game than of a book, because they are able to simply step into the game without needing to wrap their minds around it first. Most current games contain a player-controlled sequence of action early on, which elicits the feeling that the player is making the events happen in the moment even if choice-based actions aren't available yet.

Because many video games are story-driven, there is a place for writers in the gaming industry. However, video game writing positions are relatively scarce, with most newly created positions found in programming or graphic design. Ed Kuehnel, a full-time freelance writer for computer games and video games, even says that it is so difficult to break into the writing business that aspiring video game writers should initially go for an entry level job in a different capacity and move toward writing from there (Oguntoyinbo). The gaming industry is similar to Hollywood in that it is easier to shift career focus within the field than to enter the field in the first place. So, while video games do employ writers, there are not a lot of readily obtainable game-writing jobs. That side of the industry is not growing.

## **Section VI: The Future of Books and Storytelling**

Some statistics on reading in America are troubling, to say the least. The Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that in 2012, one out of four American adults read zero books. The California Health Literacy Initiative reported in 2008 that the average Californian adult reads at only a seventh-grade level (Out of Print). Children are also reading less. The Kaiser Family Foundation reported that only about 6% of media consumed by children is in the form of books (Out of Print). These statistics are deeply troubling because literacy is so interrelated with intelligence, particularly in the areas of abstract thinking and critical thinking. The kind of reading most Americans engage in daily is surface-level: blog posts, news articles, Facebook posts, headlines, reviews, etc. Reading in depth—like novel-reading—exercises the imagination and stimulates deeper thinking than surface-level reading can. It sparks connections in the mind and expands patterns of thinking. For every functionally illiterate person, we as a society grow weaker and, frankly, dumber. The book industry has found itself in a tight spot since the digital age began, and so have we all, along with it.

Opinions vary among writers as to the future of books. As far back as the 1990s, and likely farther too, authors were already questioning the place of the novel in future times. In 1992, a panel was held in Manhattan with several authors debating that topic. One, Norman Rush, argued that the novel offers “the chance to be something other than what we are, and it is therefore a mighty engine of liberation” (Grimes). Having now more than two decades between the present and the date of that statement, a flaw in Rush’s logic becomes apparent. He praises novels as a powerful source of liberation—or, by stretching the term slightly, escapism. Today, film and video games rival books as highly prominent escapist media.

Another author, Harold Brodkey, said during that same panel that he believed, “in America a novel lives by being placed on the syllabus of college English courses” (Grimes). Author Will Self was not at the Manhattan discussion panel, but he wrote a somewhat lengthy essay which seems to agree with Brodkey’s opinion of the future of books. He describes novels as a dying art form, saying that literature and reading will remain prevalent but not in the way we think of books now—more along the lines of language used online in quick bites of data. The novel is being cut down from its exalted status and cut up into pieces everyone can swallow. Like Brodkey, Self believes that the place of the novel will soon be in university studies rather than popular culture. According to him, its life will consist of being taught there as an outdated art (Self).

While some authors may have a cynical outlook on the future of their own livelihood, others disagree with such bleak conclusions. Alberto Manguel, who wrote *A History of Reading*, said, “What gives me hope for the future of books are the young people who come to me from time to time and say, ‘I’ve discovered this extraordinary writer called Hemingway. Do you know him?’” (Out of Print). There is especially hope to be found for books in schools and homes where children are encouraged to read for pleasure and not just for education. The 2016 Kids and Family Reading Report from Scholastic showed that 86 percent of kids ages 6–17 agree that “it is very important for their future to be a good reader.” Also, 58 percent of kids reported that they like or love reading books for fun (Kids and Family Reading Report). Teachers who observe children learning to love reading see hope for the future of books in the very generations that are thought to want nothing to do with them. Certainly many children are addicted to screen-time, but enough are growing up to be bookworms to keep literature alive and relevant. Even if everything worth writing

about has already been written, as has been suggested, new generations will always be coming up to experience those excellent texts for the first time and to rewrite the old stories from a new perspective.

## **Conclusion**

The book industry will look different in the future, but nevertheless, a future for books absolutely exists. In terms of content, a large proportion of popular books may continue to feature shell characters and repetitive narratives, but it is unlikely that shallow storytelling will take over the market altogether. Content is more difficult to anticipate than medium; it is as unpredictable as any prospective author's imagination, and society has not become so superficial that the only popular stories are shallow and formulaic. Some argue that every story worth telling has already been told before. Even if that is so, writers can still find new and original ways to retell them. Great writers who tell captivating stories had to get their ideas from somewhere. Even Shakespeare, the great Bard himself, borrowed most of his plots from his literary predecessors. The greatness of his work was in the way he told those stories and gave them new life. From this perspective, the outlook for writers today is more positive; with so many centuries of literary history behind us, new writers have an immense amount of story material to work from and be inspired by.

Booksellers and publishers have dealt with technological advancement and changing times with varying degrees of success. They compete with television, movies, and video games, among other media, but a market for books remains. Amazon is now an "everything store," but they built their consumer base on book sales, and they continue to be known as a bookseller. While Amazon and other online sellers have put a lot of traditional bookstores out of business, those that remain are adapting and forming niche markets that can endure.

Booksellers like Barnes and Noble have survived by expanding the range of products they sell and by selling an experience along with those products. They have also embraced technology, offering books in electronic formats and tablets on which to read them.

The importance of reading continues to be recognized by parents, teachers, and children alike. Furthermore, a great many children still enjoy reading, contrary to statistics that seem to suggest that they are overwhelmingly obsessed with technology and bored with books. For proof, we need only look at the box office success of movies like *Divergent*, *Hunger Games*, and *Harry Potter*. Those are only a few of the series which were made into popular movies because the books were so appealing to young generations. Certainly, there are those who became fans of the films alone, or who only read the books because of the films, but so many—so many more, it could be argued—fell in love with the books first. Tweens and teens formed lines and camped out for hours leading up to the midnight releases of J. K. Rowling's novels. Those midnight book releases were just about as huge and fantastic as the first midnight showings of the movies based on them.

Books in print may eventually become a curiosity as the world moves further into the digital age. This will affect the way people read, because the experience of a story is inevitably different based on the medium through which it is told. E-book reading can be less immersive—for example, if the device's battery is low, if notifications come in from social media, or if the device is dropped and the screen turns off or cracks. It will also never feel as intimate as the experience of reading a book, the physical form of which has been held and read by others before, and which contains a connection not only to its author, but to those others who have held it. As the shift from print to e-books continues, the experience of reading will inevitably continue to be altered. However, if tablets, Nooks, and other



electronic reading devices can keep long-form reading alive as print becomes less popular, the change will be worth it. Books have endured a great many changes already in format, medium, and content. They will endure many more before they meet their end, if they ever do.

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