

Comparison of Digital Literature* between South Korea and North America

Kyungsook Suh

(Chungnam National University)

Suh, Kyungsook. "Comparison of Digital Literature between South Korea and North America." *Studies in English Language & Literature* 43.4 (2017): 107-123. The author examines what literary activities have been conducted on the web or on individual computers in both South Korea and North America. To do that, the author focuses on the differences of digital literature in South Korea and North America by examining the digital literary history of both regions. Furthermore, the author delves into the definitions of terms such as e-literature and digital literature to find out how the two parties have represented them according to their terms. The author reviews how experimental literary traditions in North America and socio-economic aspects of South Korea would affect the development of digital literature in each country. Also, the author looks into what kinds of actual online texts have been produced and how the public has responded to them, as well as what problems both sides have faced regarding the future survival of digital literature in a rapidly changing Internet environment. (Chungnam National University)

Key Words: digital literature, electronic literature, avant-garde, collaborative writing, webtoon

I. Introduction

The author aims to examine what literary activities have been conducted on the

* The author uses "digital literature" defined by Roberto Simanowski in order to include both electronic literature and other forms of digital literary texts such as web-toons. The term will be more specifically explained inside the paper.

web or on individual computers in both South Korea and North America. To analyze the literary phenomena in both regions, let us refer to Florian Cramer's insightful argument on how the Internet has been used as a literary medium. According to Cramer, there are four cases: As a distribution channel for literature; as a writing platform; as a literary database; and the text that requires interface software or is produced automatically according to programmed rules (56). As for the digital literary activities, North America has paid more attention to the fourth case under an umbrella term called "electronic literature (E-lit)." Meanwhile, South Korea has mostly used the Internet or digital telecommunication technology as a distribution channel for writers' works.

The author will compare basic theoretical and practical grounds of North American and South Korean digital literary texts, based on their different use of technology. To do so, the author will outline the definition of E-lit and digital literature, as relevant to each country, examine how each region has developed its own digital literature through example texts, before discussing the future trajectory of digital literature. Finally, the author will reference how the youth of the digital culture find a new platform (such as Facebook) to express themselves through writing and expand the boundaries of literary genres. Before discussing the main point of the paper, the author will, briefly, tell the story of what made the author write this paper; this anecdote will lead to an explanation on why it is necessary to examine the definitions of terms that have been used to categorize digital or online texts as well as it will help understand how different approaches to technology lead to different literary forms.

In 2014, Chungnam National University (CNU) - located in Daejeon, South Korea - was awarded grants from the South Korean government; CNU's goal was to revitalize humanities and prepare the establishment of new curricula, one of which was called "Humanities Contents," and consisted of interdisciplinary courses run through collaborations of instructors of traditional humanities and digital technology. The author proposed a course called "Digital Literature" where she

could teach digitally generated texts to students majoring in humanities (mostly studying the Korean language, Literature, Philosophy, and Archeology) to help them understand how digital technology affects literary activities. At first, the author naively assumed she could teach Korean digital texts that have the same literary criteria as those of the American texts that she studied in North America. However, the more the author researched digitally generated texts in South Korea, the more she realized there are different aspects in Korean texts from those of its North American counterpart. This realization eventually led the author to write this paper through the lens of literary history and a socio-economic aspect. To compare the digitally generated texts of two regions, the author needed a term that included both. Thus, the author examined the definitions or terms used to explain digitally generated and online texts and needed to find out what contributed to the differences of the two regions. The author looked into how digital literature has evolved in North America and how the South Korean case is different from its counterpart.

II

Since 1999, when the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO)¹ was founded, North America has called the text that uses interface software or is produced by computer programs “electronic literature (E-lit).” According to ELO, “E-lit [in the US], refers to works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer. More specifically, it does not include digitalization of printed works and rather it

¹ The Electronic Literature Organization was founded in 1999 to foster and promote the reading, writing, teaching, and understanding of literature as it develops and persists in a changing digital environment. A non-profit organization, ELO includes writers, artists, teachers, scholars, and developers. (<http://eliterature.org/elo-history/>)

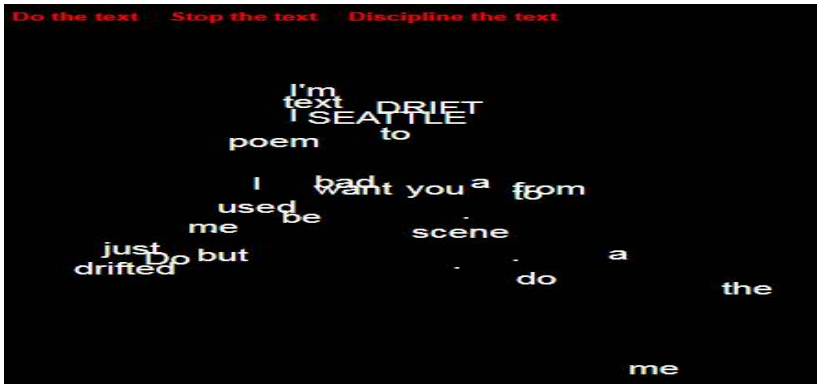
relates to digital texts - i.e., ‘digital born.’” Not interested in other forms of digitally generated texts such as films or web-comics; E-lit is exclusively limited to non-linear storytelling written by hypertext, interactive fiction, computer generated texts, etc. Therefore, to analyze digital texts of both regions under the same name, the author needed a more comprehensive term. The author followed Roberto Simanowski’s logic on why he favors the term digital literature to electronic literature. In “Holopoetry, Biopoetry, and Digital Literature: Closing Reading and Terminological Debates,” he argues:

[Because] it seems to offer the least occasion for misunderstandings. It does not refer to concrete individual characteristics such as interactivity, networking, or nonsequentiality as do terms such as interactive literature, Net literature, or hypertext, which are better qualified to describe genres of digital literature. Instead, it designates a certain technology, something the term electronic would not guarantee, given the existence of other arguably electronic media such as cinema, radio, or television. (45)

Unlike E-lit, the term digital literature embraces more extensive range of texts generated and displayed on the web and on computers including the scanned texts of paper books. Thus, it is possible to infer that a major difference of digital texts in both regions depends on whether they tend to adhere to the characteristics of E-lit or not.

Because E-lit is concerned with how literary works use digital technology medium-specifically, it tends to experiment with forms of texts or media rather than their content. This tendency has a similarity with the avant-garde mentality, which is one of the most prominent traits of Western experimental literary texts, as seen in concrete poetry, sound poetry, etc. On this point, Jan Baetens and Jan Van Looy, in “E-poetry Between Image and Performance: A Cultural Analysis,” argue that “what is being produced, read, and commented upon under the label of e-poetry [e-literature] generally does not differ radically from what is called ‘avant-garde poetry.’” For example, *Seattle Drift* (1997) written by Canadian

programmer, artist, and poet, Jim Andrews explores “the new possibilities of concrete poetry under the conditions of their being digital” and challenges the traditional Western concept of languages (Simanowski). White colored words on a black screen are dispersed, stopped, arranged and rearranged by clicking three red colored commands such as “do the text,” “stop the text,” and “discipline the text.” Below is a captured image extracted from one reading of *Seattle Drift*. On this point, Simanowski says, “[*Seattle Drift*] is a playful adaptation of the theory of *différance*, telling us, to name something is to reduce it.”



As the extended attribute that E-lit advocates is that literary works have to use digital technology medium-specifically, they pay attention to formal experiments than contents. This phenomenon is seen in the early avid reaction toward the hypertext fiction. E-lit critics and writers thought the reading experience of hypertext provides readers with understanding what formal literary experience is rather than gaining coherent stories that most traditional literary texts provide. Take Michael Joyce’s hypertext fiction, *afternoon, a story* (1987) for example. It was created using Storyspace, a software developed by Jay David Bolter and Michael Joyce in the 1980’s. The text is composed of hyperlinks, nodes, and recursive loops. An American digital culture scholar, Scott Rettberg, (University of

Bergen, Norway), explains that although the plot centers on the main character who witnesses a car crash and begins to suspect that the wrecked car belongs to his ex-wife, ultimately leading to his life falling apart; the readers who change the course of the story, by clicking on hyperlinked words, viscerally experience the formal experiment on texts presented on a computer screen, rather than produce a coherent plot for the text.

Another prominent attribute of E-lit is to try to prove one of the post-structural theories. In the early stage of E-lit history, scholars such as George P. Landow and Jay David Bolter believed what Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes advocated for the reconsideration of the roles of writers and readers when it comes to creating the meaning of a text. Landow argues that hypertext embodies the textual openness championed by post-structuralist theory and that hypertext enables people to develop knowledge in a non-linear, non-sequential, associative way that linear texts do not (White). So hypertext advocates focus on the relationship between readers and the writer and start to give their attention to the interactive aspects of hypertext fictions. For example, Emily Short's text based-interactive fiction, *Galatea*² (2000) offers readers/players the opportunity to create their own story paths by typing commands. The motif of Short's *Galatea* comes from the Greek myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor who falls in love with the statue of a woman he created. Short's story begins with the opening of an exhibition of artificial intelligences. When a reader/player enters the exhibition hall, he or she discovers Galatea standing on a pedestal with a small placard. When a reader/player is about to turn away, Galatea says, "They told me you were coming." From this moment, the reader/player can progress the plot by typing words or commands. Early E-lit advocates believed that handing power to readers/players through hypertext or interactive reading activities in a creating process of a text could be a game changer in the Western literary world. They favored more theoretical and abstract texts that challenge the Western traditional

² <http://pr-if.org/play/galatea/>

literary tradition and ones that experiment the possibilities to overthrow the writer-reader relationship through which they try to reveal the hidden ideologically charged dominant structures. However, E-lit could not attract major public attention because of its overly experimental aspect and exclusiveness; it remained popular only amongst literary circles and a handful of writers/critics in academic areas. In “Communitizing Electronic Literature,” Rettberg recollects how the hype and anticipations of hypertext novel among academic scholars faded, and rejects the idea that E-lit should follow its predecessors to advocate for avant-garde which failed to attract the public’s attention, saying:

I confess I feel this situation to sometimes be counter-productive. The avant-garde in this context is not necessarily focused on the creation of meaningful literary experiences that enable the reader to see human experience from new and strange angles, but is instead manifested as a technological imperative, valorizing the creation of new forms. (40)

Additionally, focusing on “a technological imperative” and a medium-specific tenet met a sad destiny whereby some digital texts can become obsolete due to the rapid advance of digital technology. Ironically, it has been a struggle among digital literature writers and scholars to preserve the original digital texts and to represent them in a modern digital environment.

As seen above, the Western case of digitally produced texts has been considered as one of the literary branches of experimental traditions and interpreted as avant-garde texts. But South Korea took a very different path from its Western counterpart. The genesis of its digital literature has been closely related to the technological development driven by the Korean government and its collaborations with major corporations, not as a result of the exploration of literary aspects of digital technology by writers or professionals. It’s one of the most unexpected phenomena generated in the process of technological development in South Korea from the 1990’s.

The devotion of South Korean government to developing fast Internet speeds resulted in Korea being ranked first in the ITU's Digital Opportunity Index³, which meant that Korea was fully adept in most information communication technology (ICT) sectors, including games, mobile media, and the Internet (Ok 320). The author will further expand on how this technological development has changed the landscape of literature in South Korea, but before doing that, she has to go back to the first premise of this paper on why she wants to examine the terms of E-lit and digital literature. Strictly speaking, most Korean digital literary texts are not E-lit as defined by the ELO because, predominantly, they are not digital born. Instead, South Korea has used digital technology or the Internet as platforms or distribution channels to promote literary works. There are some critics who challenged the term (E-lit) because it does not include and reflect the current state of literary activities on computers. In his paper "Weapons Of the Deconstructive Masses: Whatever the Electronic in Electronic Literature May or May not Mean," John Cayley points out the ambiguity of the term electronic literature and advocates for "writing in networked and programmable media." N. Katherine Hayles, also from *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, tries to reconsider the term E-literature by "differentiating 'literature' and 'the literary,' pointing to the latter as having a much broader conceptual framework, within which certain literary hybrids may bridge physical and digital modes of creation and dissemination through a process of intermediation (4-5)."

As she mentioned earlier, the author uses "digital literature," as defined by Simanowski, because it has been more inclusive in expanding the boundary of digital texts to Korean digital texts, such as "PC fiction,"⁴ "Internet fiction"⁵ and "webtoon" (a Korean webcomic) as well as ones which simply are displayed

³ <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/doi/index.html>

⁴ A literary genre created, circulated and consumed by users of personal computer(PC) in the 1990s of South Korea.

⁵ Fictions written on digital networks like internet unlike traditional books, magazines or other printed texts.

online, digitalized and scanned ones of paper books. Considering the fact that currently South Korea's most dominant literary genres happening online are "webtoon" and "web novel," whose platforms are run by big Internet platform corporations such as Naver and Daum, the author will briefly look into the history of digital technological development in South Korea to outline the differentiated characteristics of Korean digital literacy texts. Korea's development of digital literature has been closely intertwined with more economical or technological aspects than its North American counterpart that focused on the formal experimental aspects of literature.

Since the 1980's, "Korean society has embarked on an accelerated process of 'technological modernization' and 'informatization,' with the expectation that such processes will change the fate of the economy, national military power, and social well-being in the face of global flows (Castells et al)." Particularly, the 1997 financial bailout from International Monetary Fund (IMF) pushes this techno-nationalistic discourse even further to make national efforts to implement innovative new Internet technology. This government driven implementation of the digital infrastructure affects every day cultural practices in South Korea, particularly those of young people (Ok 322).

Digital literature activities in South Korea started with the opening of the personal computer era ("PC era") in the early 1990's. The most compelling and interesting fact of digital literature in South Korea is that it was started by avid users of personal computer telecommunication services as their past-time activities unlike their Western counterparts whose protagonists were professional writers, artists or critics. The South Korea's emergence of digital literature led by amateur writers is an unexpected incident of "the era of PC communication" from 1995 to 1997 before the Internet was introduced to Korea and replaced PC communication. In contrast to the fact that Western writers tried to experiment with the technical and formal possibilities of a computer to create the new literary genres from the emergence of a computer, Koreans focused on more

communicative aspects through which they expressed and shared their desires, feelings and thoughts in their own cyberspaces.

As the author mentioned earlier, Korean digital literature has been intertwined with the emergence of telecommunication companies which provided a bulletin board system (BBS). Briefly summarized: In the early of 1990's, Korean telecom companies, such as Dacom (now LG U+), started communication services such as email, BBS, and daily information database. Among these service features, users/writers flocked to BBS, where they wrote and shared all types of writing including fan-fiction, random casual conversation, etc., and it became their own literary community. Seeing the possibilities of commercial success through BBS, some telecommunication companies started to run a space solely dedicated to literature. Chollian ran a cyber space called "Computer Literary Circles," and HiTEL did "HiTEL Literature Hall." Both companies wanted to develop their own literary genre and to differentiate from each other. Critically, this competition contributed to developing the "PC communication literature." Specifically, "Computer Literary Circles" provided an exclusive space and encouraged amateur writers to enter literacy circles. Among their literary works, fantasy fiction genres were proliferated and some writers from these genres gained instant popularity among PC communication users and became sought-after writers for TV dramas and the film industry. For example, Ha Min's *Children of Aphrodite* (1995) was adapted as a twelve episode TV drama. And Woohyeok Lee's *Toemarak* (1993) (meaning exorcists) received much public attention as well. Lee published it in 1993 on a BBS section called "Summer Horror Literature" run by "Hitel." Four sequels of this text, consisting of nineteen volumes, were published between 1994 and 2001. To date, more than one million books have been sold and it has since been adapted as a feature film. Another example is *Dragon Raza* (1997), which was published on the board of Hitel. Its great success among PC users drew the attention of a big publishing company called "Golden Bough," which made it into a twelve volume hard copy book. *Dragon Raza* was also made into a

Multi-Users Dungeon (MUD) game and adapted as a comic book.

Along with the amateur driven-literary activities of South Korea, another evident characteristic of Korean digital literature in the early stage was that it pursued participatory or collective creation processes more actively. For example, a digital literary genre called “a relay fiction” appeared on the BBS of Chollian and Naunuri. Strictly speaking, a relay fiction writing as a part of collaborative writing activities has the same concept as sequential single writing. According to Paul Benjamin Lowry, sequential single writing is the one where “one group member writes at a time. Each group member is assigned a portion of the document, writes his or her portion and then passes the document onto the next group member (75-76).” Following the typical format of sequential single writing, in Korean relay fiction texts, the primary writer who starts the story layouts primary characters, basic storylines, backgrounds, and back-stories of characters. Then, anonymous readers/writers participate in developing part of the story with total creative freedom. Aside from the literary quality of this “relay fiction genre,” it is the ideal form of collaborative writing, which Internet creators have advocated as one of the best advantages of using the Internet. *The Cute Devil Girl* (1992) written by Sangwoo Lee is one such example of relay fictions that was commercially successful. Subsequently, some writers like Jeabong Ha and Woohyeok Lee gathered together and started a collective writing group called “Pygmalion.” Korea’s real time, multiway-collaborative writing through “relay fiction genre writing” was considered a catalysis that revived collaborative writing or group creative writing that has run deep in Korean literature tradition.

However, since the Korean digital literature world was born in online communication space run by corporate companies and its main producers were amateur writers, they were not interested in how to utilize the medium itself and to experiment with the innate attributes of a computer. Consequently, their digital texts are more like paper books whose only difference is they are published on a computer screen. Although the year 2001 saw the birth of the first Korean

hypertext fiction titled *Digital Gubo 2001*⁶ (2001) and a few artists including Young Hae Chang write digital texts, which can be classified as E-lit, Korean digital literature has still developed around paper books and digital texts published online rather than from “purely digital born texts.”

This trend that uses digital technology or internet as platforms to promote literary texts had continued in the 2000’s when the Internet emerged and the popularity of PC communication literary genre drastically faded. The digital literary genre called “Internet fiction” started to gain public attention and commercial success. The exemplary texts of Internet fiction in the early 2000’s are: *That Guy is Cool* (2001) and *The Temptation of the Wolf* (2001), both written by Guyeoni. These Internet fictions also were accommodated by big Internet corporations like Naver or Daum, who used the Internet as a publishing platform. This trend continues even now when renowned novelists such as Seokyong Hwang, and Beumsin Park used their personal blogs to promote their novels, *Venus* (2008) and *Chollache* (2008) respectively. Promoting that digital literature using the Internet as a distribution channel in South Korea has been reinforced by the huge popularity of the webtoon. Currently, South Korea’s web comic market is worth five hundred eighty billion won and is predicted to reach one-trillion by 2019⁷.

Like other Korean digital literary genres, webtoons appeal to the younger generation but have gained remarkable commercial success that has far exceeded its predecessors, both domestically and globally. Because of its expansion to the electronic mobile device market, one equipped with more diverse themes that appeal to the younger generation, and those struggling to live in the extremely competitive society, Korean webtoons came to occupy a unique literary position. Successful webtoons are adapted into TV dramas, movies, and even computer games. For example, the webtoon *Miseong* (2012) (meaning incomplete) written

⁶ It is the digital adaptation of *A Day of a Novelist, Gubo* (1934) written by Teawon Park.

⁷ <http://www.readersnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=73532>

by Taeho Yun and published on Daum since 2012 was adapted into a twenty episode TV mini-series and published as a comic book series. The commercial success of webtoons in South Korea has forced the Korean academia to embrace it as a field of academic study. Scholars began to analyze the factors that appeal to young people and what literary values they have in terms of storytelling, how effectively colleges teach students on webtoons as academic studies as well as a commercial commodity. Clearly, Korea's case on digital literature is bottom up, and an amateur initiated literary genre while its Western counterpart began as an experimental genre initiated by professional artists and academic scholars. Korean digital literature was never expected to advance and become a traditional high form of literature; conversely, it was formed involuntarily and unintentionally out of amateurism and subsequently picked up and championed by big corporations like Naver before evolving into a unique online culture in South Korea.

In terms of the prospective of digital literature in the western countries that sticks to the definition of digital born texts, scholars such as Rettberg and Cramer have rather pessimistic views. Cramer in "Literature on the Internet" argues:

Just because a technical medium is full of possibilities doesn't necessarily mean that textual forms drawing on these specific potentials will be popular. This thesis might be supported by my assertion that there is currently less interesting computer literature to be found online than there was a beginning of the World Wide Web in 1994. (67)

In this point, Rettberg proposes even some "realistic" way to "sustain itself on an other-than-mass-market scale" admitting its marginal position of a literary subculture. Rettberg promotes a poetry style survival tactic where poetry has not been a popular art form in recent years and not many poets have made a living by selling poetry books, but an active poetry subculture nevertheless exists through workshops, awards, conferences, reading groups, peer critique groups, etc. He admits the dim future for poetry in Western countries saying "the popular culture doesn't care much about poetry, but poets do, and that itself has been

enough to sustain a diverse literary culture.” This poetry style survival tactic will only reinforce the traditional trend of the Western digital literature, which only professional elites or poets have engaged in. It will give up the possibility of digital literature to expand its area to the public and possibly will be doomed to walk the same path of avant-garde literary texts.

Meanwhile, a dilemma in the Korean digital literature world is closely related to the fact that digital technology or the Internet is mainly used as platforms or distribution channels of literary works. Since the digital literary texts of Korea are mostly a digital version of a paper book, it does not have any innately different characteristics from paper books. Therefore, many writers who gain recognition online publish their physical books and wish to enter the established paper book market; the Internet has become only a stepping stone to enter the traditional literary world. The fact that already renowned writers such as Seokyoung Hwang and Bumsin Park use their personal blogs to promote their books and communicate with their readers (who can influence the content of their books) shows how online and offline literary activities are closely intertwined and blur the boundary between the paper and digital book without considering the autonomy of digital literature as literature. On this blurred boundary between digital and paper books and a lack of a definition of digital literature in South Korea, Insung Park argues that “absence of clear definition of ‘Internet fiction’ generated Korean digital literature, which has been considered as residual products of internet activities, not as proper literature. Korean digital literature did not accommodate novelistic revolution that the new digital media offer and, that people expected from newness of internet (118).”

As Friedrich Kittler, in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999), points out, “medial changes lead to epistemic changes,” the change of textual media from a computer monitor to papers generates reception gaps among readers. The text that originated on an electronic screen loses its uniqueness and unfamiliarity which appeals to computer users when it is converted into a paper book because different mediums

could create different meanings although they are the same content. Also, because the text written on a computer screen is judged by traditional literature criteria, the digital literature was not appreciated by literary critics. As a result, in South Korea, digital literature has not yet achieved an independent status as traditional literature. In terms of proper medium usage, the author thinks Korea's webtoons give provide a good example as to why one uses digital format to correctly develop the digital literature genre that fits digital devices. One notable attribute from Korean webtoons is its vertical scrolling down system. Rather than reading left to right like paper comic books, webtoons are read top to bottom. On readers' experience on this Korean webtoon format, Heekyoung Cho explains episode fifty three of T'aeho Yun's *P'ain* (2014) (meaning a country pumpkin) as "an extended time-space experienced through an extremely long vertical panel delivers a sensibility of time and space that cannot be expressed in print comics because it would span a number of pages in that format." Cho's point clearly shows why one has to consider more carefully how the medium can change the meaning of the text when one appreciates the literary text.

III. Conclusion

The digital writing and reading activities have been differentiated from those of the paper generation in such aspects as the writing platform, text circulation, and reader responses. They are more instantly produced, more readily dispersed and consumed by connection without limitation of space and time. This digitally operated social mechanism definitely has been changing the literary world in both South Korea and North America. One can ask questions to understand how one takes in all these changes correctly: What literary characteristics one has to look for when one studies or writes digital literature; whether one has to apply the same or similar criteria of paper literature to digital literature to evaluate its

quality; and how technology and literature can co-exist in the rapidly changing social media era where even Twitter (currently accommodating 140 characters) can be viewed as a literary text. The answers come down to the recognition of the fact that digital devices such as a smartphone have been affecting the daily life of the younger generation, and the processes of their reception and understanding of literary works will be different for readers or writers from previous generations. In “Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generation Divide in Cognitive Modes in Profession,” N. Katherine Hayles calls the current readers as ones with the “hyper attention” that comes at the price of environmental alertness and flexibility of response. She even further argues that readers with hyper attention “excel at negotiating rapidly changing environments in which multiple foci compete for attention; its disadvantage is impatience with focusing for long periods of time on a noninteractive object such as a Victorian novel or a complicated math problem (188).”

In conclusion, admitting that 21st century readers/writers are different in terms of digesting and consuming literary texts from those of previous generations, the author argues that one carefully has to investigate how traditional literary or previous artistic theories or practices can have an impact on digital texts and vice versa. One also has to examine how digital literature can attract the public attention and expand the boundary of literary texts not by losing the unique role of literature in human life in the capitalist societies of South Korea and North America.

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