

Until the day we die, we are living the story of our lives. And, like a novel in process, our life stories are always changing and evolving, being edited, rewritten, and embellished by an unreliable narrator. We are, in large part, our personal stories. And those stories are more truthy than true.



## The Future of Story

**H**UMANS ARE CREATURES of Neverland. Neverland is our evolutionary niche, our special habitat. We are attracted to Neverland because, on the whole, it is good for us. It nourishes our imaginations; it reinforces moral behavior; it gives us safe worlds to practice inside. Story is the glue of human social life—defining groups and holding them together. We live in Neverland because we can't *not* live in Neverland. Neverland is our nature. We are the storytelling animal.

People dream and fantasize, our children romp and dramatize, as much as ever. We are hard-wired to do so. And yet many worry that fiction may be losing its central place in our lives, that we, as a culture, might be leaving Neverland behind. The novel is a young genre, but for a century critics have been writing and rewriting its obituary. If technological changes don't spell its doom, cultural ADHD does. Live theater and poetry are even worse off. Theaters increasingly struggle to make ends meet, and poets trade accusations about who killed poetry. University literature departments are in big trouble, too. English departments have been hemorrhaging majors for decades, and the whole field is in the midst of a

great and possibly permanent depression, where two-thirds of Ph.D.'s never find full-time, tenure-track work.

It's not just the "higher" fictional forms that people worry about. "Lower" forms are struggling, too. Many lament the way that cheap and seamy "reality" shows are displacing scripted television. Video games—and other digital entertainments—are also on the rise, drawing audiences away from traditional story. The gaming industry is now much bigger than the book industry, bigger even than the film industry. The 2010 release of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* made more money (\$360 million) in the first twenty-four hours than *Avatar* did.

Don't these trends show that fiction is dying a slow death? David Shields thinks so. In his bracing manifesto *Reality Hunger*, Shields proclaims that all forms of conventional fiction are used up, punched out, and withering away. Shields, a former novelist, has tired of his former love, and he wants to help speed this process along: "I come to . . . dispraise fiction, which has never seemed less central to the culture's sense of itself."

Shields oversells his case. Take the novel. Rumors of its demise are exaggerated to the point of absurdity. For some reason, literary intellectuals love to wallow masochistically in the notion that we are living in the last days of the novel. Yet tens of thousands of new novels are published around the world every year, with the total numbers trending up, not down. In the United States alone, a new novel is published every hour. Some of these novels sell by the ton and extend their cultural reach by being turned into films.

When have novels ever delighted more juveniles and adults than Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* saga or J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books (which are twice as long in their entirety

as *War and Peace*)? When was the last time any novels made a bigger cultural splash than the postapocalyptic *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, with 65 million copies sold? When did authors sell more books to a more devoted public than John Grisham, Dan Brown, Tom Clancy, Nora Roberts, Stephen King, or Stieg Larsson? When has a literary genre outstripped the popularity of the romance novel, which does a cool billion dollars in sales per year? When has any novelist been able to brag—as J. K. Rowling can—of having the same sum in her bank account?

Literary novels are having a harder time of it, but when did they *not* have a harder time? Novelists who target high-brow readers shouldn't complain when those are the only readers they get. Still, over the past decade, many literary novels have found large readerships, including works such as Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Jona-



After queuing until midnight, readers swarm through a California bookstore to snap up copies of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007).

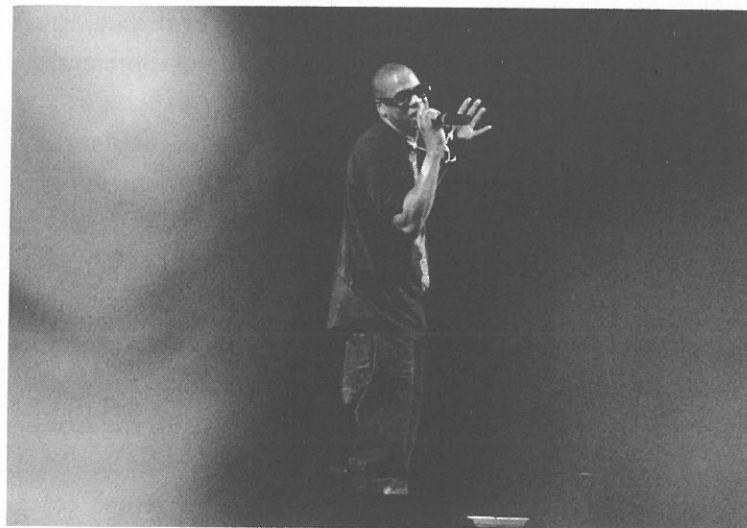
than Franzen's *Freedom* (which put him on the cover of *Time* magazine), and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*—which is, I think, about as good a story as a human being can hope to tell.

So whenever you hear that the novel is dead, translate as follows: "I don't like all of those hot-selling novels that are filling up the bestseller lists—so they don't count."

But what if the novel were actually to die or just dwindle into true cultural irrelevance? Would that signal the decline of story? For a bookman like me, the end of the novel would be a very sad thing. But, as David Shields himself stresses, it would not be the end of *story*. The novel is not an eternal literary form. While the novel has ancient precursors, it rose as a dominating force only in the eighteenth century. We were creatures of story before we had novels, and we will be creatures of story if sawed-off attention spans or technological advances ever render the novel obsolete. Story evolves. Like a biological organism, it continuously adapts itself to the demands of its environment.

How about poems? I have a friend, Andrew, who is a talented poet. We sometimes meet for beers, and he laments the decline of poetry's status in the modern world. Poets, he tells me, used to be rock stars. Byron couldn't turn around—in a bar, in a park, in his own drawing room—without getting a pair of silky knickers pegged at him. But, I remind him, poets are still stars; they still get underwear thrown at them. People still love the small, intense stories poets tell. In fact, they love them more than ever—as long as the little stories are accompanied by melody, musical instruments, and the emotion of a singer's voice.

Ours is not the age when poetry died; it is the age when



The 2010 release of *The Anthology of Rap*, Yale University Press's nine-hundred-page collection of rap lyrics, shows that scholars are starting to take hip hop seriously as poetic art. In *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*, English professor Adam Bradley argues that rap music is the "most widely disseminated poetry in the history of the world . . . The best MCs—like Rakim, Jay-Z [pictured here], Tupac, and many others—deserve consideration alongside the giants of American poetry."

poetry triumphed in the form of song. It is the age of *American Idol*. It is the age when people carry around ten or twenty thousand of their favorite poems stored on little white rectangles tucked into their hip pockets. It is an age when most of us know hundreds of these poems by heart.

My daughter Abby is dancing in the living room with a wooden spoon in her hand—tossing her hair, swinging her hips, and singing along with her new Taylor Swift CD. When the song reaches an unfamiliar stretch, Abby goes still. She tilts her ear to the speaker and concentrates on learning the words to a story about a modern Romeo and Juliet. Her little

sister is dancing wildly in her princess gown and tiara, moving her lips in front of her own wooden spoon and pretending that she, too, knows the words.

My girls live in a particular place and in a particular time. But what is happening in my living room is ancient. As long as there are humans, they will delight in the beat, the melody, and the stories of song.

Along with the fear of things dying, there's a fear of things rising. Video games are a prime example. But do they represent a movement away from story or just a stage in story's evolution? Video games have changed massively from the first arcade games I remember playing as a boy: Asteroids, Pac-Man, Space Invaders. Most hit video games are now intensely story-centric. The gamer controls a virtual character—an avatar (or “mini-me”)—who moves through a rich digital Neverland. Pick up a copy of *PC Gamer* magazine, and you will find that—with the exception of sports simulators—most video games are organized around the familiar grammar of problem structure and poetic justice. Marketed mainly to testosterone-drunk young males, the games are usually narratives of lurid but heroic violence. Such games don't take their players out of story; they immerse them in a fantasy world where they get to *be* the rock-jawed hero of an action film.

The plot of the average video game—like that of the average action film—is usually a thin gruel (a guy, a gun, a girl). But we are on the cusp of something richer. As the novelist and critic Tom Bissell notes in his book *Extra Lives*, we are living through the birth of a new form of storytelling where the conventions are still being discovered and refined. Ambitious designers are trying to fuse the appeal of gaming with all the power of musical, visual, and narrative art. For example, the writer/director of Sony PlayStation's *Heavy Rain*, David

Cage, sought to push game design forward in the revolutionary fashion of *Citizen Kane* (1941). *Heavy Rain* was conceived not as a video game but as an “interactive film,” where you play the roles of several characters who are trying to save a boy from a serial murderer known as the Origami Killer. Throughout *Heavy Rain*, the “player” inhabits several different characters (including the Origami Killer) and makes decisions that determine how the story will end.

### TRUE LIES

The way we experience story on television does seem to be changing, but television is still, in the main, a story-delivery technology. The rise of reality programming, and the displacement of scripted shows, has been greeted as a gruesome sign of the end of fiction, if not of civilization. But tawdry reality shows have risen alongside a true golden age of televised drama (think *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Sopranos*), and in any case, reality shows are hardly nonfiction. Reality show producers trap clashing strangers in houses or on deserted islands in order to instigate as much dramatic conflict as possible. The “characters” are, to one degree or another, acting. They know that the cameras are on. They know that they are expected to play the part of the hothead drunk or the ingénue or the sexpot, and they know that outrages equal screen time.

Together with teams of editors, reality show writers (yes, writers) take raw footage and twist it into classic story lines. *Extreme Makeover*, *Queer Eye*, *The Osbournes*, *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*, *Whale Wars*, *Jon and Kate Plus 8*—these and scores of other reality shows have hewn closely to the universal grammar of storytelling.

For example, on Spike TV's *The Ultimate Fighter*, a group of young men move into a big, fancy house, where they are given all the free booze they can drink but are prohibited from watching TV, reading books, using their phones, or seeing their girlfriends or wives. The point is to make the men as tense and quarrelsome as possible. Like *Survivor*, *The Ultimate Fighter* is a competition that will leave only one person standing. The original twist of *The Ultimate Fighter* is that all of the contestants do one thing especially well: enter an octagonal steel cage and beat other young men into submission. On *The Ultimate Fighter*, you don't get voted off the island; you get pounded out in the cage.

In the show's tenth season, a cage fighter called Meathead defeated a fighter named Scott Junk, seriously injuring Junk's eye. This enraged Junk's friend Big Baby, who immediately rushed into the gym to confront Meathead. Big Baby, an enormous ex-NFL lineman, towered over Meathead with his heavy fists quaking at his sides. He barked hoarsely into Meathead's face, "Swing at me, please! Hit me, bitch! Hit me! Give me a fuckin' reason and I'll kill you, motherfucker!" Meathead stared back at Big Baby, and then he took a small step backward, as if he hoped no one would notice.

On *The Ultimate Fighter*, Big Baby was mainly presented as a good guy and Meathead as a villain. Despite his intimidating build, Big Baby was soft-spoken and kind, with the good manners of a well-raised southern boy. Meathead was the show's outcast. The other fighters thought he lied a lot, and they insulted his intelligence and courage. But both characters were—to use E. M. Forster's term—round, not flat. When Meathead was alone, talking to the camera, he came off as the most cerebral contestant on the show. He seemed

to really get that his job was dangerous and that every time he entered the cage, big and scary men were trying their utmost to beat or choke him unconscious.

And while Big Baby seemed like a gentle giant out of central casting, his dark side made him interesting. He reeled back and forth between his two basic personality states: cheerful and enraged. His coach, Rampage Jackson, commented that Big Baby was "the nicest guy in the world . . . who will kill you."

*The Ultimate Fighter* is based on footage of real people—not actors—negotiating extreme conflict situations. Maybe the show isn't quite fiction, but it also isn't nonfiction. It gives us everything we gravitate toward in stories: extreme and often violent conflict, classic arcs of story and character. But it gives us one thing more: a sense of compelling realism. Most fiction has to strive hard for authenticity. Achieving verisimilitude is a large part of the craft of fiction. Reality programming doesn't have to strive. Robert De Niro's portrayal of a half-mad fighter in *Raging Bull* (1980) is among the greatest performances in cinema history. But it is still a performance—an act of fakery. When De Niro pretends to be crazy with rage, it is not as convincing or terrifying as when Big Baby loses control for real.

At the opposite end of the reality show spectrum is ABC's *SuperNanny*. Each episode begins with the plucky British nanny (Jo Frost) arriving at a home in chaos. The parents are ineffectual. The kids are little monsters. The nanny spends a day or two observing how incredibly screwed up the family is, shaking her head and rolling her eyes for the camera. And then she lays down the law. From the chaos of the household, the nanny forges order—a clean house, wise and loving par-

ents, respectful and well-mannered children. Then she drives off in her frumpy British nanny car, leaving the little family to live happily ever after.

What a fantasy! Few programs match *SuperNanny* for the brazen way it dresses fiction in the robes of “reality.” Shows like *SuperNanny* are much less truthful than the average work of fiction. Good fiction tells intensely truthful lies. *SuperNanny* is full of lies, but not truthful ones.

*The Ultimate Fighter* and *SuperNanny* illustrate that reality shows are not nonfiction. They are just a new kind of fiction, in which the lies and distortions happen mainly in the editing room, not the writing room.

These are undeniably nervous times for people who make a living through story. The publishing, film, and television businesses are going through a period of painful change. But the *essence* of story is not changing. The technology of storytelling has evolved from oral tales, to clay tablets, to hand-lettered manuscripts, to printed books, to movies, televisions, Kindles, and iPhones. This wreaks havoc on business models, but it doesn’t fundamentally change story. Fiction is as it was and ever will be:

Character + Predicament + Attempted Extrication

Futurology is a fool’s game, but I think the worry that story is being squeezed out of human life is exactly the wrong one. The future will see an intensification, even a perfection, of what draws us to fiction in the first place. The gravitational pull of story is going to increase manyfold. We will be marooned in cyber-Neverlands, and we will like it that way. As one online gamer put it, “The future looks bleak for reality.”

## BACK TO NEVERLAND

It was a sunny fall day. Ethan and his friends were running through the woods of Indian Springs State Park in Flowilla, Georgia. They dodged between campsites and into the forest, ignoring stares from park rangers and fellow campers. They were hunting monsters, and monsters were hunting them. When they slashed down pretend orcs, they cried, “Die, foul beast!”

In quieter moments, they stayed in character. The hot-headed Magnus Tigersblood apologized to Sir Talon: “I am not wise. I know how to fight and how to draw a few runes.” Sir Talon was magnanimous: “Sir, your words are from your heart.” All of the heroes hailed from exotic home worlds: the Enchanted Glade, the Empire of Perfect Unity, the Rock of Storms, Goblin City.

Ethan achieved a medieval look by wearing women’s clothes purchased at a thrift store—a puffy white blouse and black tights. A fairy named Erin was wearing a satiny dress, ballet shoes, and wings held on by elastic bands. Their weapons were wood or foam wrapped in duct tape. It didn’t matter that the costumes were crude or that the blue tarp hanging between trees looked nothing like the entrance to a dungeon. In the players’ imaginations, a foam pool toy became a terrifying club, a smudge of dirt transformed a human face into that of a night-stalking goblin, and a cheap piece of costume jewelry became as precious as the grail.

That weekend Ethan and his comrades—Wolf, Aerie, Heinrich Irongear, Dusk Whisper, and all the rest—fought and fled for their lives. They slew terror beaks. They fought “rat-wolf things” in a “cave of extreme foulness.” They solved

riddles. They cast spells. They fought among themselves and made up.

And in the end, they finally found the Mandrakes, lurking just off a forest path. Mandrakes are half-human, half-vegetable, and all evil. Many a brave warrior and beautiful maiden has stumbled into a thicket of Mandrakes, only to be devoured in seconds.

Here is what it sounded like when Ethan, wielding his foam mace, waded into the Mandrakes, with his fellow heroes battling at his sides:

Power strike!

Bam!

Parry!

Get in there! Flank him!

Two more mandrakes!

Fwaaapppp!

Power strike 2!

Dodge!

Ffff-bapppp-pah-pah-pah!

Mortal blow!

Arrrrrgggghhh!

After making the forest safe for everything good and pure, the heroes returned to their cabins. They called one another by their real names and talked about their spouses and children. And then they climbed into their cars and drove home not to Goblin City or the Rock of Storms, but to the suburbs of Atlanta. Ethan Gilsdorf, fortysomething, said goodbye to his new friends and boarded a plane for Boston, where he was working on a book about the fantasy gaming subculture.

Gilsdorf had just experienced the LARP (live action role



The Russian LARP *Stalker* is set in the radioactive exclusion zone around the Chernobyl nuclear reactor after a second fictional disaster. The larpers (shown here) must band together to fight off mutant creatures and other dangers.

playing game) called *Forest of Doors*. In LARP, grownups let their inner children out. They create fantasy scenarios ranging from typical sword and sorcery stuff to sci-fi and secret-agent games. They each develop a rich character, complete with backstory—a heartbroken sorcerer, a prim fairy with a mean streak, a femme fatale with a secret—and then the larpers pretend, sometimes staying in character for days at a time.

LARP is not really a game. It is improv theater without an audience. LARP is grown-up make-believe.

LARP evolved in the 1980s out of tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, which brought friends together for bouts of cooperative storytelling. RPGs invite us to enter richly conceived fictional worlds not as passive imaginers (as in traditional fiction), but as active characters. RPGs are crossbreeds of games and stories. But to

me, the story aspect dominates. "Game" is the name we give to our interactive relationship with the story world.

The stereotypical Dungeons and Dragons player is a pimply, introverted boy who isn't cool and can't play sports or attract girls. From my years of playing Dungeons and Dragons as a kid, and of hanging out with guys who kept playing into adulthood, this stereotype strikes me as pretty accurate. But larpers are another breed altogether. They are the kind of committed übernerds that even Dungeons and Dragons nerds get to snigger at. But no one should be sniggering. Why is acting out Tolkienesque stories considered dorky, when most of us love to sit like lumps in a theater watching actors do the same? Why is LARP considered pathetic, when we practically worship movie stars who prance around in Neverland, hollering and smooching and stabbing and emoting? Larpers are just an extreme example of the Peter Pan principle: humans are the species that won't grow up. We may leave our nurseries behind, but not Neverland.

And there's another reason we shouldn't mock these gamers. RPGs such as *Forest of Doors* and *Dungeons and Dragons* point the way to the future of story.

### O BRAVE NEW WORLD!

I don't think traditional fiction is dying, and I don't think the universal grammar will ever change. But I do think storytelling will evolve in new directions over the next fifty years. Interactive fiction, in the form of RPGs, will move from the geek fringe to the mainstream. More and more of us will be running around like larpers in la-la land, dreaming up characters and acting them out. But we will be doing so in cyberspace, not in the real world.

Two of the most compelling sci-fi visions of story's future come from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994). In Huxley's dystopian novel, fiction is essentially dead. People flock instead to the "feelies." Feelies are, superficially, a lot like movies, but there are two big differences. First, in a feely you actually *feel* what the characters do. When two people have sex on a bearskin rug, you sense every hair on the rug, your lips mashing with the kisses. Second, a feely isn't really a *story*-delivery technology. It is a *sensation*-delivery technology. Feelies do not explore the human plight. They have zero intellectual content. They are just thrill and shiver. Feelies let people watch their porn and feel it, too.

If the feelies are ever invented, people will, of course, throng to them. But I don't think this would spell the end of story. I think people would want feelies *and* stories. The citizens of Huxley's dystopia are satisfied with feelies, but they are different from us. They have been genetically engineered and culturally conditioned to the point that they are no longer fully human. Story will not go away until we really do cross over into a brave new world—a world in which human nature and nurture are fundamentally changed. Huxley himself seemed to understand this. His novel features only one fully authentic human, John the Savage, who is a deviant partly because he prefers Shakespeare to feelies.

I think the future of fiction will be closer to *Star Trek's* holodeck than Huxley's feelies. In the fictional universe of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the holodeck is capable of authentically simulating just about anything. A holonovel is a fictional work that you enter into, as a character, on the holodeck; it is a technologically sophisticated version of LARP. Like a feely, a holonovel tricks the mind into thinking the



story is actually happening. But unlike a feely, the holonovel gives you all the thrill and shiver without stripping away the story.

On the holodeck, Captain Kathryn Janeway enjoys Jane Austen-like holonovels, where she plays the role of a smart, spunky, and much-desired heroine. By contrast, Captain Jean-Luc Picard enjoys solving mysteries as a Raymond Chandler-esque detective named Dixon Hill. *Star Trek's* holonovel perfects much of what draws us to fiction in the first place: a sense of identification with characters that is complete because we *are* the characters, and a perfect illusion of transportation into an alternate universe.

We may never achieve the technological sophistication that we see in *Star Trek*. But I believe that we are moving in that direction with a specific type of video game called a MMORPG, or massively multiplayer online role-playing game. (Most people pronounce this acronym “Mor-Peg.”) In MMORPGs, players become characters in an unfolding story. They move through a physically vast and culturally rich virtual world that they share with thousands of other players. The virtual worlds have their own laws and customs. They have their own linguistic dialects, with vocabularies that can be very difficult for the uninitiated (called “noobs”) to master. (Some verbs: to gank, to grief, to nerf, to buff, to debuff, to twink, to gimp, to pwn.) They have warring tribes and thriving economies, with trade amounting to hundreds of millions of real-world dollars per year. Authentic cultures spontaneously develop in MMORPG worlds, and anthropologists write ethnographies about them.

When you enter a MMORPG, you not only enter a distinct physical and cultural space; you also enter a story space. In fact, many MMORPGs are based on popular stories, such

as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Trek*, and *Star Wars*. MMORPGs invite us to become characters in classic hero stories. As one player put it, playing a MMORPG is like living “inside a novel as it is being written.” Another said, “I’m living inside a medieval saga. I’m one of the characters in the novel, and, at the same time, I’m one of the authors.”

Take, for example, Blizzard Entertainment’s MMORPG, World of Warcraft (WoW). It is hard to describe WoW in this compact space, for the same reason it would be difficult to sum up the physical and cultural concept of Nicaragua or Norway in a few paragraphs. The ambition of WoW is startling. Its developers aren’t game makers; they are world makers. (They tellingly refer to their creation not as a role-playing game, but as a role-playing *experience*.) WoW’s designers are geek gods carving a virtual world out of the void.

WoW is an online universe made up of many separate planets, races, factions, cultures, religions, and mutually incomprehensible languages. Twelve million real people adventure there (meaning that the population of WoW world exceeds Nicaragua’s and Norway’s put together). The sociologist William Sims Bainbridge, who spent two years in WoW world doing participant-observer research, isn’t exaggerating when he writes that the WoW experience is based on a “tapestry of myths as complex as any in the ancient sagas.” There are books lying around WoW world, such as *The New Horde* and *Civil War in the Plaguelands*, which your character can read to learn the lore of the realm. There is a series of novels (stretching to fifteen at this writing) that flesh out WoW’s backstory, develop the major characters, and constrain the continuous evolution of the online experience. When you enter WoW world, you become a character in an evolving epic that stretches back to the beginning of time—the first gods,



Screenshot from *World of Warcraft* showing a female blood elf.

the birth of worlds, and ten thousand years of history charting the rise and fall of races and civilizations.

WoW achieves what it does because it bundles the creativity of many hundreds of collaborators: programmers, writers, social scientists, historians, visual artists, musicians, and others. Most great art is created by individuals, but WoW is the product of hundreds of creative people weaving the power of story art together with visual and sound art. WoW is an art bonanza, and these are still its early days. What will universes such as WoW be like in twenty years? In fifty?

## EXODUS

In his book *Exodus to the Virtual World*, economist Edward Castronova argues that we have begun the greatest mass migration in the history of humanity. People are moving en masse from the real to the virtual world. Bodies will always be marooned here on earth, but human attention is gradu-

ally “draining” into the virtual world. Tens of millions of MMORPG devotees already spend an average of twenty to thirty hours per week absorbed in online adventures. According to a survey of thirty thousand MMORPG players, about half of all serious players form their most satisfying friendships in-game, and 20 percent consider MMORPG land to be their “true home,” while Earth is “merely a place they visit from time to time.” The pace of the exodus will increase as technological advances make virtual worlds more and more appealing.

According to Castronova, the exodus will be fueled not only by the attractive force of new virtual worlds—but by the strong suction of interactive story—but by the repellent force of real life. Castronova asks us to imagine an average guy named Bob. Bob works in retail—shelving product, sweeping floors, manning the register. He drives through a bleak concrete landscape of big-box stores and fast-food joints. When he bowls, he bowls alone. He is not involved in civic life. He is in no real sense a member of a community, and his life is meaningless. His job asks so little of him, and he produces nothing of lasting value.

But after work, Bob goes online and finds everything that is missing from his life. In MMORPG land, Bob has friends; he may even have a wife. He doesn’t live to sell and consume trash; he lives to crusade against evil. In MMORPG land, Bob has big muscles, big weapons, and dangerous magic. He is an essential and respected member of a tight-knit community.

Commentators frequently blame MMORPGs for an increasing sense of isolation in modern life. But virtual worlds are less a cause of that isolation than a response to it. Virtual worlds give back what has been scooped out of modern life.

The virtual world is in important ways more authentically human than the real world. It gives us back community, a feeling of competence, and a sense of being an important person whom people depend on.

Above all, MMORPG worlds are profoundly *meaningful*. As game designer David Rickey put it, people enter MMORPGs to take a daily vacation from the pointlessness of their actual lives. A MMORPG is an intensely meaning-rich environment—a world that seems, in many ways, more worthy of our lives and our deaths. MMORPGs accomplish this, above all, by resurrecting myths. In the virtual world, the myths retain all their power, and the gods are alive and potent. Here is how Warhammer Online describes the sinister warlord Tchar'zanek: "In the lands of the far north, where tribes of savage barbarians worship the abhorrent gods of Chaos, a new champion has risen. His name is heard on the howling of the icy winds and the shrill cries of ravens. It is proclaimed in peals of thunder and whispered in the nightmares of men. He is Tchar'zanek, Chosen of Tzeentch [a god of Chaos], and he will shake the very foundations of the Old World."

So people will increasingly enter MMORPG worlds not only for their positive virtues but also to escape the bleakness of modern life—the feeling that, as game designer Jane McGonigal puts it in the title of her recent book, reality is broken. You might say, "Yeah, but those role-playing geeks all have one thing in common: they are pathetic losers. I'm not. The world of dorks and orcs has nothing to do with me."

True, MMORPGs are not for everybody. But they are still in their infancy. In the decades to come, computing capacity will grow exponentially, and we will move closer and closer to the holonovel. When this happens, story land will outstrip real life in many ways. Many people—especially people

like Bob—have already decided that it is nicer to be a king in MMORPG land than a peasant in this one. But someday will it be nicer to be a king in MMORPG land than a king in real life?

Of course, people will always have to unplug from their stories to visit the bathroom and the refrigerator. But interactive fictions may become so appealing that we will be loath to leave them behind. This is something that the relentlessly optimistic *Star Trek* series never quite got right. The holodeck is, like the hydrogen bomb, a technology with hideous destructive potential. If you had a walk-in closet where you always got to do the thing you most wanted to do—from saving the world to mastering your harem—why would you ever come out? Why would you ever want to stop being god?

Humans evolved to crave story. This craving has, on the whole, been a good thing for us. Stories give us pleasure and instruction. They simulate worlds so we can live better in this one. They help bind us into communities and define us as cultures. Stories have been a great boon to our species.

But are they becoming a weakness? There's an analogy to be made between our craving for story and our craving for food. A tendency to overeat served our ancestors well when food shortages were a predictable part of life. But now that we modern desk jockeys are awash in cheap grease and corn syrup, overeating is more likely to fatten us up and kill us young. Likewise, it could be that an intense greed for story was healthy for our ancestors but has some harmful consequences in a world where books, MP3 players, TVs, and iPhones make story omnipresent—and where we have, in romance novels and television shows such as *Jersey Shore*, something like the story equivalent of deep-fried Twinkies. I think the literary scholar Brian Boyd is right to wonder if overcon-

suming in a world awash with junk story could lead to something like a “mental diabetes epidemic.”

Similarly, as digital technology evolves, our stories—ubiquitous, immersive, interactive—may become dangerously attractive. The real threat isn't that story will fade out of human life in the future; it's that story will take it over completely.

Maybe we can avoid this fate. Maybe, like disciplined dieters, we can make nutritious choices and avoid gorging on story. In that spirit, here are some modest suggestions based on the research in this book.

Read fiction and watch it. It will make you more empathic and better able to navigate life's dilemmas.

Don't let moralists tell you that fiction degrades society's moral fabric. On the contrary, even the pulpiest fare usually pulls us together around common values.

Remember that we are, by nature, suckers for story. When emotionally absorbed in character and plot, we are easy to mold and manipulate.

Revel in the power of stories to change the world (think *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), but guard against it, too (think *The Birth of a Nation*).

Soccer practice and violin lessons are nice, but don't schedule away your child's time in Neverland—it is a vital part of healthy development.

Allow yourself to daydream. Daydreams are our own little stories: they help us learn from the past and plan for the future.

Recognize when your inner storyteller is locked in overdrive: be skeptical of conspiracy theories, your own blog posts, and self-exculpatory accounts of spats with spouses and coworkers.

If you are a doubter, try to be more tolerant of the myths—national and religious—that help tie culture together. Or at the very least, try to be less celebratory of their demise.

The next time a critic says that the novel is dying from lack of novelty, just yawn. People don't go to story land because they want something startlingly new; they go because they want the old comforts of the universal story grammar.

Don't despair for story's future or turn curmudgeonly over the rise of video games or reality TV. The way we experience story will evolve, but as storytelling animals, we will no more give it up than start walking on all fours.

Rejoice in the fantastic improbability of the twisting evolutionary path that made us creatures of story—that gave us all the gaudy, joyful dynamism of the stories we tell. And realize, most importantly, that understanding the power of storytelling—where it comes from and why it matters—can never diminish your experience of it. Go get lost in a novel. You'll see.