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KOREAN WEB NOVEL:  
AN INNOVATIVE FORM OF LITERATURE?<sup>1</sup>

ABSTRACT

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the literary field underwent a significant transformation with the emergence of digital literature, disseminated primarily through the Internet and specialized online platforms that initially hosted genre-based narratives, fostering the exchange of shared interests among users. Over time, some of these websites evolved into fully developed platforms for the publication and consumption of digital works, exerting a profound influence on literary production and readership, particularly in terms of scale and accessibility. This study addresses the conceptual and methodological challenges associated with defining, categorizing, and analyzing digital literature. It aims to establish a theoretical framework for the development of a multidisciplinary approach to its study, with a particular focus on South Korean web novel, commonly referred to as *web sosŏl*. The research explores the origins, characteristics, and modes of production, distribution, and consumption of digital literature in Korea, while examining the hypertextual structures enabled by the Internet and mobile technologies. Furthermore, it evaluates the potential

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trajectories of this literary phenomenon and assesses the applicability of contextual and interdisciplinary methodologies to the analysis of web-based narratives.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the so-called “digital natives,” namely individuals born during the period following the expansion of the Internet in the latter half of the 1990s (Dingli *et. al.* 2015), marks a significant transformation in both technological interaction patterns and modes of content consumption. This generation is characterized by an everyday, intuitive engagement with technology, including social media and various digital devices, which has, in turn, influenced their practices of reading and writing. We currently live in an era often described as one of “textual overload,” marked by a steady decline in the preference for traditional printed materials such as physical books. At the same time, individuals are increasingly surrounded by an ever-expanding array of digital texts, ranging from blog posts and tweets to online forums and electronic publications. This shift signifies not only a transformation in media consumption habits but also a profound reconfiguration of the ways in which texts are produced, distributed, and interpreted in contemporary digital culture.

Furthermore, the recent shift toward markedly more dynamic multimedia content, exemplified by the short-form videos on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube Shorts, reveals a profound transformation in media consumption preferences. This trend not only highlights a significant change compared to more static content such as photographs, images, and written texts, but also demonstrates how the interactivity and immediacy of short videos are reshaping the contemporary media landscape. The growing dominance of such dynamic content can be attributed to its intrinsic capacity to capture audience attention through visually engaging imagery, rapid editing, and immersive storytelling, providing visual and narrative experiences that, while quickly consumed, leave a lasting impression. As a consequence, static forms of content, particularly written texts, appear to be gradually losing their appeal, suggesting a broader cultural shift in how narratives are perceived, valued, and consumed in the digital age.

Despite the characteristics of the contemporary media landscape, there has been a notable increase in interest toward a specific category of written texts, a phenomenon that warrants particular attention. The emergence of narratives distinguished by distinct literary qualities within the broad spectrum of textual genres raises questions of considerable significance. This trend reflects the rise of a new form of literature, whose primary channels of dissemination and reception are situated on the web through a wide range of websites originally designed for the publication and sharing of various types of narratives, thereby fostering interaction among users with

common interests. This innovative narrative current, commonly referred to as digital or electronic literature, exerts an undeniable influence on the daily consumption of literary works, particularly in terms of the sheer volume of production and readership (Hayles 2008).

However, the intrinsic complexity of digital literature, as evidenced by its broad definition, inherent formal fluidity, and diversified classification (Rettberg 2019), presents significant challenges in the development of appropriate analytical methodologies. This diversity not only reflects the eclectic and dynamic nature of this literary corpus but also highlights the difficulties inherent in defining and systematizing its distinctive features in a coherent manner. The proliferation of digital literary works, a phenomenon that has gained momentum alongside technological advancements (Moretti 2017), has further intensified these challenges, as the multiplication of content and formats requires an analytical approach that is both flexible and methodologically rigorous.

This study aims to establish the foundations for developing a multidisciplinary methodology for the analysis of digital literature, with particular attention devoted to South Korean web novel, a field that has shown remarkable dynamism within the literary landscape. These works, known in Korean as *web sosöl* (웹소설), literally meaning “web novels,” represent a significant cultural phenomenon. In particular, platforms such as ‘Naver Web Sosöl’<sup>2</sup> and ‘Kakao Page’<sup>3</sup> have emerged as genuine “ecosystems” dedicated to digital literature, encompassing the entire chain of literary production, distribution, and consumption. From this point onward, the term *web sosöl* began to gain widespread public usage, accompanied by a series of structural and cultural transformations that came to define the characteristics of contemporary web novel. Among these developments, the introduction of paid serialization stands out as a crucial concept in shaping the current identity and economic framework of the *web sosöl* medium (Lee 2022: 51-52).

These digital environments not only facilitate access to a wide range of works but also encourage narrative innovation and the experimentation of new literary formats (Park 2022a: 110-113). An emblematic example is the approximately 10,000 titles made available through Naver in 2022 (Jeon *et. al.* 2023), a testament to an exceptionally prolific and continuously expanding digital literary production. The presence of such a substantial volume of works highlights the growing public interest in this form of narrative and underscores the crucial role these platforms play in shaping contemporary literary trends. At the same time, they foster a culture of

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2 <<https://novel.naver.com>>.

Since the reorganization of Naver’s online content platform in 2019, ‘Naver Web sosöl’ have been incorporated into ‘Naver Series’, the company’s paid-serialization platform, through which they are currently distributed and serviced: <<https://series.naver.com>>.

3 <<https://page.kakao.com>>.

reading characterized by dynamism, interactivity, and an intensified exchange between authors and readers, reflecting broader transformations in the creation and consumption of literature in the digital age. This development is closely aligned with the widespread adoption of smartphones, which served as a major catalyst for the popularization of *web sosŏl*. In this sense, web novel can be interpreted as a cultural product born from the technological advances of the twenty-first century that have profoundly reshaped the ways in which Koreans experience storytelling. Technology has not only transformed everyday life but has also redefined narrative consumption itself, with readers actively participating in the construction of narrative structures through the interactive affordances of digital platforms (Park 2022a: 107-110).

Therefore, this study will examine not only the emergence of digital literature in Korea, outlining its definitions, distinctive features, and internal dynamics, but also its structures of production, distribution, and consumption. The analysis will further explore the effects mediated by the Internet and mobile technologies, which give these literary works a distinctly hypertextual character. Based on these considerations, the research will assess both the potential for a gradual alignment of web novel with specific literary currents.

## 2. KOREAN WEB NOVEL: FROM ITS ORIGINS TO THE PRESENT DAY

The advent of ‘digital’ literature marked a pivotal turning point closely intertwined with the expansion of the Internet, which rapidly established itself as the primary medium for its dissemination and consumption. This literary innovation initially found expression across a variety of websites specifically designed to host narratives of diverse genres. Virtual environments such as Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) served as meeting spaces for users with shared interests, fostering exchange and dialogue. Far from being a geographically limited phenomenon, this development soon assumed an international dimension (Flores 2019).

In South Korea, the foundations of this digital literary movement were established through the use of computerized Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), known domestically as PC Communication (피씨통신), marking the beginning of a phase dedicated to exploring new digital dimensions within the literary sphere. This system was characterized by the use of virtual “bulletin boards”, which actively encouraged the creation and sharing of narrative works. As early as the 1990s, numerous works reached and engaged a wide readership, achieving notable popularity (Suh 2023: 71-72). These narratives spread rapidly, particularly among young audiences, who printed and circulated them among interested peers. This process of physical sharing, although relying on a traditionally analog medium such as paper, reflected a cultural dynamic deeply rooted in the formative stages of digital culture, illustrating the hybrid nature of early digital literary practices that bridged virtual and tangible modes of textual dissemination.

The expansion of this innovative narrative form was significantly accelerated by the rise of the book rental system, which played a crucial role in reshaping reading habits and the modes of literary consumption in South Korea. Just as video rentals had become a widespread cultural practice in the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of temporary access to media was soon extended to comics and books. This trend gained additional momentum during the economic crisis of 1998, when the financial constraints faced by many readers fostered a preference for more affordable, short-term consumption models, typically lasting three to four days. At the same time, the limited accessibility of narrative works through the BBS platforms of the period encouraged both authors and publishers to print and distribute these stories on a large scale through rental bookstores. This new commercial model not only expanded the reach of these narratives but also contributed to the emergence of a vibrant subculture of readers who shared a growing interest in popular genres such as fantasy, mystery, romance, and East Asian style martial-arts fiction. The spread of rental bookstores became an important intermediary between digital and physical modes of literary circulation, signaling an early convergence between popular culture and digital literary creativity (Lee 2020).

The proliferation of the Internet marked the beginning of a new era in which access to literary works through the online sphere became an established and widely adopted practice. The rapid expansion of World Wide Web and ADSL technologies in South Korea between 1998 and 1999, largely driven by government initiatives, enabled readers to engage directly with websites that hosted narrative works, thereby gradually displacing traditional modes of literary consumption such as book rentals. In this context, the consumption of genre fiction increasingly gravitated toward specialized platforms such as “Munpia”<sup>4</sup>, “Joara”<sup>5</sup>, and “Romantique”<sup>6</sup> (see Lee 2023: 655-658; Suh 2023: 75-77), which serve as emblematic examples of *internet sosŏl* (“internet novels”). These sites were distinguished by innovative and unconstrained writing practices that incorporated elements of the fantastic as well as the creative integration of emojis within the text (Roh 2018: 410-411). This shift not only transformed the mechanisms of literary production, distribution, and readership, but also reflected a broader cultural transition toward participatory and interactive modes of storytelling. Within this new digital ecosystem, readers and writers coexisted in a shared creative environment, facilitating the emergence of novel forms of authorship, reader engagement, and collective imagination. This dynamic fostered a new kind of readership—active, specialized, and genre-oriented—that would later serve as the foundation for today’s web novel communities.

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4 <<https://www.munpia.com>>.

5 <<https://www.joara.com>>.

6 <<http://new.toto-romance.com/main/main.asp>>.

With the advent of the mobile era and the widespread diffusion of smartphones, major web portals such as Naver and Kakao (formerly Daum) adopted the strategy of serial publication for narrative works, thereby responding to the evolving demands of an increasingly connected readership. In 2013, Naver launched a platform specifically dedicated to *web sosŏl*, anticipating a trend that would experience remarkable success throughout the 2010s (Park 2022b). This development constituted a critical moment in the very definition of what is today understood as web novel. With the entry of dominant two platforms into the market, the term *web sosŏl* itself became widely popularized. At the same time, the explosive increase in the number of works led to the consolidation of specific genres, narrative techniques, and recurrent clichés, providing the conditions under which web fiction could be established as a stable conceptual category within the literary field (Lee 2020; Lee 2023). This evolution in literary consumption reflects not only a profound transformation in readers' habits but also the publishing industry's capacity to adapt to the new possibilities offered by digital technology. Through these innovations, the act of reading has become more interactive, immediate, and participatory, fostering new forms of storytelling and engagement with literary texts that blur the boundaries between author and audience, and between production and consumption.

As of the mid-2020s, platforms hosting Korean web novels can be broadly categorized into two types based on their degree of openness. Open platforms, which can be considered the original form of web novel, include 'traditional' sites such as Munpia and Joara, as well as sections dedicated sections within Kakao Page and Naver Series. These platforms adopt a free serialization system that allows anyone to upload their own works, with the option to apply for paid distribution once a certain volume of accumulated chapters has been reached. The main advantage of open platforms lies in their accessibility, which enables the active participation of new authors and the continuous introduction of free serialized novels. However, their limitations include the lack of guaranteed quality and the absence of binding contracts, which can result in the sudden discontinuation of ongoing works. In contrast, closed platforms such as Naver Series and Kakao Page require editorial approval (by in-house MDs, or merchandisers) before serialization can take place. These platforms represent large-scale markets with substantial readerships, and the editorial screening process helps ensure a certain level of quality in the works published. Nevertheless, it is difficult for aspiring authors to make direct contact with these companies, and the preferences of the MDs can significantly influence the types of works that are selected for publication. Acknowledging these limitations, platform operators have sought to attract new and emerging authors through complementary open systems and public writing contests, thereby maintaining a dynamic flow of creative talent within the web novel ecosystem (Park 2022a: 110-113).

The current Korean web novel market can be characterized as one dominated by two major corporations, Naver Series and Kakao Page, with smaller companies striving

to establish their presence and achieve growth within this competitive landscape. In particular, Naver has accelerated the industrialization of web novel by introducing a paid preview system that capitalizes on the accessibility advantages of its large-scale platform. Meanwhile, Kakao has played a central role in the popularization of web novels through its “Wait-and-Read-for-Free” marketing strategy, which allows users to access one episode for free after a certain period of time. Together, these two corporate models have defined the dual structure of Korea’s contemporary web novel industry, shaping both its economic framework and its modes of audience engagement (Lee 2023). In recent years, web novels have increasingly served as original source material for a variety of One Source Multi-Use (OSMU) adaptations, including webtoons, dramas, films, audiobooks, and merchandise (Lustrissimi 2023). Moreover, the active exportation of these works to international markets has further accelerated the globalization and popularization of Korean web novel, solidifying its position as a central component of the contemporary cultural and creative industries.

A crucial aspect to consider is that web fiction, from its very emergence, has been intrinsically shaped by a dual commitment to reader orientation and make adaptability. This is evident, above all, in the fact that its subgenre classifications have undergone rapid and substantial changes within a relatively short period of time. When Naver first launched its web novel service in 2013, it offered only three subcategories, namely romance, SF & fantasy, and martial arts. Shortly thereafter, additional categories such as horror & mystery, light novels, historical & war fiction, and various fusion genres were introduced. Subsequently, the SF & fantasy category was subdivided into romance fantasy, fantasy, and contemporary fantasy, in order to more clearly define target readerships, while horror & mystery was rebranded as “mystery.” All of these changes occurred in less than a year, indicating that no fixed or standardized system of classification yet existed within the early web novel ecosystem. In other words, because this was a space of initial commercial experimentation, platforms exhibited a strong tendency to accommodate the demands of both readers and the market, and the time required to implement such changes was relatively short. Further transformations were triggered when Kakao Page, often regarded as a latecomer in the web novel market, entered into direct competition with Naver. Kakao Page focused primarily on fantasy genres targeting male readers, a demographic that was relatively less active on Naver, and pursued an aggressive marketing strategy. As a result, the platform concentrated on five major genres: fantasy, contemporary fantasy, martial arts, romance, and romance fantasy. Through this process, the Korean web novel market came to recognize these five as its core or “main” genres, while other types of narratives were either marginalized or absorbed into broader categories (Park 2022a: 113-117). As will be discussed later, these genres are far from rigid or closed categories. They continue to evolve through processes of hybridization and recombination, constantly generating new narrative configurations and thereby contributing to the ongoing dynamism of the Korean web novel field.

Despite the continued rapid growth of the web novel industry, scholarly discourse on how to approach and analyze this phenomenon remains comparatively underdeveloped (Lee 2020; Lee 2022). This stagnation is largely attributable to the multifaceted characteristics that define Korean web novel—its fluid genre boundaries, dynamic production systems, and complex modes of circulation and readership engagement. These features complicate the establishment of stable analytical frameworks, calling for an interdisciplinary methodology that can adequately capture its literary, technological, and socio-economic dimensions. Accordingly, the following chapter seeks to advance the discussion by examining Korean web fiction through three interrelated dimensions: curation, production, and consumption. This tripartite framework will serve as a lens through which to investigate the structural mechanisms, creative processes, and reader dynamics that collectively shape the evolving ecosystem of Korean digital literature.

### 3. CHARACTERISTICS OF KOREAN WEB NOVEL: CURATION, PRODUCTION, AND CONSUMPTION

In the contemporary Korean web novel market, the role of digital platforms has become increasingly central and, indeed, decisive. Given the sheer number of new releases—often dozens of titles published each day—the choice of which works readers encounter depends less on individual preference and more on the platforms’ systems of curation. In this respect, the platform functions as both a mediator and a gatekeeper, shaping literary visibility and influencing the circulation of taste within the digital literary ecosystem. The presentation and categorization of web novel titles follow a range of algorithmic and editorial criteria designed to maximize discoverability and reader engagement. Platforms such as Naver Series, Kakao Page, Joara, and Munpia employ multiple classifiers to determine which works are featured on their ‘showcase’ or front page. These classifiers typically include variables such as view count, male-targeted and female-targeted genres, reader age group, publication day, new releases, and trending keywords. Through such mechanisms, platforms guide user attention and structure the experience of literary consumption, often privileging works that demonstrate strong commercial potential or high engagement metrics. Genre classification remains a fundamental curatorial principle within this system. Categories include both established genres—such as romance, fantasy, contemporary fantasy, martial arts, and romance fantasy—and emerging hybrid genres, which arise through the fusion of preexisting narrative traditions. Additionally, recurring motifs such as ‘return’, ‘possession’, ‘reincarnation’, and ‘dimension shift’ function as recognizable thematic markers that contribute to the diversification and specialization of the web novel market (Jeon *et. al.* 2023). These motifs operate almost as subgenres in their own right, allowing platforms to segment audiences and refine recommendation algorithms.

Another key aspect that illustrates the centrality of curation in the web novel industry lies in the very structure of serialized publication, which is meticulously tailored to meet readers' preferences and consumption habits. The serialized format, one of the defining characteristics of web novels, operates in direct response to the demands of a digitally connected readership that expects immediacy, accessibility, and continuous engagement. With the smartphone having become the primary medium for reading web novels, platforms and authors have adapted their works to optimize readability and convenience. Text layout, paragraph structure, and visual rhythm are carefully calibrated for small screens, ensuring that the reading experience remains fluid even during short periods of downtime, such as during commutes on subways or buses. This optimization has also led to a standardized length for paid serialized installments, generally ranging between 5,000 and 7,000 characters per episode (Park 2022a: 111; Park 2022b: 42), a format designed to align with what has been termed a "snack culture", a mode of cultural consumption based on brevity, portability, and instant gratification. Such a system underscores the profound interdependence between reader demand and narrative production. In an ecosystem where user retention and the attraction of new readers serve as the ultimate indicators of success, both platforms and authors engage in a process of continuous market-driven adaptation. The production of web novels thus follows a logic of customized cultural commodification, in which content is not merely created but 'curated' and 'designed' to fit the temporal rhythms, behavioral patterns, and emotional expectations of its readership.

In this sense, curation constitutes the structural foundation of the web novel ecosystem, extending well beyond the simple organization of content. It operates as a dynamic process of negotiation between market logic, technological mediation, and cultural value formation. The curated visibility of a work determines not only its commercial viability but also its perceived literary legitimacy within the digital environment. Algorithms, metadata, and reader analytics collectively participate in the construction of cultural meaning, progressively eroding the distinction between aesthetic evaluation and market performance. As a result, curation in web novel functions as a distinct mode of cultural production, actively shaping hierarchies of visibility, taste, and value within the web novel market. The interaction between automated recommendation systems and human editorial oversight gives rise to a hybrid model of literary selection that simultaneously reflects and reinforces dominant consumption patterns.

Since web novel platforms function as integrated systems for the mass production, distribution, and consumption of narrative content, they constitute an ecosystem in which creation, mediation, and reception occur in a nearly simultaneous manner. This simultaneity, made possible by the affordances of the web, exerts a profound influence on both the writing process and the narrative structures of web novels. Authors are able to monitor readers' reactions and preferences in real time and are

therefore compelled not only to respond to them quickly but also to write under considerable pressure. As studies on web novel writing practice suggest, the aspect most consistently emphasized is that narratives and expression must remain easy to read from the reader's perspective, since the continuation of serialization depends directly on sustained audience response (Choi 2017; Lee 2023). To survive as a web novel writer is, in effect, to enter a continuous trial in which one must secure and maintain readers' interest from the moment serialization begins. As a consequence, there is a marked tendency to prioritize readers' expectations and desires over purely author-centred aesthetic considerations. The entire process of web novel production unfolds in shared digital environments where readers' voices are constantly present, which considerably increases the degree to which reader feedback intervenes in and shapes the work itself.

In response to this environment, authors systematically adapt both form and content in order to maximize the marketability of their works. They refine paragraphing and line breaks to enhance readability on smartphone screens, and they design compelling protagonists, striking opening situations, and narrative hooks that heighten curiosity about subsequent episodes. The competitive structure of the web novel market, in which dozens of new works are released each week and thousands of existing titles are already available, significantly increases the probability that any work which fails to capture interest at the outset will be ignored. Consequently, writers are under a quasi-obligatory constraint to concentrate highly appealing, often provocative elements in the opening instalments so as to draw readers through to the point of paid episodes (Park 2022b). Moreover, serial publication itself requires specific forms of narrative preparation. Many authors complete a substantial portion of the manuscript, or at least a detailed outline, before releasing the first episode. During serialization, they closely monitor readers' reactions and adjust plot development, pacing, or character portrayal in order to maintain or revive interest. Each episode must function as a relatively self-contained unit, offering a degree of immediate satisfaction through a local resolution while simultaneously generating renewed curiosity or introducing a new narrative complication. The result is a micro-structured form of storytelling in which the rhythm of episode-by-episode gratification and suspense becomes a defining feature of the narrative economy (Choi 2017).

Building on this serialized structure, the central role played by the crossing and recombination of genres and motifs in web novel production can be understood within this context. In order to respond to reader demand, authors actively adopt popular tropes and literary devices, sometimes retrofitting them into drafts that have already been written (Seo 2025). Recurrent devices such as 'return to a previous timeline', 'possession', 'reincarnation', or 'transfer to another world' are deployed strategically to meet expectations shaped by platform culture and recommendation systems (Park 2022b). Genre boundaries are therefore highly fluid, and new hybrid forms emerge through the continuous blending of existing generic conventions (Roh 2018; Kim

2019). A readily comprehensible narrative structure is also considered essential. Plots tend to follow clear causal lines, with recognizable character functions and quickly identifiable stakes. Visual elements, particularly cover illustrations and character images, are carefully designed to attract attention in the platform interface and to communicate genre, tone, and target readership at a glance (Park 2022a). In this way, production in the web novel field involves not only the writing of text but also the orchestration of narrative, visual, and paratextual elements to increase click-through rates and reader retention, reinforcing the tight coupling between creative practice and platform-based market dynamics.

If curation and production reveal how platforms and authors structure web novels, the dimension of consumption shows how readers, in turn, shape both narrative form and market dynamics. From its early stages, the consumption base for Korean web novels has been distributed across a wide range of age groups (Lee 2022), an indication of their broad popular reach. One striking feature of this readership is the tendency to develop stronger attachment to works than to specific authors. Readers often prioritize preferred genres, motifs, and narrative patterns over authorial identity, selecting texts according to whether they match familiar expectations of plot development and thematic content. Over time, many readers have become highly accustomed to the narrative grammar of web novels, including their pacing, tropes, and episode structure. In order to heighten reader attention, authors and platforms frequently make the opening segments of each episode extremely short and focused, thereby reinforcing narrative immersion from the very beginning. In this sense, readers' consumption patterns exert a direct influence on narrative form. The sustained engagement of the audience also depends heavily on the capacity of the text to create a strong sense of emotional alignment and shared experience between protagonist and reader (Park 2022a).

Within this search for immersion, factors such as ease of use, readability, the possibility of seamless payment for subsequent episodes, platform connectivity, and integrated communication functions become crucial determinants of consumption (Woo *et. al.* 2017). To attract and retain habitual readers, a work must present an appealing title and appropriate cover image, be clearly distinguishable from competing texts, maintain a smooth and fluent narrative flow, and offer content that is immediately intelligible. In other words, successful web novels are those that minimize cognitive and technical friction while maximizing affective engagement and narrative momentum.

Another central dimension of web novel consumption is reader participation through comment functions. Readers who progress mechanically from one episode to the next encounter, at the end of each instalment, a comment section embedded within the reading interface. Among the hundreds or thousands of comments that may accumulate, those marked as “best” constitute not only individual opinions but also the aggregated judgement of a broader readership that has endorsed them through

'likes'. Over time, such highly visible comments come to function as a paratext of their own, attached to each episode as a kind of communal annotation that transcends the original temporal moment of posting (Lee 2020). This interactive space allows users to share interpretations, express satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and contribute to the formation of a kind of public opinion around the text. These interactions influence not only other readers, who often consult comments before continuing, but also authors, who may adjust narrative choices in response to recurring criticisms or praise.

In this environment, the consumer of web novels naturally assumes the role of active evaluator and advisor, intervening in processes of production and circulation. Consumption is no longer structured primarily by the author's consciousness or intention, but by the reader's sense of enjoyment, plausibility, and 'common sense'. Readers are able to observe, with very little delay, the effects of their recommendations, preferences, and evaluations on the serialization of works and on authors' creative decisions. From the consumer's perspective, the web as a space thus provides conditions in which readers can occupy a position of relative advantage vis-à-vis authors, exerting visible influence over the life cycle of a text (Choi 2017). In this respect, the consumption of web novels exemplifies a broader shift in digital culture, in which reading becomes inseparable from rating, commenting, and co-shaping the narrative field.

In summary, the three dimensions examined here, curation, production, and consumption, indicate that Korean web novels operate within an ecosystem in which literary value is continuously co-produced by platforms, authors, and readers. Platforms shape visibility, authors adapt their writing to serial formats and real-time feedback, and readers consume, evaluate, and influence texts in highly active ways. In other words, these dynamics suggest that web novels are literary products formed at the intersection of technological mediation, market logic, and participatory reading practices.

#### 4. IS KOREAN WEB NOVEL AN INNOVATIVE FORM OF LITERATURE?

We may now approach the central question of whether the Korean web novel constitutes an innovative form of literature. This question can be approached along three interrelated axes: its media infrastructure, its literary poetics, and its position within the broader field of digital and world literature.

As discussed above, the web-specific simultaneity of production, distribution, and consumption radically reshapes the conditions of literary practice in the Korean web novel ecosystem. Serialization, platform upload, reader response, ranking, and monetization occur within almost the same temporal frame. This simultaneity maximizes efficiency and lowers entry barriers for authors, yet it also amplifies the power of readers and the market, thereby diminishing traditional forms of authorial authority. In such a configuration, web novels tend to privilege commodity value

and popularity over the autonomous “work” in the classic sense: reader numbers, payments for previews, and ranking data become decisive indicators of value. The traditional hierarchy in which the author occupies a privileged symbolic position is consequently destabilized; readers, both individually and as aggregated data, can effectively “outrank” the author. As Choi argues, this development breaks with the solemnity of high literary culture and the authority of the writer, opening the literary field to more democratic and participatory forms of interaction (Choi 2017: 93-94). In this respect, the web novel is innovative not because it abandons literature, but because it reorganizes the literary field around platform-mediated participation and continuous negotiation with its audience.

At the level of form, the Korean web novel does not constitute a radical rupture with the history of narrative prose. It should be understood not as an alien cultural object, but as an evolution of the novel genre (Roh 2018). Serial narration, strong generic framing, and plot-driven immersion are all features with deep roots in popular print culture. What is new is the way in which these features are rearticulated within a mobile, platform-based environment. Micro-serialization, ‘snack-sized’ episodes, the extreme concentration of narrative hooks at the beginning of a story, and the systematic use of recurrent motifs all respond to the temporalities and attention economies of networked reading. These strategies demonstrate that web novels adapt novelistic narration to a situation in which readers move quickly across interfaces, pay per episode, and constantly evaluate whether to continue. In this sense, the Korean web novel is innovative as a media-specific reconfiguration of familiar narrative resources. At the same time, the need to survive in a highly competitive platform market can drive web novels toward formulaic repetition and over-codified genre patterns. This tension between innovation and standardization mirrors the broader ambivalence of digital culture, in which new expressive possibilities coexist with pronounced commercial pressures.

When Korean web novels are situated within theoretical frameworks of electronic and world literature, further dimensions of both their innovativeness and their limits become apparent. Tabbi has argued that electronic literature should not be reduced to a set of technologically spectacular “works”, but understood as an emerging cultural form, that is, as the collective creation of new terms, genres, structures, and institutions (Tabbi 2010). From this perspective, what is decisive is not only the digital support of texts, but the embedding of literary practice in networked infrastructures and collaborative writing spaces. Korean web novels fit this description in important ways. They are anchored in highly developed platform infrastructures, sustained by dense social and algorithmic networks, and increasingly implicated in transmedia circuits. They also participate in processes of international circulation that recall David Damrosch’s definition of world literature as a “mode of circulation and of reading”, rather than a fixed canon of texts (Damrosch 2003). Viewed in this light, Korean web novels can be regarded as one of the most consolidated institutional

realizations of electronic literature within a specific national and linguistic context.

Yet their status within the Korean literary field remains contested. Web novels must engage in a “struggle for recognition” vis-à-vis so-called pure literature and established hierarchies of value (Lee 2022: 63–67). They are frequently marked as commercial or generic and thereby positioned at the margins of ‘pure literature proper’, even as they exhibit remarkable narrative productivity and a rich repertoire of motifs and symbolic configurations. This ambivalent positioning is precisely what makes them a crucial site for rethinking what counts as literature in the age of platforms.

The study of Korean web novels therefore calls for methodological innovation. It is no longer sufficient to apply only traditional tools of narrative analysis; one must also interpret the fine-grained genre labels and categories—often emerging from platform practices and hashtags—in relation to contemporary social dynamics and metaphorical structures (Lee 2022). This implies an interdisciplinary approach that brings together literary theory, media studies, platform studies, and the sociology of culture. It also requires critical approaches that attend to the “actual structures and modes of functioning of literary genres” under new communication infrastructures, rather than simply expanding canons or catalogues (Tabbi 2010). Attention must shift to networks, constraints, and shared conceptual vocabularies, as well as to the interfaces and architectures through which literature is produced and experienced. Korean web novels, which develop in direct dependence on UI design, payment systems, ranking algorithms, and comment cultures, provide an exemplary case for such a reorientation. Moreover, the intense dynamism of the Korean web novel scene suggests that frameworks developed here may have broader applicability to digital literature elsewhere (see Lee 2020). If narrative structures, platform affordances, and reader practices are analyzed in a systematic and integrated manner, Korean web novels could indeed offer a useful analytical model for world digital literature more generally.

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