Young Adult Literature and the Ethics of Internet Communication Technology

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Amy Piotrowski, Ph.D.
Utah State University - Uintah Basin
Twitter: @piotrowskiamy   Website: amypiotrowski.com

The Issue

"Books that provide fictional representations of a future that involves technological advancement play a unique role in introducing children to issues that are relevant to scientific and technological progress, as in the moral and ethical implications of such developments" (Flanagan, *Tech and Identity in YAL*, 2014, p. 6)

The Issue

There's a line of work in literary studies that examines technology's impact on humanity and society, from Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985) in which the boundaries between the human and the technological are blurred to Flannagan's (2014) work using posthumanism to examine depictions of technology in YAL

The Issue

Flanagan discusses how in posthumanism agency is "networked instead of being based purely on individualism" (2014, p. 5). So, how do we act ethically when agency is "collective and networked" online?

The Issue

Flanagan points out that in the last 10-15 years YA texts have shifted from a cautionary tone regarding technology towards portray technology in a more positive light, as "enabling rather than disempowering" (p. 2).

The Novels

Feed, *Warcross* and the first two entries in the *Arc of a Scythe* trilogy provide readers with a look at the ethics of online distributed spaces. These texts demonstrate how technology may fail to solve human problems that need human solutions.

Feed

Titus and friends have the capabilities of the Feed, but the way the Feed works is designed to distract them. (Flanagan points out how the first person narration brings the reader into Titus's "fragmented" and interrupted lived experience.) The technology that connects them also separates them. Example: as Violet slips away, all Titus can do to cope is order pants and more pants obsessively.

"*Maybe, Violet if we check out some of the great bargains available to you through the feednet over the next six months, we might be able to create a consumer portrait of you that would interest our investment team.*" - Nina from Feed Tech

Warcross

Emika is a bounty hunter and hacker who ends up in the big Warcross tournament. The game's creator, Hideo, hires Emika to go after someone planning to disrupt the tournament. It turns out Hideo, whose brother was kidnapped years ago, seeks to use his NeuroLink technology to control people so they cannot commit a crime.

"You're taking away something that makes us fundamentally human!" - Emika

Scythe and *Thunderhead*

In a world run by AI and cloud computing, the Thunderhead is a benevolent presence. The one place there is corruption is the one place run by humans - the Scythedom. But the Thunderhead's benevolent programming prevents it from intervening. The solution will have to come from humans.

Scythe's power to kill: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." - Lord John Dalberg-Acton

"However, the sycthedom is not bound by my laws, or my sense of ethical propriety. Which means that I must endure any abomination that it inflicts upon the world" - the Thunderhead

Teaching Applications

- Examine issues of privacy online, especially data collected to run algorithms that target advertising to us - this goes farther than Facebook
- Discuss use of AI in schools: a high school is planning starting in the fall to use AI and facial recognition software with its security cameras to detect individuals who should not be on campus, parents who don't have primary custody of their student, students engaged in misbehavior (Article here)

Questions?

- Email: amy.piotrowski@usu.edu
- Twitter: @piotrowskiamy
- Website: amypiotrowski.com