

The Use of Narrative Concepts in “How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe”

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How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe is a 2010 novel by Charles Yu. It is the story of a time machine repairman, also called Charles Yu. The characters are fully aware they live in a story – in fact they’ve found that their universe is only made of 17% reality. The characters live in Minor Universe 31, a fictional world that was abandoned before physics was fully installed. None of them qualify to be heroes, and neither are there any villains. They do not have scientists – they study science fiction instead. As a work of meta-fiction, it references many narratological themes and concepts. Self-reference and poking-fun at science fiction abounds, but these things are not just to be clever. Instead, the references to narratology serve as metaphors for the life of the main character and author. Specifically, he borrows from the ideas of Iser’s fictionalizing acts, and plays with the narration of the story. Unlike much science fiction, which generally concerns itself with large societal issues, with characters as plot devices, rather than people, this book is about one man and his relationship to his parents. While the similarly titled *Hitchhiker’s Guide to Galaxy* is much more about contemporary society, and our fascination with digital watches, than any particular character, “[Universe 31 is] not big enough for a space opera, and anyway not zoned for it.” It has a much more human focus.

First, this is a quick summary of the plot of the book. Charles Yu, a time machine repairman, is the son of the inventor of one of the first time machines. As it often turns out, however, his father was never recognized for his work. Others invented time machines around the same time, and by luck, they were successful, and he was not. His father spent much of his time detached from life already. Most of his time was spent in the garage, building the UTM-n, where n is the prototype number of the time machine. Even when he was present physically, he had a habit of zoning out, removing himself mentally in a sort of time travel of its own. Still, Charles Yu’s greatest and deepest interactions with his father took place as they built those machines. However, whether by

accident or design, one day he got into his time machine and never returned. Yu had been looking for him ever since. With no clue of where he went for nearly twenty years, however, the search had gone cold.

Instead, Yu was content to cruise through life inside his time machine, a TM-31. With his machine, he could avoid living through the present, where events happen one-after-the-other. Instead, he would cruise in present-indefinite tense, allowing him to just experience things generally. Ten years pass for him in this way, as he takes repair jobs from his company, the same one that passed up his father's invention. Yu must return to normal time for maintenance on his TM-31. Though he has aged ten years, only a week has passed for everyone else. He visits his mother, who spends most of her time inside a one hour time loop by her choice. She relives one family dinner, an ideal dinner that never happened, over and over. It's a form of assisted living. She's happy with that life, most of the time. When he visits, the holographic version of himself from the time loop seems better for her anyway. She gives him a package that she found in his closet. In the morning, Yu goes to pick up his time machine and sees his future self get out of it. Panicking, because of the possible paradox, he shoots the future him as he hands him a book, saying "The book is key". He jumps into his time machine and goes away with the book, but he knows he only has hours before he will return and die. The book is titled *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, and its contents are exactly the same as the book we are reading. Paradoxically, he reads the book from this point, but writes it as he goes. He is simultaneously the author, narrator, experiencer, and focalizer. He knows how the loop ends, and would rather just go to there, to be finished with it, than spend the time reading and waiting, so he turns to the last page of the book.

This time paradox is too much for the machine, and he is catapulted out into a subjunctive. Here, he finds a silent Buddhist temple with one occupant, the Woman His Mother Should Have Been. His father had been there too, years before, in his travels. But neither of them found what they were looking for – who was to say that his real mother was not the person she should have been, and this one an imposter? He escapes, and is taken back to his childhood, where he remembers much about his dad. He realizes that the book has a key that opens the package his mother gave him. He opens it, and finds a message from his father. It was a time, date, and place, all encoded into a diorama. This was where his father was stranded, a moment in their family kitchen, but they are not there anymore. There was no time for him to go find him, because the loop had ended. He had to go back, be shot, and hopefully give his past self the information he needs to do something sooner. But he knows that the loop must always be the same each time, so he faces death, rather than just letting it happen, like he had for every event the past ten years. It turns out, however, that sometimes you can survive a gunshot wound to the stomach. He does, gets himself a new time machine, and finds his father.

Under Iser's definition of the three fictionalizing acts, the first is the selection or

repertoire. The story obviously uses elements of science fiction. We know no mechanism for time travel to the past in real life, but they are a science fiction staple. He uses some of those concepts. Time travel in this story cannot change the past – not substantially. No one is important enough for time to change for them. Instead, they must just relive the events they wish to change. He notes that regret is his greatest job security. This choice is interesting in itself. There are many different mechanics of time travel to choose from in “the real.” Nearly every story has its own take on it. This choice helps to solidify what is already shown about the people of Minor Universe 31. None of them, with the possible exception of Charles Yu, are heroes. None of them are villains. No one is important enough to change history, like great heroes sometimes do. It is a relentless river. This reflects Yu throughout much of the book. He was content to let events happen, be caught in the stream. When he finally accepted his death and walked into it, proudly, he finally became the hero. Perhaps that is why he miraculously survived, as heroes do.

The second of Iser’s fictionalizing acts is the combination. Existing time travel mechanics and sci-fi tropes are used, and perhaps autobiographical elements, because the main character has the same name as the real-life author. This combination of elements did not exist before, however, so it is a new combination.

Inside the story, an idea similar to Iser’s is presented. Iser described the fictive as a combination of “the real,” what already exists in the world and people’s minds, and “the imaginary,” what exists in the author’s mind, their choices. Universe 31 is described as 17% reality by volume, centered in the core, with the rest standard sci-fi. It explains that the sci-fi layer is supported by the qualitatively different reality layer. Similar to Iser’s idea, a narrative universe is imaginary components supported by pieces of reality. The open field of study for them, as it is for many who study narratives, is how the two layers interact.

The most interesting of the narrative acts for this novel is self-disclosure. It not only labels itself fiction by its place on the shelf, but its title and even characters say so. However, Charles Yu is the name of the author of the book, but the main character is also called Charles Yu. Yes it is fiction, but we are left wondering how much is true. How many similarities are there between the real Charles Yu and the character Charles Yu? His relationships with his parents are key to the book – how similar are they to the real Charles Yu’s? His dad surely did not disappear by time machine, but maybe his dad did disappear. In this way, perhaps auto-biographical elements make this story more true by metaphor than many more-plausible tales. This could be the piece of reality that supports the wild imagination of the story. Narration is very important to this book. Borrowing the language of the equivalence principle of the theory of general relativity, which says that gravitational force is indistinguishable from the pseudo-force of a non-inertial reference frame, a principle that powers many theme park rides, the characters of the book discover the fictional science principle of past-tense/memory equivalence. Put simply, when the story is being narrated in the past tense, the characters cannot tell if they are simply

remembering a past event, or experiencing it again. This allows for time travel by changing the tense of the narration. This is the foundational principle of time travel, the fundamental Chrono-Diegetic theory. As characters in a story, they have the natural capacity to experience events in any order. Flashbacks, for them, seem just as real as experiencing the event. The time machine merely unlocks that ability.

Indeed, the book begins with the main character parked with his time machine in the present-indefinite gear. He explains much about his life in general, but no real time is set to the events. Things generally happen, but not in a specified order. He likes it that way. By his clock, the past ten years of his life have gone by in this manner, hiding from The Now. He is in a tiny pocket of space where he knows nothing will happen. This is explicitly paralleled with his relationship to his father. He recounts his earliest memory of his father, at the age of 3. His father held him, creating a tiny pocket of space-time just for him.

When Yu visits his mother, the narration of the book switches to the present tense, where events do happen, one after the other. He likens it to falling off a cliff each moment, never sure where you will end up.

At other times, when Yu is visiting the past, the narration of the book switches to the past tense. These sections act just like a flashback in most books, the difference being that the characters can initiate them and inside their time machine know that it is the past. They can even open windows to hypothetical versions of themselves. Yu has found 39 so far, most of whom seem like jerks to him. He wonders what that says about himself.

At one point he describes The-Woman-He-Never-Married. He decides that The-Woman-He-Never-Married is a perfectly valid ontological class, so she exists. He decides to call her Marie. He describes how they never met, in a park, when he never caught her attention. He never asked her out, they never became friends, etc. Something like that must have happened, to someone, he thinks, so why not call her Marie? At the beginning this is a bitter recollection, by a man who has spent the last ten years outside normal time with only his computer operating system TAMMY and his dog Ed, who technically doesn't exist. There is a substantial growth in his character at the end, when he decides that Marie is not a missed opportunity, but a promise. He sets out to find her.

These different methods of narration tie in well with the concept of time travel in the book. The Appendix, which describes how he will meet his father, find Marie, and start living life, is written in the imperative. He will do this. He must do this. It fulfills the title – it says how he will live safely in a science fictional universe. The only section of the book where the narration does not match the content is the subjunctive. He travels to a hypothetical, where he meets the subjunctively perfect version of his mother. But the narration probably could not be purely in the subjunctive mood. This is probably a limitation of English. There would be too many 'would's in the text for it to make much sense.

Narration is also played with for the last third of the book, as Yu the character

is reading as he writes the book, using some advanced technology. He often comments on its contents – the layout of the page, how certain sections are missing. One sentence has been scratched out. He doesn't know what should go there. He makes a subtle reference to dramatic irony – which cannot exist in this story, because we know what he knows. He is the experiencing I and the narrating I. In some circumstances, though, he knows things only from the narration that he reads, but doesn't know how he could know it. He references the Libet experiment, as he wonders how much free will he has. *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* is a clever book, seeped in the ideas of narratology. There is no fourth wall. They study narrative like we study science, because it is on narrative that their world runs. Ultimately, it does not read like a how-to book. It is a very human story of a man who only exists in the fictive. Yet, we wonder how much of the real is there. On some level, it could be called an autobiography. Narrative choices, references to ideas in the study of narrative, and the form of narration itself are all referenced, played with, and serve to amplify the humanness of the story. Paradoxically, through the impossible journey of a fictional character, and metaphors from the normally impersonal world of particle physics and time travel, Charles Yu tells a bittersweet, intimate narrative that reflects reality very well.