

Original Paper

Virtuality and Ludicity: Narrative Experimentation in *The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate*

Kun Yuan¹

¹ Xiamen University, Xiamen, Fujian Province, China

* Kun Yuan, Xiamen University, Xiamen, Fujian Province, China

Received: September 15, 2026 Accepted: September 30, 2026 Online Published: October 19, 2026

doi:10.22158/sll.v10n4p32

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v10n4p32>

Abstract

The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate is a narrative experiment. Time travel, as a traditional science fiction theme, is often mediated by a time machine to traverse between the real world and the past or future, with the real world serving as both the starting point and destination, highlighting the subjectivity and reversibility between different times and spaces. But in The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate, the time travel breaks out of the conventional form of science fiction, turning time travel into irreversible one-dimensional behavior and becoming a virtual reality game-like narrative experiment. This paper puts traditional time travel into the background of digital age, reveals the fuzzy treatment of fictional world and real world in ontology dimension through the operation logic of virtual game, discusses the virtual and game nature of real world in the novel at ontology level, and examines how alchemist's gate becomes a metaphorical expression in digital age.

Keywords

Ted Chiang, virtuality, ludicity, time travel, narrative

Ted Chiang is one of the best contemporary Chinese-American science fiction writers. His fiction *The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate* (2007) won the Hugo Award and the Nebula Award. The novel centers around the time travel of businessman Fuwaad, and the narrative unfolds with the operational logic of a virtual reality game, which envisions a possible picture of time travel in the digital age. Domestic and international studies have mainly focused on the view of time and space, fate and ethical choices, etc. Although they have also paid attention to the novel's unique narrative style, they have neglected how the novel's narrative arrangement contributes to conceptualizing the new form of time travel in the digital age, thus highlighting the cultural metaphor of digital technology. Jonathan Strahan (2008) situates the story at the border between science fiction and fantasy: "Written in a manner that

recalls Scheherazade and her *Arabian Nights*, we nonetheless get a rigorous, well-thought-out tale of a science fictional device operating in a distant time” (p. 14). Ted Chiang draws on the nested narrative structure and folktale style of *The Arabian Nights* in his novel, combining it with the theme of time travel based on scientific and technological rationality, constituting a tension between form and content within the text, with the dual coloring of sci-fi and fantasy hinting at the novel’s multilayered narrative connotations. Ted Chiang talks about the inspiration for the novel, suggesting that the recursive nature of time-travel stories might fit well with *The Arabian Nights* tradition of story-set stories, which sounds like an interesting experiment. What does the experiment refer to? Why does the traditional theme of time travel in novels still have vitality today?

James Gleick (2016) argues that “time travel is a fantasy of the modern era. When Wells in his lamp-lit room imagined a time machine, he also invented a new mode of thought” (p. 5). It can be said that time travel has always been closely linked with the development of science and technology, the fantasy of time travel is the source of inspiration for technological progress, and technological innovation also provides a more wonderful way to realize time travel. With the advent of the digital age, traditional time travel has taken on a new form, transforming from an unattainable daydream into an everyday experience with the support of virtual reality technology, somehow realized in VR games. VR gaming is a product of modern technology while not departing from the overall scope of human gaming behavior. In computer gaming, virtual reality technology is used to create a simulated three-dimensional world, which is the basis of virtual reality games. While games introduce people to the world, VR games, rooted in modern technology, create a richer and more vivid virtual experience with their high level of interactivity and immersion.

This paper argues that time travel in *The Merchant and the Alchemist’s Gate* possesses an experience similar to that of a VR game, and that the alchemist’s Gate is not only a gate of time, but also a metaphor for the technology of the digital age as a gateway connecting the real and the virtual. The mimesis of the digital age reaches the realization of the virtual, and the boundaries between the real and the virtual are increasingly blurred. Ted Chiang (2013) admitted to being a video game fan in the interview and mentioned a game he found interesting in which the importance of the experience was emphasized, “Ultimately, your choices don’t change the outcome of the story in any material way, because the game has only one ending. But it did a really good job of making those decisions feel consequential when you were making them” (“Interview (Part One of Two)” section, para. 27). The sense of experience is the very core element of VR gaming and the meaning of time travel as Ted Chiang writes about it in *The Merchant and the Alchemist’s Gate*. If prioritizing the real world is the conventional narrative of time travel, then Ted Chiang uses virtuality and playfulness to launch a narrative experiment in time travel in the digital age. How to face the increasingly real “time travel”? This is the question that the digital age raises for us. *The Merchant and the Alchemist’s Gate* not only tells a story of time travel, but also uses VR game-like experiences to develop an ontological discussion

of the virtual and real worlds. As readers, we can think about new ways of living and thinking in the digital age in the VR game-like narrative of time travel in *The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate*.

1. The VR-Like Ludic Qualities of Time Travel: The Pursuit of Hyperreal Experiences

VR games can virtualize the current scene as well as the past and future. As long as you enter the game, you come to the time and space constructed by the game. In this moment, the possible world becomes prioritized over the real world, and the world the player faces is as real as the real world. In the virtual world of the game, the player enters into the order and emotion generated by the game plot, and obtains a perceptual experience that transcends reality. At this time, the player is not only a participant in the world, but can even be called the creator of the world under certain circumstances. The player can set the time and space of the game world, choose to turn on or off the game at any time, and re-enter the game world almost indefinitely and without restriction. Just as Fuwaad, the protagonist of *The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate*, can choose the temporal setting of his time travel and pass through a time gate to enter a different time and space.

The novel takes the narrator, the merchant Fuwaad, who tells the King Caliph of Baghdad about his experience of trying to go back in time to save his wife as the most superficial story, which is also the main line of the novel; the other stories told by the alchemist Bashaarat are located in the second layer in the structure of the novel; The three stories of Hassan, Ajib and Raniya told by Bashaarat, which in turn involve branching stories of the same character in two time periods before and after twenty years, form the third layer of the whole system; The time travel of Fuwaad is the fourth layer, and the fourth layer eventually merges with the surface layer, forming a narrative loop that is connected and nested in layers. The transformation and intertwining of the multiple layers of the story create a psychedelic effect, and the narrator Fuwaad can no longer tell which is the real world and which is the world in the story being told. "Now my tale has caught up to my life, coiled as they both are" (Chiang, 2019, p. 34). Assuming that the world in which Fuwaad lives is the real world with the highest priority, and the world of the narrated story is the secondary virtual world, then the virtual and the real form a counterpoint at this point, and it is no longer possible to identify which is the real world and which is the virtual world between the transitions between the different worlds, because both have become real. Marie-Laure Ryan (1991) describes immersion in a fictional world as a process of "recentering": "For the duration of our immersion in a work of fiction, the realm of possibilities is thus recentered around the sphere which the narrator presents as the actual world" (p. 22). The moment the reader is immersed in the story, the virtual world crosses the ontological difference with the real world and achieves re-centering, which is precisely the logic of the operation of the VR game and the experimental nature of the novel: The time travel in *The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate* blurs the boundaries between the virtual and real worlds, and the ontology of the world takes on a virtual character. The businessman becomes the avatar of the reader and experiences this playful time travel.

In addition, the novel also realizes the unity of immersion and interactivity through plot arrangement and character interaction. The time travel that breaks the chronological order allows characters in different times to appear at the same time, with the inevitability of their appearance, and each appearance carries the mission of accomplishing the mission of the “game system”. The traveled characters meet themselves and others who exist in possible worlds and use time to begin a series of stories with causal connections. Raniya, the rope-maker’s wife, knows that she is not just standing by on her time-traveling mission, “Allah must have brought her here so that he might use her as his instrument” (p. 23). So that the self cannot simply be equated with the “inner other” and is not an external projection of the protagonist’s deepest, unrealized possibilities. Thus, the self cannot be simply equated with the “inner other”, not as an external projection of the protagonist’s inner, unrealized possibilities, but as multiple selves engaged in the same narrative game, where the goal is to push the plots of the possible worlds to coincide as much as possible with the trajectories of their lives. Ryan (1991) further explains that “the plot is the trace left by the movement of these worlds within the textual universe” (p. 119). In the story, the interplay among multiple selves generates the hyperreal experience at the heart of the narrative. The middle-aged wife joins forces with the older wife to help her youthful husband out of trouble, the young weaver steals gold coins from his older self, and the lucky cordwainer gets rich by being instructed by his older self; the trajectory of the characters’ development may seem to change as a result of this, but it does not change the end of the development of the characters in the textual real world, as all the behaviors are a part of the process that leads to the final outcome. At this point, we have not yet been able to realize Ted Chiang’s real intention of writing about time travel, and it is easy to fall into the appearance of fatalism triggered by the fate of the characters. Following Fuwaad’s travel, we can see the possible face of the world conceived by the novel. We need to note that the possible worlds in *The Merchant and the Alchemist’s Gate* are characterized by the following features: multiple subjects exist at the same time; inter-subjective behaviors are causally linked; the moment in which the subject is located is a superposition of multiple possible worlds; there is no absolutely dominant real world, and the choices made by the protagonist determine the ontological priority of the world. Thus, the properties of the gate of time in the fiction differ from the reciprocal nature of time travel in traditional science fiction narratives. Generally speaking, time travel is from one reality to another, or from one reality to a virtual world, but the essence is to “return” to the original reality through the actions of other time and space. However, the medium of the “gate” in *The Merchant and the Alchemist’s Gate* blurs the boundary between the real world and the possible world, that is to say, the action of traveling turns both sides into the possible world, which is exactly like the unprecedented hyperreal experience created by VR games. New media brings new forms of existence into view, open up new experiences, and make new modes of perception possible. Thus, the time travel set up in the fiction is formally similar to a game that can be played over and over again, but the purpose of such a game is the irreversible creation of virtual worlds, and once

begin, there is no “reality” to return to. Ted Chiang largely reverses the traditional pattern of prioritizing the real world over other parallel worlds in previous time travel stories; just as the self seen in time travel is not a projection of the inner self, the worlds that time travelers arrive at are not footnotes to the real world, but are just as real. Likewise, the world from which time travel departs is not so real. Ted Chiang takes this directly as an issue, demonstrating the world’s immense ontological virtuality and playfulness.

2. Ludic Structure of Nested Narrative: In-depth Expansion of Experience

The narrative mode of VR games is characterized by “nesting”, which can be expressed as “instance” in online games. From a structural perspective, an online game may offer multiple routes through its narrative, a structure that can be understood through Eco’s (1986, p. 81) discussion of the rhizome. Subsidiary narratives interweave with the main storyline, generating an expanding range of possible worlds. As these narratives diverge and reconverge, they form a textual vortex around a shared source text. The copy narrative increases the interest and excitement of the game, and the player can continuously generate multi-level psychological experiences in the vortex of the story. In contrast to the strictly text-based scripting model, stories generated in real time by players interacting with the computer system can be regarded as autopoietic narratives.

The story of the alchemist can go on and on, and the experience of the merchant can also generate countless narrative texts in different instances. The narrative path of the whole novel can be “prolonged” indefinitely, and the content of the narrative and the textual space can also be expanded in depth. The virtual world in *The Merchant and the Alchemist’s Gate* is actualized, while the real world is virtualized due to the dimension of time, and the key role is played by the choice of the story characters, and the relative movement between the real world of the text and the many virtual worlds becomes the driving force of the narrative. Carr (2006, p. 39) emphasizes the player’s role in determining whether and how particular events unfold. Within the possibilities provided by the game, the player helps shape the arrangement of the plot. When the merchant Fuwaad becomes a player, he has the possibility to choose the world while realizing time travel, and a new story begins to unfold. Fuwaad passes through the time gate and meets the characters in the story told by Bashaarat. “For a moment I was unsure if I were dreaming or awake, because I felt as if I had stepped into a tale” (p. 31). At this point Fuwaad walks from the second layer of the story with Bashaarat into the fourth layer of the story of time travel and rendezvous with the characters from the third layer of Bashaarat’s story. “The thought that I might talk to its players and partake of its events was dizzying. I was tempted to speak and see if I might play a hidden role in that tale, but then I remembered that my goal was to play a hidden role in my own tale. So I left without a word and went to arrange passage with a caravan” (p. 31).

Fuwaad enters his own game again and is faced with two choices: to participate in the events with the story characters or not? Fuwaad’s choice is not to get involved; if he does, how will the course of the

story change? The novel gives the answer through Bashaarat:

“‘So if you learn that you are dead twenty years from now, there is nothing you can do to avoid your death?’ He nodded. This seemed to me very disheartening, but then I wondered if it could not also provide a guarantee. I said, ‘Suppose you learn that you are alive twenty years from now. Then nothing could kill you in the next twenty years. You could then fight in battles without a care, because your survival is assured’. ‘That is possible’, he said. ‘It is also possible that a man who would make use of such a guarantee would not find his older self alive when he first used the Gate’” (pp. 16-17).

This presents a VR game-like structure of instantly generative storytelling, where the game’s storyline is generated instantly through the player’s interactions with the game’s characters, and therefore contributes to the realization of different possible worlds. The possible directions of the story create a text-based imaginative space for the reader to enter into other possible worlds as well, if Fuwaad had made different choices. The meaning of the narrative needs to be understood and elaborated by the reader through personal experience, and the non-linear structure creates a labyrinthine effect that carries out an immersive and interactive game-like narrative.

Nelles (2002) argues that “all embedded narrative has a dramatic impact, if only that of deferring or interrupting the embedding narrative, and that all embedded narrative has a thematic function, if only one of relative contrast or analogy” (p. 347). This view helps to better understand the textual level of openness achieved by the copy narratives of *The Merchant and the Alchemist’s Gate*. The themes of the three stories told by the alchemist Bashaarat in the novel are: “the tale of the fortunate rope-maker”, “the tale of the weaver who stole from himself”, “the tale of the wife and her lover”. The protagonists of the story have different experiences in their own stories, and through the use of nested narrative structure, multiple clues are integrated, and in the copy narrative of the businessman going back twenty years to try to save his wife, the characteristics of multiple subjects that cannot be expressed by a single structure are revealed: past and future are the same, and we cannot change either, only know them more fully. Like the player of a VR game, the reader can get a sense of infinitely extended and deeper experience in the copy narrative. There is one issue that we still need to work out here: how to deal with the inconsistency between the player, who is constrained by the design of the game, experiencing the limited freedom to trigger a plot with a limited number of designed options and the game’s finale, while the time traveler, who seems to face the infinite freedom to create a plot?

If the ending of the game is regarded as Heidegger’s metaphor of existence, then it is easy to understand the playfulness of time travel. Heidegger (1962, p. 303) characterizes human existence in terms of being-towards-death. Although the embedded narratives seem capable of endless expansion, they unfold within a game that moves inexorably towards its end. The game’s beginning and end echo human birth and death, giving its proliferating narratives a finite temporal framework. This tension between narrative possibility and temporal finitude turns the story’s embedded narrative structure into a gamified simulation of the human condition. As Todorov (1978, p. 41) suggests, the highest level of

narrative embedding is self-embedding. At the end of the novel, the fourth level meets the first, and Fuwaad gives the decision of the story's direction to the King Caliph, who decides which of the possible worlds to make real, and if it is decided that the world of Fuwaad's story is real, the virtual world completes the ontological level of transgression and becomes the real world that was originally used as a nested framework. The story ends here without giving the King's choice, and the reader's perspective shifts from Fuwaad to Caliph and faces a fork in the road of possible worlds. If the world in this novel is chosen as the real world, is the reader who is reading in the virtual world? Juul (1999) argues that "narrativity and interactivity can not take place at the same time" (p. 4), but the combination of narrative and interactivity can be seen in the novel which means extraditing virtual narratives to the traditional science fiction tropes of time travel as an experiment in virtual reality narratives.

In the structure of the sub-narrative, the time of the story switches freely on the timeline, the world in which the story takes place is different from the real world in which the characters live, and the characters experience the tasks to be accomplished in their respective story threads, and therefore actually experience real emotions. As Bashaarat said about the two sides of the tapestry, "You may find one more agreeable to look at, but you cannot say one is true and the other is false" (p. 30). Fuwaad goes back in time in every way possible to try to save his wife's life, and it could even be argued that he actively chooses to immerse himself in the story world, where the characters participate in and create the narrative, thus contributing to a deeper expansion of the sense of experience.

3. Character NPCization of Ludic Power: the Experience of Immersion and Manipulation

Characters are the core elements that make up the story world, whereas *The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate* presents ambiguity in terms of story background and characterization. Ted Chiang prefers to structure the story background on different cultures, but does not choose to take the cultural landscape and character traits as the core of the narrative; instead, he focuses on the overall human experience and value orientation through the instrumental characters, the instrumental character has a vague appearance, and what the reader learns is only the character's name, occupation, and other basic information and behavior, so it can be said that the character's existence is only to promote the development of the storyline, and this kind of character happens to be widely available in VR games, and is known as NPC (Non-Player Character). The birth of NPC originated from the rapid development of the game industry supported by modern technology. Traditional games have been unable to meet the great demand of players for immersion and interactivity, so NPCs are set up to promote the plot and take on the function, which is an important way for game designers to interact with players. Characters such as the alchemist, the fortunate rope-maker, and the weaver who stole from himself are all NPC characterizations of the author, and while the novel lacks personalized depictions of the characters in terms of appearance and psychology, it nevertheless grants the characters a certain degree of autonomy to advance the plot. The businessman Fuwwad becomes the avatar of the reader in the text, and through

the interaction between Fuwaad and the NPC-like characters, the author and the reader realize the function of interaction in the virtual game world: “The thought that I might talk to its players and partake of its events was dizzying” (p. 31). Following the perspective of the reader’s electronic avatar Fuwaad, we can observe the interaction with other NPC characters in the game, and this is accompanied by a highly involved immersive experience, which is essentially a perceptual agency of the avatar for the player. Mateas (2001) defines agency as “the feeling of empowerment that comes from being able to take actions in the world whose effects relate to the player’s intention” (p. 142). The VR game, through the player’s virtual avatar or “avatar narrator” and the game world, game characters and NPC instant interaction, can construct or influence the game story script and plot advancement, so as to realize the purpose of “transformation” or “reconstruction” of the game world, and the player can experience immersive immersion and a sense of intervention in other people’s lives. The aim of “reconstructing” the game world can be realized, while the player can experience the immersion of being in the game and the manipulation of intervening in other characters’ lives in the process. This naturally reminds us of Foucault’s interpretation of the power of life. Foucault focuses more on how human beings are captured, forged, and produced by a variety of power disciplining mechanisms; VR games, as a medium of modern technology and human-computer interaction, overflow the discursive orbit of Foucault’s theories of power, but it is still quite reasonable to use Foucaultian thinking mechanisms to interpret the power mechanisms embedded in the fictional game narratives. The protagonist’s intervention in the lives of others is more evident in the fact that he wants to change the death of his wife, that is, to give others the power of “life” and as the story unfolds, he experiences the power of control and the powerlessness of power in the face of life. Fuwaad insists on traveling from Baghdad to Cairo to achieve time travel, and tries to arrive in Baghdad early to save his wife, but he encounters many obstacles set by the game world: insufficient water, disease, sandstorms, robbers, and high temperatures..... In the end, he still has to accept the news of his wife’s death once again, but unlike the last time, he receives a message from her and is relieved by it: “past and future are the same, and we cannot change either, only know them more fully. My journey to the past had changed nothing, but what I had learned had changed everything, and I understood that it could not have been otherwise. If our lives are tales that Allah tells, then we are the audience as well as the players, and it is by living these tales that we receive their lessons” (p. 33).

We can summarize the protagonist’s change of experience in the novel, which goes through the following stages: Doubt-Relief-Suffering-Release. In this immersive game of life in the world of possibilities, the protagonist gains an epiphany-like experience of the power to allow others to “die”. Chiang (2013) observes that “one of the cool things about science fiction is that it lets you dramatize the process of scientific discovery, that moment of suddenly understanding something about the universe” (“Interview (Part One of Two)” section, para. 53). It is this sense of experience that becomes the playful narrative core of the novel.

4. Virtual Reality: Time Travel in the Digital Age

The Alchemist's Gate is not merely a personal gate of travel, but the coexistence of all possible space and time. The deep ontological implications of the VR playful narrative in the quotidian, which has been discussed above, can only be realized in the digital age when one perceives that the real and virtual worlds are becoming increasingly intertwined. Huizinga (1980) argues that civilization emerges and develops through play, which can temporarily take participants beyond everyday life. As he puts it, "All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (p. 10). Yet current digital games are extending into infinite time and space, and not only has the real world become a space for play, but it has begun to create new spaces. The characters in the novel meet up with versions of themselves at different ages as they time travel, a kind of co-presentation of different times. "With that step, you would visit the Baghdad of twenty years hence. You could seek out your older self and have a conversation with him. Afterward, you could step back through the Gate of Years and return to the present day" (p. 11). The time portal in the novel enables time travel by actualizing possible worlds, so that the virtual world is as real as the real world. The settings in VR games have become an attempt at reality, and with the help of virtual reality technology, we can construct worlds that have disappeared or don't exist, and when the player puts on a VR device, he or she can realize a short trip through time. VR games enable players to instantly enter a different space and time, choosing one of the non-simultaneous virtual worlds and realizing it. The experiences gained in the virtual world are different from those in the real world, and the construction of these experiences generates diverse selves and reshapes our experience of the world, precisely through the experience of gaming in order to face the digital world where the virtual and the real are increasingly intertwined.

The gate of time in the novel becomes a metaphorical expression of technology in the digital age. The network is the "nerve" of the information age, and VR games rooted in network technology are the medium of interaction between reality and the virtual world. Simmel (1997) uses the door as a metaphor for the human capacity to establish and cross boundaries: "It is absolutely essential for humanity that it set itself a boundary, but with freedom, that is, in such a way that it can also remove this boundary again, that it can place itself outside it" (p. 172). Read in this light, the gate in Chiang's story represents both a boundary and the possibility of crossing it. However, in the digital age, the "gate" of technology has already surpassed Simmel's sense of the boundary of "gate". The "gate" in *The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate* can travel through time, but it cannot isolate different worlds, just as digital technology has become pervasive, and the virtual and the real are intertwined in a way that is difficult to decipher. Don Ihde provides us with an intentional diagram of "(human-technology)→world". In *Bodies in Technology*, Ihde (2001, p. 138) proposes the existence of a third kind of body, the technological body, in addition to the material body and the cultural body. The technical body is materialized in technology, both as a perceptual extension of the material body and as an influence on the subject's thinking consciousness. In VR games, players become a kind of

“human-machine joint body”, through the technology to perceive the world, players manipulate the virtual body, in the virtual world of the game to produce a strong sense of experience, the body at the same time in the both real. The novel constructs a myriad of possible worlds, and the reader follows the narrator's point of view, facing the same question as the King Caliph at the end of the story: is the world Fuwaad recounts real? “Now my tale has caught up to my life, coiled as they both are, and the direction they take next is for Your Majesty to decide. I know many things that will happen here in Baghdad over the next twenty years, but nothing about what awaits me now” (p. 34). While we as readers are unconsciously substituting into the role of the King Caliph, we are trapped in the world of the story together with the merchant, and we are startled to find that all the characters, including the merchant, are Ted Chiang's NPC characters. Not only is the merchant unable to tell which is the real world and which is the virtual world, but the reader also seems to have a hard time distinguishing between reality and fantasy, just as we in the real world are lost in the virtual reality created by technology. It can be seen that the focus of time travel writing in *The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate* is no longer on the past or the future on the timeline, but on sketching the future picture of the symbiosis between the real and the virtual. The alchemist's gate becomes a metaphor for digital technology, the alchemist's gate in the novel is a technological medium connecting the real world and the virtual world, and human beings are standing on one end of the digital technology and marching towards the virtual space on the other end.

In traditional time travel novels, travel often becomes a way to escape from reality, but time travel in the digital age has nowhere to flee to. The unchangeable past *The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate* seems to imply the philosophy of human existence in the postmodern society. The modern crisis of rationalism is rooted in the inherent arbitrariness of traditional rationalism, which arbitrarily regards the world as the real world and ignores the fact that the existence of the real is only a possibility. Postmodernist rationality is placed in constant self-deconstruction, so that rationality is characterized by uncertainty and playfulness, thus creating an eternally changing world of possibilities, which in turn will push human rationality out of the postmodern dilemma. The author explores the way of human beings getting along with technology in the torrent of technological change, giving a modern reflection on wandering in the rift between the virtual and the real. Lan Jiang (2021, p. 32) cautions that the possibilities opened up by technological advances coexist with new forms of subjection. Digital technologies and algorithmic governance can turn individuals into data subjects whose actions are increasingly organized by large technological platforms.

Virtual reality technology allows us to experience the realization of the virtual in the form of a game, and at the same time prompts us to start reflecting on the virtualization of reality. This seems to be Ted Chiang's way of thinking for those of us who are trapped in the digital age, “Contemplate the marvel that is existence, and rejoice that you are able to do so” (Chiang, 2019, p. 50). What is the point of discussing the virtual and playful nature of the fictional world in its ontological sense, when all the

endeavors in possible worlds can neither erase the past nor change the future? Nietzsche believed that eternity could be reached in the moment of the present, and that the moment of experience was the very pathway to the world and the answer given in this paper.

5. Conclusion

Under the conventionalized time travel narrative theme on the surface of the *The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate*, we can detect the hidden logic of VR game operation: the hyperreal experience, the nested loop narrative structure, and the power mechanism of NPCization of the characters. Ted Chiang breaks the linear narrative mode with a gate of time, presenting the world's virtuality and playfulness in the ontological sense, and turning it into a kind of narrative experiment. "gate" as a medium to access the real world and the possible world, information technology is almost pervasive in reality, so the alchemist's gate is also a metaphor for modern technology, which we can observe the penetration of modern technology into the way of life and the control of emotional perception. The narrator in *The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate* navigates through the cracks and overlays between the real and the virtual, while we as readers are equally confused as to whether it's a story or a reality, wandering in and out of the imaginary and real created by the digital technology, which leaves behind an experiential sense of the process with myriad possibilities, and thus an experience of life in the digital age. Marie-Laure Ryan combines the idea of possible worlds with the disciplines of speech act theory, artificial intelligence, and computational technology to provide us with theoretical resources for elucidating the problem of world ontology in Ted Chiang's science fiction. VR games, which rely on modern technological developments, offer cross-media narrative perspectives, showing us the potential of science fiction's time-travel theme to be interpreted in the digital age.

References

- Carr, D., Buckingham, D., Burn, A., & Schott, G. (2006). *Computer games: Text, narrative and play*. Cambridge, England: Polity.
- Chiang, T. (2013, May 24). Interview: Ted Chiang (B. Huang, Interviewer). *The Asian American Literary Review*. Retrieved October 15, 2026, from https://web.archive.org/web/20141122141914id_/http://aalmag.org:80/specfictioninterviewchiang/
- Chiang, T. (2019). *Exhalation: Stories*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Eco, U. (1986). *Semiotics and the philosophy of language*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Gleick, J. (2016). *Time travel: A history*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie, & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.

- Huizinga, J. (1980). *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Ihde, D. (2001). *Bodies in technology*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Juul, J. (1999). *A clash between game and narrative: A thesis on computer games and interactive fiction*. Master's thesis, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark. English translation, 2001. Retrieved October 15, 2026, from <https://jesperjuul.net/thesis/>
- Lan, J. (2021). Shuzi wenzixue he suanfa zhili jishu: Shuzi zibenzhuyi shidai de zaishengchan [Digital philology and algorithm management technology: The reproduction in the era of digital capitalism]. *Shandong Shehui Kexue*, (3), 25-32.
- Mateas, M. (2001). A preliminary poetics for interactive drama and games. *Digital Creativity*, 12(3), 140-152. <https://doi.org/10.1076/digc.12.3.140.3224>
- Nelles, W. (2002). Stories within stories: Narrative levels and embedded narrative. In B. Richardson (Ed.), *Narrative dynamics: Essays on time, plot, closure, and frames* (pp. 339-353). Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.
- Ryan, M.-L. (1991). *Possible worlds, artificial intelligence, and narrative theory*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Simmel, G. (1997). Bridge and door. In D. Frisby, & M. Featherstone (Eds.), *Simmel on culture: Selected writings* (pp. 170-174). London: Sage.
- Strahan, J. (Ed.). (2008). *The best science fiction and fantasy of the year* (Vol. 2). San Francisco, CA: Night Shade Books.
- Todorov, T. (1978). *Poétique de la prose*. Paris: Seuil.