[00:00:00]

Dan Punday: Time T equals zero.

A is on a train traveling due west along the x axis at a constant velocity of 70 kilometers per hour. He stands at the rear of the train, looking back with some fondness at the town of 6,3, his point of departure, the location of the university and his few friends. He's carrying a suitcase, 30 kilograms, a small bound volume, his thesis, 0.7 kilograms, seven years. Using this information given, calculate A's final position.

2: Assume A is lonely. Assume A is leaving 6,3 in order to find someone who could equal his love of pure theory. A says to himself, no one in a town like 6,3 could possibly equal my love of pure theory, not even P, his esteemed advisor [00:01:00] and mentor.

Jim Phelan: This is Jim Phelan, director of Project Narrative at the Ohio State University, and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative Podcast. In a typical episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me. Today I'll be talking with Dan Punday, who has selected charles Yu' s 2020 short story, " Problems of Self Study" for our discussion. Dan's choice makes Charles Yu the first author to have more than one story featured on the Project Narrative Podcast. In episode 19, which first aired in June, 2023, Marco Caracciolo chose Yu's short story "Systems", which was commissioned by the New York Times, also in 2020, for their Decameron project, 29 new stories from the pandemic. Dan Punday is professor of English at Mississippi State University, where he specializes in contemporary American literature, [00:02:00] digital media, and literary theory, especially narrative theory. Dan's books include \_Narrative After Deconstruction\_, \_Five Strands of Fictionality, Narrative Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Narratology,\_ \_Writing at the Limit: The Novel in the New Media Ecology,\_ \_Computing as Writing\_, \_Playing at Narratology,\_ and most recently \_Infrastructure in Video Games\_. I also want to stress that Dan has been a major contributor to the International Society for the Study of Narrative, having served as president, having organized two annual conferences himself, one with his colleague at Mississippi State, Kelly Marsh; that conference was held right before lockdown in 2020. And Dan also served for several years together with Lindsay Holmgren as a liaison between the society and its other conference organizers. Dan, it's a pleasure to welcome you to the podcast. Is there anything you'd like to say to introduce Charles Yu's [00:03:00] story?

Dan Punday: Thanks, Jim for the invitation. It's great to be on this podcast. You know, one of the things I found really interesting about this story is it plays on some of our assumptions about the ways we construct invented stories, right? It's a story that would very minimal characterization, and yet I think we care a lot about them.

And it's a story that plays a little bit on the idea of making up stories, right, and we'll see that as soon as we get into it. So those are the couple of things that, that stood out to me and motivated me to choose this story.

Jim Phelan: All right. Excellent. So now, here's Dan Punday reading Charles Yu's "Problems for Self Study".

Dan Punday: Just as a preface, there's a couple of quirky things about this story. There's more math in this story than probably the average narrative podcast. And the way in which the story is structured is in terms of some numbered sections, most of which have titles, not all, and then items inside each of those that are organized by letter. And so, I'm gonna read those, calling them item A, [00:04:00] item B.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Dan Punday: Item C.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: Because we have characters who are also called by letters and it might potentially be confusing. So at any rate.

Jim Phelan: Good adjustment, yeah.

Dan Punday: Great. So, " Problems for Self Study".

1: Time T equals zero.

A is on a train traveling due west along the x axis at a constant velocity of 70 kilometers per hour. He stands at the rear of the train, looking back with some fondness at the town of 6,3, his point of departure, the location of the university and his few friends. He's carrying a suitcase, 30 kilograms, a small bound volume, his thesis, 0.7 kilograms, seven years. Using this information given, calculate A's final position.

2: Assume A is lonely. Assume A is leaving 6,3 in order to find someone who could equal his love of pure theory. A [00:05:00] says to himself, no one in a town like 6,3 could possibly equal my love of pure theory, not even P, his esteemed advisor and mentor.

A suspects P is a closet empiricist checking his theory against the world instead of the other way around. Once a barged in and caught p hunched over his desk with a guilty but pleasured look on his face, approximating, right there in the office.

3: Relative motion.

Across the train car, A spots B, assume B is lovely.

a: A immediately recognizes that B is not a physicist.

b: Still, he calculates his approach.

c: A wonders into what formula do I plug? The various quantitative values of B? Could B, A wonders, though she clearly lacks formal training in mechanics, ever be taught in some rudimentary sense to [00:06:00] understand the world as I do?

d: A notes her inconsistent postulates, her wasted assumptions, her lovely inexactness.

e: He decides to give her a test.

f: A says, if a projectile is launched at a 30 degree angle to the earth with an initial philosophy of a hundred meters per second, how far does it travel?

g: B notes his nervous and strange confidence, his razor nicked chin, his tie too short by an inch. An un combed tuft of hair. She's charmed.

h: B humors A.

i: B says, well, doesn't it depend on how windy it is?

j: Ignore the wind, says A.

k: But how can I ignore the wind?

l: Ignore the wind says A.

m: Are you saying there's no wind?

n: A says the wind is [00:07:00] negligible. He says this with a certain pleasure. The other passengers roll their eyes.

o: A says it does not matter for the purposes of the problem. Besides, A says, it makes the math too hard.

p: A looks at B's dumb expectant, beautiful face. He feels pity for her meager understanding of physics. How can he explain to her what must be ignored? Wind, elephants, cookies, and air resistance. And: the morning dew, almost everything in newspapers, almost everything owing to random heat dissipation, the taste of papaya, and the mass of the projectile, the shape of the projectile, what other people think, statistical noise, the capital of Luxembourg.

q: A wonders, can I be with a woman who, however lovely, does not understand how to hold all else constant, how to isolate a variable?

[00:08:00] A thinks:

i. She will see it my way.

ii. She will change for me.

iii. I will educate her.

B thinks:

iv. He's lonely.

v. I can make him less so.

vi. I will change for him.

4: A spent seven years, 2,557 days, 4,191 cups of coffee in the town of 6,3.

He was writing his thesis, 79 pages ,841 separate equations. A's thesis is on non-linear dynamic equations.

a: In it, he discovered a tiny truth.

b: When he had written the last step of his proof, A smiled.

c: A's truth is about a tiny part of a tiny sliver of a tiny subset of all possible outcomes of the world.

d: When A brought this to his advisor and mentor, the esteemed [00:09:00] P, P smiled. A's heart lept. e: P said what it lacks in elegance, it makes up for in rigor.

f: He also said, what a wonderful minor result.

5: A and B are sliding down a frictionless incline plane. They're accelerating towards the inevitable domesticity.

Some marriages are driven by love, some by gravity.

6: The three body problem.

Things can continue to get more complicated for A, now traveling in an elliptical path around B. B remains fixed giving birth to their first child. Doctors and nurses orbit B periodically.

a: Given the mass of A, now 80 kilograms and the mass of B, now 55 kilograms, calculate the gravitational force between A and B using Newton's universal gravitational formula: FG equals G times MA times MB divided by R [00:10:00] squared, where G is the gravitational constant.

b: Imagine the situation from a stationary perspective of B. As bodies whirl around you, you focus on the pain, the quiet place, the baby. You look at A who so lovingly paces around you, worried about your health, you wonder what is A thinking?

c: Now imagine the situation from A's perspective. You wonder, what if the child turns out like its mother? What if the child does not understand theory? You've spent so many nights lying, awake with B, trying to teach her how to see the world, its governing principles, the functions lying under it. All hours spent with B as she cries, frustrated, uncomprehending.

d: This is what is well known in the field of celestial dynamics as the three body problem.

e: Simply put, this is the problem of computing the mutual gravitational interaction of three separate and different masses.[00:11:00]

f: Astronomers, since the time of Kepler, have known that this problem is surprisingly difficult to solve.

g: With two bodies, the problem is trivial. But with two bodies, you can simplify the universe, empty it of everything, say the moon and the sun, an A and a B, the sun and a speck of dust. The equations are solved analytically.

h: Unfortunately, when we had a third body to our equations of motion, the equations become intractable. It turns out that the mathematics get very complicated, very fast.

i: A has only recently begun to feel comfortable predicting B's path, B's behavior, her perturbations and eccentricity of orbit. And now this, he thinks. Another body.

j: B screams in agony of natural childbirth. She looks in A's eyes. What is he thinking? A, her odd impenetrable husband, will he make a good father? [00:12:00]

k: A thinks generally about the concept of pain. A has a witty thought and would like to write it down.

7: The problem of inertia.

a: A and B are not moving. VA equals VB equals zero. A is in his study, hidden in a corner. He is talking in a low voice.

b: B across the house is watching television.

c: A is talking to J, who is married to S. S is a good friend of A.

d: J is thinner than B. S is older than A.

e: B is listening to A. S is listening to J.

f: Also listening: the neighborhood. Theta and Sigma. Delta and Phi.

g: Also listening: the social circle. Phi, Chi and Psi. Eta, Zeta and Nu. Even Lambda has been known to listen.

[00:13:00] h: Others, just speculating, say that A and J would make a good looking couple. A says no, thinks yes. J blushes.

i: S exerts a force on J. A exerts a force on B. A wants to exert a force on J, and J would like it if A would exert a considerable force on her.

j: B is walking down the hall. A can hear B. B can hear A's voice growing softer with each step she takes. A freezes in anticipation, ready to hang up the phone.

k: B changes velocity, turns, goes to the kitchen, pretends not to hear.

l: A does not move. B does not move. The forces cancel out. Everyone remains at rest.

8: Partial solutions.

a: Renovate the kitchen.

b: Renovate themselves.

c: Go on a safari.

d: Go to a [00:14:00] "seminar."

e: M ake large purchases of of luxury durable consumer goods.

f: Make small overtures to an object of lust at work.

g: Take up golf.

h: Find a disorder and self-diagnose.

i: Get a purebred dog.

j: Get religion.

k: Landscape the backyard.

l: Have another child.

9: Gedanken experiment.

a: Imagine A is building a spaceship. He's tired of being pushed, pulled, torqued, accelerated, colluded on a daily basis, losing momentum. He's tired of his thesis failing time and again.

Every day an exception to A's theorem. Every day he recognizes it a little less. Once a shiny, unused tool, a slender, immaculate volume, now riddled with holes, supported with makeshift untenable assumption. A's theorem has not so much predicted the future [00:15:00] with success as it is recorded a history of his own exceptions.

b: It is simplest to approach the problem of satellite motion from the point of view of energy.

c: Every night for a year, A and B eat dinner in silence. Every night for a year, A lights a cigarette opens a beer, goes to the garage to work on his imaginary spaceship. Sometimes he has doubts, sometimes he gets frustrated, wondering if it is worth all the imaginary trouble.

d: And then one day he finishes his spaceship. Even imaginary work pays off.

e: A turns on his imaginary vehicle, listens to it roar. It makes a lot of imaginary noise. B tries to talk over it, but the engine is deafeningly loud.

f: B shouts at A, right in front of his face. A sees B gesturing wildly. Why is she acting so crazy?

g: The energy of the body in [00:16:00] satellite motion is the sum of its kinetic and potential energies. It is given by the following: E equals K plus U equals IMV squared divided by two minus GM divided by R two.

h: A watches B move frantically around the garage. A notes that B looks rather desperate, as if she were trying to stop him, trying to hold him, trying to keep him from leaving Earth.

i: A's spaceship is heating up. It is time, he thinks. He holds the imaginary levers and calculates his trajectory. He enjoys for a minute the low frequency hum as it vibrates through his whole body. His future opens up in front of him.

j: He is moving now. His past sealing itself off, trailing farther and farther behind him.

k: The escape velocity, the ESC of a projectile launch from the surface of the earth is the minimum [00:17:00] speed with which the projectile must launch from the surface in order to overcome gravity and leave the vicinity of the earth forever.

l: His imperfect theorem, his imperfect credit, his imperfect house, his imperfect bladder, his imperfect hemorrhoids, his imperfect gum disease, his imperfect career, his imperfect penis: gone. Also gone: the history of his interactions, his past collisions, his past. He has finally achieved his major result. He's free from the unceasing pull of gravitational memory.

10: a is in deep space. The solar wind is at his back, pushing him along at a rate of 0.000000001 meter per second. At this rate, it will take him the rest of his life to travel the distance of just over eight feet.

B is on a space rock watching A drift glacially. Imagine you are B.

a: imagine you are 20 meters from A, close [00:18:00] enough to see his face close enough to know his shape, close enough to imagine contact.

b: you have a rope. If you can throw it just right, you might be able to tie yourself to A, turn his course, affect his trajectory. You might not be able to stop him, but you may be able to make sure that wherever he drifts to, you end up there as well.

c: assume that you are of average strength. Assume you are of above average compassion, patience, will, determination.

d: if you throw the rope and miss, what happens? If you never throw the rope, what happens?

e: Imagine you will spend a period of 80 years within a few meters of this astronaut, a man in an insulated space suit. Imagine it is possible to drift by this man staring at him as he makes his way into the infinite ocean of space.

f: you will never know [00:19:00] any other points, other problems, the mysteries of biochemistry, the magic of literature, the pleasures of topography. You will only know physics.

g: you will never know what it feels like inside his suit.

h: you will never know why you are on this rock.

11: Initial conditions.

A is on a train traveling due west along the X axis at a constant velocity of 70 kilometers per hour. He's carrying a suitcase, 30 kilograms, and a small bound volume, his thesis, 0.7 kilograms, seven years. He stands at the rear of the train looking back at the town, 6,3, a point full of sadness, an origin of vectors, a locus of desires, a point like any other point.

Jim Phelan: Okay Dan, thanks very much. So much going on in this story, I think, but maybe we could begin with, you know, picking up on some of the things you said in advance, the story's sort of [00:20:00] self-consciousness about its own fictionality. It's asking readers to tap into our knowledge of story problems and math as instances of fictionality, even as it seems to be trying to morph from a story problem to a recognizable narrative, and by which I mean, you know, something where we get change over time to characters. So, maybe you could elaborate on or correct any aspects of this general characterization of the story to get us started?

Dan Punday: Yeah, I mean, what I found really interesting about the story is that Yu is really trying to pull in an expanded sense of fictionally.

We tend to talk about fiction in terms of kind of intentionally signaled creative invention, right? We know when we're reading a novel that most of the characters in there aren't real, even if there's, they throw in some historical figures, and we sort of know how to engage with that.

But, you know, fictionally is one of those things that we deal with all the time. You know, when you buy a lottery ticket, you sort [00:21:00] of imagine what's gonna happen if you win that jackpot. There's been some really great historicist work on the rise of fictionality and kind of modern commerce.

So, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt have a great discussion of the rise of credit at around the same time as the novel, right? And so..

Jim Phelan: Right.

Dan Punday: When you pay on credit, right, you and the merchant agree to pretend that you have the money that you have.

Jim Phelan: Right. Or predict that you will have it, right?

Dan Punday: Yeah. Or you will have, right? Yeah. Right, right. And even if we're not talking about buying something you can't afford, just like the literal mechanism of buying something on Amazon, right? You go and you click buy and Amazon will say, right, you bought this on, you know, April 23rd, but in fact you're really not paying for it for weeks probably, right?

Jim Phelan: Yeah, right.

Dan Punday: But that would be crazy. You can't, you can't think in those terms. Right? So that fiction, let's pretend as if you bought this, helps kind of grease the wheels of so much of our interaction. And one of the things that I think that Yu does so [00:22:00] well, especially in that first interaction with B where he says, ignore the wind, and her reaction, which is entirely predictable, which is like, is there no wind?

And he says, no, but you can't, it makes the math too hard, and you know, any of us who've done these kind of story problems know like, well, yeah, of course, you know, you're being asked to calculate a certain kind of thing, and yet, this presence of the fictional, like, let's all behave as if this is the case.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Dan Punday: I just think it's so much fun in this story and, and reminds us of like how that kind of works our way into our...

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: Everyday.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, and there's a way in which the story like frustrates that, right? You can't keep ignoring it, right? I mean that, you know A and B, this becomes an issue for them, right? He wants her to be... A wants B to understand physics the way he does right? He doesn't want any empiricism, right, he suspects his own advisor of being a closet empiricist and that's bad, right, so, so part of the conflict is that the, you know, the impossibility of having the [00:23:00] world conform to story problems in a way.

Dan Punday: Right, right. Yeah. And I think, I mean, when B comes into the story and she only comes in, what two pages in, but, we have one relationship to A and you know, we don't necessarily know the logic of the story yet, right?

Jim Phelan: Right.

Dan Punday: It's all framed in terms of formula and then all of a sudden B comes in, and, you know, what she says is what all of us are thinking, which is like, what about the wind? You know, like you can't factor these things out. You can't do pure theory without empiricism, and so it's an interesting way in which that she brings to this narrow that set up one way, a very kind of different perspective that brings in all this kind of messiness.

Jim Phelan: Right, right. And part of the messiness is the way in which they negotiate, you know, their perceptions of each other, right, after this, after that discussion about, well, there's no wind, right, he's convinced, oh, I can get her to see it my way, right, or she'll change for me. And she's like, well, this is a lonely guy and maybe I can, you know, [00:24:00] I can make him less lonely and even if I have to change, I can, right? And so suddenly we're in, human, human, man, woman, kind of you know, complexities.

Dan Punday: It's a tremendously efficient little exchange. I mean, again, this is, what, an eight page story and, and that, just that exchange, right, a thinks then he gives us the three things, and B thinks those three things.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Dan Punday: And it's, we understand that A is a problematic figure.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: And B is, is our point of emotional connection, right?

Jim Phelan: Right.

Dan Punday: She's the one who like grounds the story in how real people behave, and I think that's such a lovely little turn, three pages into the story.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Right, right, and so, you know, part of what you're talking about, I think is kind of a turn from, you know, the story being and the characters being totally synthetic, you know, the names of letters and so on, and then to having, you know, what we might call some kind of mimetic dimensions with some kind of psychology and a relationship [00:25:00] between each other's, you know, perceptions or, you know, and we have access to each one's perceptions and they don't necessarily have that same kind of access and that becomes part of our interest in, or what's gonna happen next.

Dan Punday: Right. Yeah. And it's, it's, so interesting because, it takes so few words to get to that point, right?

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: Like we have that initial framing in terms of A, and then the shift to B, and what seems almost like, again, you know, if you start reading the story, it almost feels like a joke, right?

Let's write out short stories if it were a physics or math problem. But it only takes a couple of pages before we get that sense of investment. We know, you know, we know people like A, we know people like B, we can understand that dynamic. And it comes in so quickly with so little.... work.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Supporting text.

Dan Punday: You know what I mean.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, there's not a lot of text that will, you know, the narrator's gonna step back and give us characterizations and so on, yeah.

Dan Punday: We, we are told, assume B is lovely, and I think that is literally the only [00:26:00] physical description that we have of any character in the story, and yet we're immediately able to project onto them those relationships, understand why we should care about them.

Jim Phelan: Right, right, right. So that's also, you know, I think another interesting feature because i It kind of appeals to, you know, cultural stereotypes, right? And then this, it says, okay, you know activate them and apply. But there's also something I think, too, like if we think about the difference between sort of, you know, our affective response, developing affective response to A and B and their relationship, relative to other characters who are letter named, you know, and even C ,right, but also S and J.

Dan Punday: Yeah.

Jim Phelan: Right? There's something very different about, you know, audience relationships to A and B as opposed to audience relationships to C, S, and J.

Dan Punday: It's a fascinating part of the story ,because we introduce those characters and we [00:27:00] understand immediately that they are complicating their romantic relationship. It's such, you know, it's such a classic, you know, marriage story. You know, get married, have a kid, then all of a sudden, you know, you've got these other, other characters, but we don't care about them at all, right? There's nothing in the story that, that makes you worry, you know, no one gets to the end of the story and says, ah, but what, what happens to S?

Jim Phelan: Right.

Dan Punday: Is J happy in the end? I mean, it's completely uninteresting, even though the way the story is constructed, we know basically that almost the same amount about them, that we know about A and B, and yet the way that we get into the story makes us connect to those two characters in a way that the other two, we understand that they're, just there to move the marriage story along.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah, right. So even when they come in, a and B remained the center and they're, you know, just totally subordinated to the A and B story, right.

Dan Punday: Right. I think it's really interesting that the way that Yu [00:28:00] handles that, it gives us the dynamic, right?

People want to exert force on each other, and then ends that section with a list of things they could possibly do, right? Have another child, spend a bunch of money on luxury goods, and goes, I mean, obviously that's never resolved. We never find out if they do any of those things and it's, it's almost as if it just doesn't matter, right?

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: We understand that for the purposes of this story, all of that is irrelevant, right?

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: And again, it's one of the things about the story, right, is it plays on this idea of irrelevance, right? A says, ignore the wind, right?

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Right.

Dan Punday: On some level, right, ignore, you know, Yu says to us, ignore S and J, right? They're, they're complicating factors that actually don't... they cancel out or something like that.

Jim Phelan: Right. Yeah. Yeah, and also there, I think it's, you know, this is one of the sections that he does give a title to, the list, right. And it's partial solutions.

Dan Punday: Right, right.

Jim Phelan: So, you know, your point, well, doesn't really matter because whatever they [00:29:00] did, they're already called only partial, right.

Dan Punday: Right.

Jim Phelan: So it's not gonna solve things. But there's another, there's another layer to this too, I think, which I think you're reading of it today sort of brought out for me a little bit stronger.

There's a complicated kind of irony sort of running through this, you know, like, like section seven it's called moment of inertia, right? And it's section seven, moment of inertia is when we have the exertion of the force, right? That's exertive force on J, J exerted force on B, right? Which would be, well wait, you know, if we're exerting forces, then we're, you know, we're overcoming inertia, right?

Dan Punday: Right.

Jim Phelan: But then at the end we get, you know, A does not move, B does not move. The forces cancel out, everyone remains at rest, so there's something about, I don't know, kind of an irony that he wants us to maybe even to apply to what he's doing with, you know, story problem and short story or something.

Dan Punday: It is, I mean, it's a... [00:30:00] you're making a great point because on some level, you know, what we tend to imagine these narratives in terms of characters taking actions and dealing with the consequences.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: And having a section called inertia, right, is, is just such a fun way of flipping that on, on its head.

And the fact that we've got this section of a story where actually the whole point is that nothing changes, right, it's this moment of inertia, I think really is, really is interesting.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, it is another way in which he's playing with, well, what is the narrative, right? I mean you know. What kind of narrative do we have when the forces cancel each other out and everyone remains at rest? Yeah. We could go on. Yeah. Okay.

Dan Punday: One of the things that I found really interesting, and loops back just a little bit to our, our starting point on fictionality, but it, one of the things I love about Yu's story is that it plays on this relationship between these very particular characters, A and B, and these types, right?

Jim Phelan: Right.

Dan Punday: We know when S and J show up that they're the complicating factors that occur in every kind [00:31:00] of middle aged, you know, marriage narrative. And that idea about the way in which we sort of abstract out stories, right?

Jim Phelan: Mm-hmm.

Dan Punday: We, we have a tendency to kind of reduce complexity to formula, and I think we, we like to read narrative as these fleshed out real characters.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Dan Punday: But we understand, right, that novelists have to make decisions. They have to decide what parts of the story to focus on, and I think Yu is just really great at, you know, drawing our attention to that, saying, look at the way in which I am, I'm telling you this part matters, this part doesn't matter.

Jim Phelan: And then you, and then you build on it.

Dan Punday: It's a really great way to... yeah, yeah.

Jim Phelan: You build on it, you bring in your stuff, right, and you might want to think about them mimetically, but I'm insisting that they're thematic, and they are constructs, there are these other, other things too.

Dan Punday: Well, and I think the point that you're making Jim, which is great, is like that in some sense that what Yu accomplished in the story is, I mean, maybe I'm just a sentimental reader, but like [00:32:00] I care about these characters even though Yu is like yelling at you, right?

These are just dented characters, right, they're just A and B, and yet...

Jim Phelan: They're characters moving around in my story problem.

Dan Punday: I know, but I, I want B to throw the rope, throw the rope B, you know?

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah.

Dan Punday: Tie yourself to A, I want her to do it, even though I understand that Yu has signaled constantly that these are, these are just markers I'm moving around a board.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But there's something about the moving, I mean, the idea of, you know, we talked about the inertia, but there's progression, and progression of a relationship, a progression of a relationship, as you know, it goes through these phases, these steps, these conflicts and so on, and I think there's something about that, that he's relying on us to sort of tap into so that, and we tap into that, then we, we do align, we do have affective relationships, and we can have them without sort of losing sight of the fact that they're invented, they're just counters that he's moving [00:33:00] around the board.

Dan Punday: Yeah. And so, I mean, one of the things I think is really striking about the story and that I know maybe this is something we could talk about a little bit more, is the way in which yu kind of develops our sense of what it is that we're reading, right? So, the first two pages, we're reading a and it's a story problem and you think, is this like a, just a gimmick? And then we bring in B and it's like, oh no, actually it's a story about a relationship. And so, we think we've got that, and then we bring in S and J and it's like, oh, this is gonna be a marital infidelity story, and then it's not.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: And then we end up with the kind of science fictiony story towards the end.

So it's, it's really interesting the way in which Yu keeps putting us in different spots where our expectations about genre, expectation changes.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Right, right.

Dan Punday: Like if we had to stop the story after one page, we would guess that the story goes a very different way.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, exactly.

Dan Punday: I think that's just really interesting too.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah. I really like your point about the multiple genres that sort of get activated and, yeah, and I [00:34:00] think we'll want to talk some more about the last couple pages, but yeah, maybe first we could talk a little bit more about the narrator narratee, right?

We have, you know, a story problem, it's like the "you" are the ones, you know, there's a narratee, and the person who's gonna solve the story is addressed, right, or solve the problem is, is addressed. So he is doing that, but then there's also like, you know, when A and B become characters that we get interested in, then with that, that sort of narrator narratee relationship fades a little, and we we're more in a sort of a, you know, another kind of conventional third person narrative. So what do you, what do you make of that?

Dan Punday: Yeah, I think it's a great point and, you know, we have certain... you probably know more about this than I do, but certain ways in which "you" narration can function, right?

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: Where you've got ways in which the "you" of a story is actually really a, a character, but it's, we're pretending for the [00:35:00] sake. Sometimes where we have a "you", which is, you know, in like a video game or something like that or especially a text adventure where it really is you, the player, right?

You gotta decide you're in this room and you gotta decide. And the things I think is so interesting about this story is that Charles Yu, not to be confused with the you of the, of pronoun, of the reference, that Charles Yu is starting out with an expectation about what the you is, and those first couple of pages, right, we know where we're at. Like, in the same way we're doing a math problem for a class or physics problem, right, we're filling out our taxes, right? The "you" of that, that document is you as a real person who needs to do a certain task.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: And it, it changes pretty quickly, right? I mean, and once we get into the story and especially towards the middle point where we are told at some point like, pretend, you know, position yourself with B on the rock or whatever.

Jim Phelan: Yes. Right, right.

Dan Punday: There's a way in which we shift from that [00:36:00] definition of the you of the story to a very different kind of you, right?

Jim Phelan: Good.

Dan Punday: We're being encouraged to kind of look at the world through her eyes I, I think really does change how the story functions, so.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I think that's right. We, we move from sort of simply being addressed by the problem setter and we're thinking about the problem to being addressed as a narratee that can empathize with this character, right, and that is a very kind of different relationship.

Dan Punday: Yeah, and I think your, point like going back to the problem, you know, the story problem question, right? When we read a story problem, we know what the task is.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: And it takes us a while as we get into the story to understand, okay, so, what is my task here? I think it's, it's really interesting, again, going back to that idea about why do we identify with these characters? Like we're given, we appear to be given one task at the beginning of the story, but as the story goes on, we have a very different kind of of [00:37:00] relationship.

Jim Phelan: Right, right. Yeah. And maybe, you know, like that's where that section, imagine you are B, right?

Dan Punday: Mm-hmm.

Jim Phelan: A is in deep space.

Dan Punday: Yeah.

Jim Phelan: B is on a space rock watching A drift by glacially. Imagine you are B: that's really where maybe the real difference comes in, right? And there's also something about almost like, all right, I've shown you B, you've, you've attached to B in a certain way, now take this next step and then we might even leave B behind and it'll just be you, right, "you" the second person, a reader, right? Because, you know I'm gonna give you attributes, right? Assume you are of average strength, not like assume B is of average strength, assume you are of average strength, right?

Assume you are of above average compassion, patience, will and determination. Right? And, and suddenly it's like we're replacing B almost.

Dan Punday: Right. It's, it's [00:38:00] a lovely passage, right? I mean that idea, like assume you're of average strength. It's just that, of course, like we are all of average strength, we're above like, like we also like to think we're above average compassion patient will and determination like that, that idea of, I mean it's, it so much plugs into all our ways of thinking about empathy and reading, right?

Jim Phelan: Yes.

Dan Punday: Like, assume that you are the person who cares about this. Of course we're the person who cares about it, 'cause we picked up this collection of short stories, of course. And the things that follow from that, right? What if you throw the rope and miss, what if you live with this guy for 80 years?

It's, it's just, again, it's a really touching way of like drawing, encouraging us to think about how we would be in this space. Again, it's a, it turns the, our expectations about the kind of "you" narrative on its head a bit. Yeah.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. And then it keeps turning, right?

So that's the other thing, right, so we get all this, the empathy stuff, right, and then you'll never know any other points, other problems. The [00:39:00] mysteries of biochemistry, the magic of literature, the pleasure of topology, you'll only know physics. Well, wait, what?

Dan Punday: Yeah.

Jim Phelan: What happened to the me of being above average compassion and, and all that.

Dan Punday: Right, right. I mean, because we are literally knowing, reading literature, right. We are in this very minute, we are reading a short story by Charles Yu. Right, right.

Jim Phelan: Right. And then, then, you know, you only know physics. You'll never know what it feels like inside his suit, right, so the limits of the empathy, and you will never know why you were on this rock. And that's like, whoa, wait a minute. How do we get here?

Dan Punday: Well, it's great. I mean, it's great, right? 'Cause at the beginning of the section, this is section 10 of the story, right?

Jim Phelan: Right.

Dan Punday: Yu draws us in, encourages us to identify with B and the things that he's saying are universalizing, right?

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: You're above, you know, your average strength above, you know, and then at the end, the last item is you will never know why you are on this rock. Well, like, yes, 'cause we can, can't be on a rock. It's space, we're gonna die. Right? And so that, that way in which the story [00:40:00] moves between our expectations of literary identification and also being put in these absolutely impossible positions, right?

Jim Phelan: Right, right.

Dan Punday: And I think that's one of those brilliant things about this story. Yeah.

Jim Phelan: Right, right, right. And even, and then even back to the fictionality and the artificiality of story problems, right? You will never know what you're on this rock doing. Wait, I mean, I'm on the rock because I'm trying to help A, right.

You know? No, no, you're not, you know, so. So then I think that that then takes us to the final section, the initial conditions, he says, right? So, you know, it's interesting. We start with, you know, t Time one equals zero and then we go through all this. It does seem like we've moved forward in time from time one, but then we get section 11 and we're back to initial conditions. We have the repetition of the same sentences, a nd interestingly, you [00:41:00] know, then after that we get this new stuff right. But we're, if we're back there at time one, he stands at the rear of the train, looking back at town 6,3, a point full of sadness, an origin of vectors, a locus of desire, a point like any other point.

Dan Punday: Right.

Jim Phelan: And that lands, I mean, totally differently than if that's the way it started, right?

Dan Punday: Right. It's a really fascinating turn to remind us of the time that has passed in the story, right? I mean, the, the story to some extent is all about time, right, how, how much time passes, how long will you, you know...

Jim Phelan: Right. You start with the journey and all that.

Dan Punday: Physics, yeah. Yes. That physics sense of time, and then literally the last paragraph draws us back to that, you know, point full of sadness, right.

Jim Phelan: Right, right.

Dan Punday: And reminding us of the ways in which we have gone through an experience of something that, that isn't really calculable.

Again, in terms of [00:42:00] genre, it, it is so thoroughly literary, right?

Jim Phelan: Right.

Dan Punday: The beginning of the story is all calculation. We have the middle where we have these, these abstractions, but that last scene, that last one sentence paragraph that, that ends on the note of putting us at this position to observe what, what has happened, right, to reflect back on the spirit of sadness, which, which is so different from the middle of the story, right?

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: So you, and if we're talking about changing genres.

Jim Phelan: Right, right.

Dan Punday: It's taken us through a bunch of them and the the ending note is, is so thoroughly kind of literary in focusing on A's sense of sadness.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. But it's also like, you know, one move we could make is to say, all right, I'm gonna, you know, bracket what we just read in sections one to 10. We could go back to initial conditions, where we start over, right? But we're starting over and the description is different, right?

We get, [00:43:00] okay, he's standing at the rear train, looking back at the town, right, but instead of thinking about his thesis now, it's the description of what it is, a point full of sadness, et cetera. A point, like any other point. So any other point is full of sadness, origin of vectors, a locus of desire.

And I think, it lands, it has any force because of the way in which sections 1 to 10 have explored sadness, desire, you know, all these things.

Dan Punday: Yeah. Well, I mean, one of the things that I think we haven't talked much about, but I think is important in the story, is this section, this, this sort of, science fictiony section.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: Where he's inventing a spaceship, right? And he finishes it, and it says even imaginary work pays off, and then just a couple of lines later, A's spaceship is heating up, it is time. He thinks he holds the imaginary levels and calculates the trajectory, he enjoys for a minute the low frequency home that vibrates to [00:44:00] his whole body, his future opens up in front of him.

Jim Phelan: Right.

Dan Punday: And so that, that image of imaginary work, right, which is such an interesting idea. I, you know, I think, I don't want to claim to be a big expert on physics, but I think physicists would say that imaginary work isn't real work, 'cause it doesn't move bodies around in the world.

In fact, there's a reference to that. So that idea of imaginary work changing the world, even though it can't be calculated, right?

Jim Phelan: Right, right.

Dan Punday: And I think that's the, that's the note that the story ends on, right? Like we have gone through something, and in fact, going back, right, we end up with initial conditions and nothing has changed about his position in terms of physics.

Jim Phelan: Right. Okay.

Dan Punday: He's moving in the e xact same way, exact same speed, his thesis weighs the exact same amount, and yet something has happened and it's the imaginary work, right?

Jim Phelan: Right.

Dan Punday: It's the imaginary work of the story that Yu has given [00:45:00] us.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Dan Punday: I mean, that's the way I read that passage.

Jim Phelan: Yeah, no, I think that's right. I mean, especially, you know, going back to where you started with the fictionality stuff, right? If you're foregrounding that, then the move to meta fiction is, is a short step, right, and then if you have a line that says, okay, even imaginary work pays off, right, the invitation to apply that to what we're doing, to what he's doing and to what we're doing and is, you know, the invitation is pretty clear.

And we're gonna keep reading, we're sort of accepting the invitation. Yeah.

Dan Punday: Yeah.

No, that's, I think that's the note I read the story ending on is that imaginary work that we've been through in reading the story, even though again...

Jim Phelan: Yeah, yeah.

Dan Punday: In physics terms, nothing's changed.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Yeah. What about, I mean, maybe this is my own thing, right, but a point of sadness, right... why, you know, locus of desire, yeah, I get that, that makes a lot of sense, yeah. You know, origin of vectors, yeah. But you know, why not a point of possibility or a point of...

Dan Punday: Right, right.

Jim Phelan: You know, hope [00:46:00] or something, right? I mean, It's a kind of a, I don't know, is it a, you know, 21st century kind of...?

Dan Punday: Like, it's, it's a really interesting question, right? I mean, on, 'cause we get those right vectors of desire, right?

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: Which we get earlier in the story and that whole description of the S and the J, where, you know, S wants J to, you know, people want other people to exert forces on them and stuff like that. And that's not this, right? I mean, sadness is different. I mean, and again, sadness is different than desire, right? Isn't kind of part of the story, like the middle of the story is driven by need and desire.

Jim Phelan: Absolutely.

Dan Punday: And the ending note is, is sadness, which is retrospective and, you know, yeah. It's also the end of the story, right?

Jim Phelan: Right, right, right, it's, it's quite the note to end on, I think.

Dan Punday: Well, yeah. I mean, I'm, you know, I'm a sucker for a sad ending, so.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Yeah. No, I think, I think it works for me too, but it's like, oh wait, I find it arresting you

know.

Dan Punday: I think, I think B can do better [00:47:00] than A, Jim. I don't, I don't, I don't wanna, I don't wanna tell people who to love, but I think, I think I think B can do better than A.

Jim Phelan: Yeah. Right.

I do think we are all invited to make that inference, but, but then, you know, A, he's sitting out. He is, he's got his own, you know, possibilities and ideals and all that, so yeah, it's not like, yeah. Alright, well good. Anything that you'd like to touch on that we haven't gotten to?

Dan Punday: No, I think, I think ending on sadness and the fact that I think that B can do better than A is is the note I want to end on, personally.

Jim Phelan: Okay. Well, thanks so much, Dan. This was really a lot of fun.

Dan Punday: It was so much fun, Jim. It's, it encouraged me to read this story much more closely than I had in the past. It's been a ball talking about it with you and I hope some people out there go and read more Charles Yu. Charles Yu, yeah, two novels.

\_How to Live Safely in a Science Fiction Universe,\_ which is a lot like this story in some ways, it's a sequel, [00:48:00] \_Interior Chinatown\_, which is a second novel, which was adapted with Yu's involvement for Hulu.

Jim Phelan: Okay.

Dan Punday: It's a looser adaptation than I personally care for, but they're both great.

Jim Phelan: Yeah.

Dan Punday: And read more Charles Yu, I expect big things out of them.

Jim Phelan: Okay. Terrific. That's a great note to end on. Thanks again and I wanna thank our listeners and say we appreciate your feedback, which you can send to us at email, projectnarrative@osu.edu, or on our Facebook page or our Twitter/X account, which is @PNOhioState.

I'd also like to remind you, you can find now more than 40 additional episodes of the podcast at the Project Narrative website or on Apple Podcasts. And if you listen on Apple, I invite you to rate and review us. Thank you again for listening. [00:49:00]