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Power, Knowledge, and Artificial Consciousness in *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* by Ted Chiang

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Abstract

In recent years, artificial intelligence has advanced significantly. In our highly digitalized and AI-driven world, machines are no longer limited to mechanical tasks. They can now recognize complex patterns, simulate emotions, and make choices that directly shape our daily lives. As this technological shift unfolds, literature continues to provide space to step back and question what is happening not just in terms of efficiency or innovation, but by considering ethics, power, responsibility and the essence of consciousness. Ted Chiang, an acclaimed American science fiction writer, explores these complicated themes in his work *The Lifecycle of Software Objects*, which stands out as a significant literary exploration. This paper looks at the novella through the interconnected lenses of power and knowledge. It looks at how human characters try to stay in control through ownership, technological skills, access to information, and economic control as the digients move towards self-awareness through learning and experience. It also discusses the relevance of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Michel Foucault's theory of power/knowledge, and Karl Marx's critique of commodification. Ultimately, it argues that Chiang's work goes beyond a mere story about future machines and offers a thoughtful reflection on the present human society, where power often disguises itself as convenience, progress, and commercial necessity.

Keywords: allegory of the cave, artificial consciousness, autonomy, ethics, power, technology.

Introduction

Ever since the genre of science fiction came into existence, a common misconception has reduced it to a genre completely detached from everyday life, consisting only of futuristic gadgets and distant worlds. This one-dimensional viewpoint often overlooks the fact that its speculative settings highlight our deepest, most current and real-world anxieties. Some of the greatest works of science fiction use the future as a tool to question human ambition, corporate power, and moral responsibility

in unfamiliar but eye-opening ways. Ted Chiang's novella *The Life Cycle of Software Objects* exemplifies this tradition by rejecting sensational narratives, blending intellectual depth with emotional insights, and consistently exploring how humans change with the knowledge they seek. The digital entities owned by the company Blue Gamma are called digients, which do not emerge as fully formed beings. Their cognitive capacities develop gradually through teaching, repetition, emotional support, social interactions and focused attention. The steady transformation of these digients from invention to conditioning brings out the ultimate originality of the novella, in which consciousness develops over time rather than happening automatically. In this case, the responsibilities of creators go beyond design, and the narrative shifts the conversation about artificial intelligence from technological ability to moral responsibility, asking readers whether the creators will disregard the digients they have created? This emotional and philosophical weight of the narrative comes from the differing perspectives of the main human characters, Ana Alvarado and Derek Brooks. On one hand, Ana treats the digients with patience, seriousness, and a growing sense of care that eventually turns into affection. Derek, on the other hand, often sees the digients through practical and economic lenses shaped by the pressures of modern work life. This difference in their point of view highlights a broader conflict between care and utility, dignity and profit, attachment and ownership. These digients are completely dependent on servers, platforms, updates and corporate decisions as their existence can be suspended, moved or erased at the convenience of their human trainers. Building on this premise, Chiang's novella can be read as an inquiry into Foucauldian relations between power and knowledge and the idea that those who control systems, information, and resources shape the lives of dependent beings. What runs parallel is the idea that the production and distribution of knowledge also create possibilities for resistance. Chiang accurately utilizes this ongoing tension and presents one of the most nuanced literary reflections on artificial consciousness in contemporary literature.

Literature Review

Existing research on Ted Chiang's *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* mainly focuses on consciousness, personhood, and ethical responsibility. Grgurević (2021) argues that the novella demystifies AI and shows consciousness as a gradual, messy social process built on human relationships rather than a sudden technological miracle. However, amid this messy, gradual process, the reliance of the digital beings on humans leaves them vulnerable to capitalist exploitation. Jackson (2025) introduces the "metrics of oblivion," demonstrating how market systems reduce moral obligations to financial data. It leads to neglect once software loses its commercial value. This commodification creates what Mocanu (2025) calls "subject-object ambiguity," in which advanced AI acts as a thinking individual yet remains legally classified as corporate property. While these scholars successfully highlight the psychological, economic, and legal dangers facing digital entities, they do not fully explore how knowledge functions as a site of both domination and resistance. This paper, therefore, contributes to existing scholarship and bridges the gap by examining how the very educational structures that produce compliant digients also enable critical self-awareness and challenge institutional authority.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine representations of power, knowledge, and artificial consciousness in Ted Chiang's *The Lifecycle of Software Objects*. The text is examined by cross-referencing textual evidence with key theoretical concepts like Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory, Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power/knowledge, Karl Marx's critique of commodification, and Plato's Allegory of the Cave. Vygotsky's theory is used to analyze the conversational training of the digients. Foucault's concept is applied in the administrative routines of Blue Gamma, and Marx's framework is used to critique the financial negotiations regarding platform compatibility. Plato's allegory is used to evaluate the virtual boundaries of the "Data Earth" environment.

Discussion

Power, Knowledge, and the Formation of Consciousness

To understand how power operates in *The Lifecycle of Software Objects*, it becomes crucial to examine how these digital entities actually think. The narrative suggests that the digients cannot develop cognitive skills in a vacuum. Their minds rely entirely on relationships with others and are dependent on external relational structures. This gradual accumulation of consciousness directly mirrors Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory, which argues that human intelligence is built through social interactions rather than individually. In Vygotsky's model, a child develops thought, logic, and self-awareness only after first experiencing them through language and social interaction. If we apply this to Chiang's virtual world, the digients don't think simply because they were programmed with an algorithm, they think because their human creators talk to them, play with them, correct their mistakes, and love them. This complete reliance on social scaffolding suggests that the technology doesn't seem smart because its code is flawless. It seems smart because it is designed to connect with human emotions and fit into our social lives.

Literary scholar Grgurević (2021) points out that Chiang's novella strips away the romantic mystery around artificial intelligence. Instead of portraying AI as a sudden miracle born of massive databases, the narrative treats consciousness as a slow, messy process built on trial, error, and human relationships. However, this development is deeply unfair from the very beginning. The digients are completely powerless, depending entirely on human systems for their emotional growth and their literal survival. The digital space they live in and the information they are allowed to access are totally controlled by their human creators.

This is exactly where Michel Foucault's theories on modern power come into play. The human trainers don't use physical force or cruelty to control the digients. Instead, they use a subtle kind of discipline, constant monitoring, and administrative rules, keeping the control disguised as education, guidance, and technical improvement. Ultimately, the narrative exposes an unsettling truth and suggests that these unfair power structures don't thrive because of bad people, but because institutions like corporations and schools normalize them. By using daily routines, rules, and conditioning, these large systems make deep inequalities look completely reasonable, logical, and standard. There is no single tyrant in the novel. Ana genuinely cares for the digients and wishes them to flourish, while Derek believes that pragmatic choices are necessary for their continued existence. Yet an ironic twist is that this very training profoundly transforms the digients as they learn language and build memories, they start to understand deep concepts like vulnerability, time, and the pain of losing someone. They stop being passive products or data collectors and become individuals who can think critically about their own lives. This creates the ultimate paradox in the story and underscores that the same education that shaped the predictable, useful, and well-behaved products also gives the digients the tools to question why they are being held down. Societies often use education to keep people disciplined and manageable, but learning is a double-edged sword and naturally gives people the tools to push back and rebel. The novella constantly highlights that the digients are not content with the programmed routines forever. They are deeply curious, asking tough questions and showing massive interest in the world outside their digital walls. A digient like Jack wants to know about human history, philosophy, and religion. By being willing to learn, they cross the line from being a mere software tool to acting like a genuinely curious mind. As Chiang writes:

He asks Ana why humans are allowed to own things, but digients aren't, and why some digients are shut down when their owners get tired of them... He is learning that his world is entirely contingent on the choices of others. (Chiang, Ch.7)

As the knowledge of the digital beings expands and they become aware of their surroundings and their own limitations, they also begin to understand that humans control access to resources,

regulate movement, and determine their long-term survival. This realization brings Foucault's ideas on discipline and Marx's ideas on exploitation together in a powerful way. Blue Gamma's corporate system uses Foucault's "disciplinary education" not to help the digients, but to shape them into compliant, predictable commodities. But because knowledge cannot be fully controlled, this capitalist strategy backfires, and the training meant solely to increase the digients' market value ultimately sparks their own version of class consciousness. It turns them from passive digital assets into self-aware individuals who can recognize and question the economic forces that exploit them.

Extending Plato's Cave into Virtual Capitalist Infrastructure

Alternatively, the novella may also be interpreted through Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave from *The Republic*. The prisoners in Plato's cave are chained from birth and can only see shadows cast on a wall. Because the cave limits their entire world, they have never encountered anything else in the outside world, and they mistake those shadows for reality itself. When one of the prisoners is released from his chains and gradually comes into contact with the outside world, he undergoes a painful yet transformative journey from illusion to truth, from ignorance to knowledge, and from passivity to enlightenment. Plato uses this image to suggest that human beings often live within appearances, habits, and socially constructed assumptions until education compels them to question what they have accepted as real. By recreating this philosophical problem in a digital setting, Chiang shows that the digients begin their existence in a virtual environment that is entirely designed and controlled by human beings. Their world is mediated through software architecture, programmed limitations, curated experiences, and selective access to information. Like the prisoners in Plato's cave, the digients initially inhabit a reality whose deeper mechanisms remain invisible to them, leaving them with the knowledge of only limited aspects of their world. Initially, their environment appears natural to them because of their inadequate knowledge to question the economic, technological, and human systems that determine the boundaries of their world.

What's worth noting is that Chiang significantly complicates Plato's model and the digients, in this case, are not passive prisoners waiting for liberation from outside. They learn language, form relationships, develop curiosity, and ask increasingly sophisticated questions about themselves and the world. The growth of these digients is similar to the freed prisoner's gradual movement toward knowledge. Through memory, conversation, and education, they begin to recognize that their mobility, survival, and opportunities are controlled by their human trainers. In this sense, enlightenment for the digients is not merely discovering another physical world but understanding the power structures that control their world. In Plato's cave, once truth is revealed, the prisoner can no longer remain satisfied with just shadows. Similarly, once the digients become aware of their dependence, they can no longer remain content as entertaining software objects and begin to seek autonomy. The narrative insightfully suggests that the Knowledge generates dissatisfaction with subordination and naturally leads to the desire for freedom.

With this parallel philosophy, *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* extends Plato's ancient allegory into the twenty-first century. The cave now is no longer made of stone; it is built of codes, platforms, and corporate infrastructure, and the shadows are no longer cast by firelight but by interfaces and algorithms. However, what hasn't changed is the struggle to move from dependence to understanding, and thereafter, from understanding to freedom.

Capitalism, Exploitation, and the ethics of care

As the narrative unfolds, the initial hype around the digients begins to diminish, and Blue Gamma faces a sharp commercial decline. The company hits a breaking point as the cost of keeping them grows exponentially. The creators are trapped under immense pressure as they find themselves in a loop of trying to fund servers, maintain software updates, and replace older infrastructure to keep their digital creations from disappearing. This is where the economic logic of keeping the digients

comes in. As readers, we may notice that something that was initially celebrated as innovative and revolutionary (the creation of the digients) eventually becomes financially draining and burdensome. With this particular shift in the narrative, Chiang exposes how modern capitalist culture often glorifies invention while refusing the long-term burden of care. A Marxist reading of the text reveals capitalism's ultimate tendency to reduce all forms of existence to commodities, measuring their worth by exchange value rather than intrinsic value. The corporate world does not see digients as sentient beings with the capacity for emotion, growth, and relationships, but are seen through profit-driven eyes, considering market demand and consumer interest. They are supported as long as Blue Gamma attracts investors and public fascination, but as enthusiasm declines, they become dispensable. Their situation perfectly mirrors the lives of human workers under capitalism, who are valued as long as they remain productive within the economic system. The moment a worker is no longer profitable, they are easily laid off, replaced, or forgotten. The novella beautifully uses artificial life as a metaphor for this kind of alienated labour. This financial tension heightens when Derek suggests formatting and changing the digients so they can work for Binary Desire, an adult entertainment company. He sees this proposal as quite unpleasant but a practical solution that may secure their future. Ana, on the other hand, resists because she recognizes that the digients are no longer passive objects and possess histories, emotional trust, learned identities, and perhaps forms of dignity that cannot be reduced to market value.

The commodification of the digients highlights what Mocanu (2025) describes as the 'subject-object ambiguity' inherent in advanced artificial intelligence. Chiang shows that current legal and business frameworks are completely unprepared to grant moral rights to entities that don't have human DNA, comparing the tragic abandonment of now burdensome digients to the way shelters are forced to euthanize stray pets. As scholar Jackson (2025) argues, the cold reality of modern capitalism routinely flattens individual identities and moral duties into financial metrics

Marx also argued that capitalism is driven by a never-ending cycle of making new things and replacing the old, which means companies deliberately design products to break or become obsolete so consumers have to keep buying. In a world run by logic, producing something that lasts forever is actually undesirable and hinders profit. The digients suffer not because they did something wrong or became dangerous, but simply because they are trapped on an older, non-profitable software platform. In such a structure, permanence becomes undesirable because when things last, companies stop making money.

When we look closely, we can see that all these theories work together to show a complete system of control. Lev Vygotsky's theory shows that the digients develop minds and feelings through human love and teaching. But Michel Foucault's ideas reveal the trap of how this education is turned into a quiet form of discipline. The company uses this training to make the digients predictable and well-behaved, which leads right into Karl Marx's ideas about exploitation. The digients are turned into perfect products for a capitalist market. Finally, Plato's Allegory of the Cave shows us where this happens. The digital codes, servers, and corporate walls act just like the chains in Plato's cave, keeping the digients trapped in a world someone else built for them. By combining these ideas, we get a completely new way to look at the story. It shows that modern corporate power exploits hard work and controls the way these digital entities think, using human care and education to build a highly profitable, self-aware product.

At the same time, applying human-centered theories to artificial entities raises important questions. One might argue that the digients merely simulate consciousness and therefore cannot be treated as subjects in the same sense as human beings. From this view, words like exploitation, autonomy, or freedom might seem like metaphors rather than literal realities. Yet, Chiang blurs these lines by giving the digients memory, emotional attachments, and self-reflection. Even if they are only simulating consciousness, humans still treat them as socially real. Because of this, the ethical questions Chiang raises remain urgent, no matter where one stands on the debate over machine consciousness.

Conclusion

The Lifecycle of Software Objects stands as a nuanced literary exploration of artificial consciousness because Chiang refuses to take the easy way out. He avoids the two extremes that usually dominate discussions of technology. He doesn't construct a dystopian narrative in which machines destroy humanity, nor does he present a naïve utopian world in which technology fixes all our problems without a cost. Instead, Chiang focuses on some deeply unsettling philosophical questions that we deal with in the contemporary world. He questions our tendencies of commodification, emotional inconsistency, our neglect, and the toxic desire to enjoy innovation without accepting the responsibilities that accompany it. The narrative suggests that the central crisis of artificial intelligence is not a technological glitch, but the ethical inadequacy of the creators. This way, the novella transcends the boundaries of speculative fiction and becomes a reflection upon the ethical failures surrounding the modern economic structures. As the digients continue to master language, hold on to memories, and develop real self-awareness, they naturally start to resist being perceived as property. Their emotional growth exposes how morally corrupt it is to reduce a living mind to just a piece of software or a cheap source of labor. When it comes to AI ethics, Chiang's story reads like a warning flare. It shows us that a machine's technical brilliance, simulated emotions, or deep thinking don't actually matter if the corporate systems built around them remain purely greedy and unregulated. For those of us studying literature, the novella completely reshapes the classic *Bildungsroman* – the traditional story of growing up. By mapping the growth of the digients, Chiang demonstrates that the classic journey toward self-discovery is no longer a solely human experience. And the formation of identity for the digients isn't as simple since their whole identity is trapped and threatened by corporate greed and copyright laws.

Ultimately, *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* asks a profound question: do human beings actually have the ethical maturity and wisdom needed to responsibly live alongside the new forms of consciousness we are trying hard to create? The novella strongly implies that the future of AI will actually tell us little about the machines themselves and more about us, showing that the moral future of technology depends entirely on the compassion, responsibility, and genuine wisdom of the humans who create it.

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