

Humanities & Arts Requirement

Humanities and Arts Project Title Page

Chronesthetic Therapy: Inverting Tropes in Time Travel Fiction

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Humanities and Arts Course Sequence: HUA3900

Course #	Course Name	Term
EN 2252	Science And Scientists In Modern Literature	B21
EN 2234	Modern American Novel	C22
IMGD/WR 2400	Writing Characters For Interactive Media & Games	A22
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Abstract

My project is a creative writing piece taking inspiration from well-written works of science fiction, and avoiding the common conventions in this genre of focusing too heavily on the invented environment and technology rather than the characters and themes. The acclaimed author Margaret Atwood denigrated science fiction by saying: “Science fiction is rockets, chemicals and talking squids in outer space.” But even a time travel story can eschew these common pitfalls and instead focus on rich, well-developed characters.

Critical Introduction

My creative short story fits into the works we studied this term and those I have previously read in many ways. The works of fiction we studied were short stories. The short story format forces the writer to be more deliberative in how they present their characters, character development, themes, conflict, setting descriptions and scenes. The length is restrictive and often one or more of these primary elements need to be sacrificed so that the author can more deeply investigate another. The use of tropes, a focus on character development/growth and the eschewing of science in favor of a meaningful story are other ways the works analyzed in this introduction influenced my work. On the last point, science fiction stories can get caught up in the science, technology, action and setting differences in the worlds it creates. The result of this is that characters can be flat, lacking growth, themes can be weakly developed and the story forgettable. The famous author, Margaret Atwood, once mocked, "Science fiction is rockets, chemicals and talking squids in outer space." While another famous author John Updike stated that science fiction will always be a minor genre, because it is "so busy inventing its environment that little energy is left to be invested in the human subtleties". On the other hand, science fiction can be a powerful medium to convey themes and characters because the genre is so naturally interesting, which is what I try to achieve with my creative work. Overall, the connection between my work and others can best be seen by analyzing the stories it draws from and drawing connections.

Bradbury, Ray. "A Sound of Thunder."

Ray Bradbury (1920-2012) was one of the most famous and widely read authors of the 20th century, specializing in science fiction novels and short stories. *A Sound of Thunder*, where Bradbury explores time travel, is one of his better-known short stories. Many authors use tropes as building blocks of the stories to set and fulfill reader expectations, and as a kind of shorthand that makes concepts understandable to a reader. Not only does Bradbury use tropes, but he also created some as well, such as the Butterfly of Doom, created in this story. *A Sound of Thunder* is a cautionary tale about the dangers of time travel. The main character Eckels despite significant warnings, alters the timeline with seemingly innocuous actions in the past, which dramatically change the present that he lives in. The characters in *A Sound of Thunder* are caricatures of elements of society, with limited depth and no growth. To be fair to Bradbury, it was a very short, short story, but clearly his focus was on time travel and its consequences, particularly from an anti-elitist point of view. Bradbury uses the trope as shorthand for readers, allowing him to quickly explore two central themes – the theme of elitism and entitlement of the rich and powerful and the importance of personal responsibility. Every aspect of the story radiates the anti-elitest theme. Time travel is being used as a recreational vehicle for rich and powerful elites, even though the potential consequences can be world-shattering. The main character, Eckels, is a caricature of an elitist, who does not take personal responsibility seriously, and, of course, pays for it in the end. In contrast, my story focuses primarily on character growth, and the “time travel” present in the story is just a tool. For Bradbury, time travel was a tool for making a thematic point, where for me it is a tool to enable character growth. I find it is most interesting to use tropes to surprise a reader, by

twisting tropes, and that is how I use the Butterfly of Doom trope from *A Sound of Thunder*. I inverted the trope, demonstrating its flaws, and revealing its assumptions. The inversion of the trope is essential to the growth of my main character and for the cognitive behavioral therapeutic process he goes through. Learning from Bradbury, my story ended up being significantly longer than I initially expected it to be, as I needed to establish the complexities of my characters before I could allow them to grow.

Fu, Kim. "Time Cubes."

Kim Fu is a young (born in 1987) Canadian author, living in Seattle, who has published two novels, a book of poetry and a book of short stories. Fu's works typically chronicle individuals who are dealing with profound psychological challenges, and her deep, multi-layered characters are the heart of her stories. The short story, *Time Cubes*, a foray into time travel in a near-future, follows this typical pattern. Even though the main character in *Time Cubes*, Alice, agrees with her Depressive Specialist that she is living in a paradise, she is still depressed, suicidal and never leaves the building she lives and works in. In the story, the reader never meets any other characters in any substantial way and Alice is the only character with a name. Alice has a casual sexual encounter with the Time Cubes vendor, who is selling what looks like fascinating toy that appears to move time through whatever is in its small box. She learns that this is really a time machine, but one that moves time through the occupant and that he has a human-sized cube. Instead of turning back time to be younger, she immediately uses this to commit suicide, by aging herself, but what she experiences is the full passage of her life, all the physical and emotional events she would have experienced, speeded up to mere seconds. The story is

profoundly sad, but Alice is fascinating, fully developed character whose point of view focuses the reader on important themes around mental health, happiness and that loneliness can occur even when surrounded by people. Even in paradise, Alice is unhappy; even surrounded by people, she feels alone, not even knowing the name of the vendor. Fu is telling us that happiness, contentment and mental health come from the inside, no matter what world a person is living in. Fu uses a recognizable construct, a machine that can move time, but instead of focusing on the science, a complicated plot or other characters, they focus the reader on the character of Alice.

I used the concepts from *Time Cubes* in a variety of ways. Primarily, I focused my story on the development of my protagonist, and offered little attention to the explanation of the technology around time travel. I tried to follow Fu's intentions by making my character feel deeply human, rather than spend time on the intricacies of time travel or getting overly involved in a plot that zooms around time. Also, like Fu's main character, I center my story on the same human issues of mental health and common problems of the human psyche. Time travel is often written as a method of changing the past to solve problems which are outside of yourself, instead I focused on solving the problem within yourself, which is a lesson of *Time Cubes*.

Niffenegger, Audrey. The Time Traveler's Wife.

Audrey Niffenegger's debut novel, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, published in 2003, is a unique take on time traveling for many reasons. First, the time traveler, Henry DeTamble, travels in time naturally due to a genetic disorder, eventually named Chrono-Impairment,

and not some advanced technology or wormhole. Second, the novel is a character-driven love story between Henry and Clare Abshire, who Henry meets up and down their shared timeline. The novel is also written in varying points of view. Henry and Clare eventually marry, struggle to have a child, due to the inherited genetic disorder, and Henry dies due to his time traveling at 43 years of age. Third, instead of focusing on technology, changing events, or the intricacies of time travel, the novel focuses on deep character development, particularly for Claire. Claire lives her life waiting for Henry, from their first meeting when she is only 5, and she even waits for him after his death. Claire is a complex, multi-dimensional character, and we see her character grow in response to the experiences with Henry. She learns to cope with loss and uncertainty, while her love, which creates great difficulties, never wavers. Henry also grows, particularly in the way he comes to terms with his condition and his daughter, who also has the condition. Henry's love for Claire helps him grow, confront his fears and eventually embrace his condition, as well as better manage it. Among the themes in *The Time Traveler's Wife* is the importance of accepting what challenges there are in life and adapting to them. Loss is also at the center of the novel, as both characters experience profound loss and grief. Both being able to accept these losses and understanding the fragility of life are important lessons. Free will and destiny are also in a tug of war in the novel. Readers are left to contemplate whether the events occurred because of the characters' actions, or are they as pre-destined as they seem to be.

I use several aspects of *The Time Traveler's Wife* in my creative work. My work focuses on character development far more than the mechanics of time travel or time

travel adventures. My main character deals with personal issues, such as grief, depression and a sense of regret for his life's direction. The character demonstrates personal growth like Claire and Henry. I also chose to use a switch in point of view to add intrigue to the story. Finally, I will also include themes concerning regret and whether free will or destiny controls us.

Chronesthetic Therapy

I awaken to the chirping of my alarm clock. Squinting in the darkness of my little bedroom, it takes my eyes a moment to focus on the glowing numbers. 5:00 A.M., the seconds ticking by. The same as always. Some mornings I'd almost hope that I slept through the initial round of beeping, hoping that I'd wake up to see something different. But I've never slept past even the first chirp, never woken up even twenty seconds past five. I sit up with a drowsy sigh.

The alarm clock is out of reach, on a shelf mounted to the far wall. My therapist had suggested putting it there, to help me get out of bed even in the mornings that my depressive thoughts weigh me down. The wall-mounted shelf works fine, and it keeps me from laying in bed and scrolling through feeds for hours, but a proper bedside table would've been a better choice. Moveable, no worries about weight, a drawer to put things in...

The alarm's continued chirping pulls me out of my thoughts. Its screen reads 5:01 A.M., a few seconds away from turning over to the next minute. Two minutes of morning time, lost to sitting in bed. *Stupid. Wasting time. Up, get up, get up now*, I think to myself. It takes conscious effort to drag myself from beneath the warm blankets, but I get up and tap that glowing screen with a finger.

"Good morning, John! Today is January Sixth, twenty-thirty-seven." My alarm clock speaks in its sing-songy voice. The lights slowly brighten, giving his eyes time to adjust.

“Would you like me to-”

“Stop.” I simply order. If I’d responded affirmatively, it would have sent a signal to my smart coffee maker, to prepare me a mug while I get ready. But, of course, I’d forgotten to place an empty mug underneath last night. I always forget.

“Okay!” My alarm clock responds before falling silent. I flick the light switch in my bathroom, and as I enter I’m greeted with my own face. Square jaw, messy hair, scraggly beard. *Should have shaved last night.* My expression droops at the corners as I look away, before those dark clouds in my head form into angry depression, like they usually threaten to do when I see my own reflection. *There I go again, regretting something as simple as not shaving last night, I can almost hear the mild scolding of my therapist.* With a twist of a knob, water pours out of a showerhead, starting cold and slowly warming up. *A morning shower to clear my head,* I hope.

Body cleaned, teeth brushed, clothes on, eggs sizzling, coffee machine buzzing. Same as every other morning. I scrape the eggs onto a single plate and grab a fork, holding both in a single hand while I pick up the mug with my other. I sit down at my little dining table, quietly wishing that I’d bought bacon last time I went shopping.

No, no, my therapist told me not to think like that, I chastise myself. *What were the affirmations again...*

They take me a second to remember the list of affirmations my therapist had talked to me about. He said it might help whenever I’m feeling like this. Repeating them in my head won’t help, so I speak aloud to my empty apartment.

“The past is behind me. I need to focus on now. I can’t change things I’ve done. I can change things I do. The past is...”

I trail off. *I sound stupid*, a part of me says. And immediately after, this thought is replaced with another. *There’s nobody here to hear me. Who cares if I sound stupid?* I stop that train of thought and resume my affirmations, but more quietly this time.

“The past is behind me. I need to focus on now...”

I’m in the car, on my daily commute. My beard is itchy. *I should have shaved this morning. I had enough time for it.* So caught up in my internal thoughts, I nearly don’t see the brake lights of the car in front of me. I stomp on the brake pedal, coming to a quick halt before I would have surely rear-ended them. *I need to pay more attention*, I chastise myself.

I lean to the side and see a whole mass of cars and trucks in front of me. Traffic. I sigh and rub my face with both hands, as if trying to rub the anger out of my system. *If I’d taken the previous exit, I would have avoided this jam... Now I’m going to be late.*”

As I allow my car’s self-driving system, I quickly slide my phone out of its pocket and text my manager, to let them know of my delayed arrival. *Damnit, if I’d used a GPS app, I would’ve seen this traffic jam.* As the cars slowly advance, I tack yet another mistake onto the reasons why I’m dreading what should be an exciting day.

I pull into the parking lot of Insurance International Ltd., my car slightly crooked in the parking spot, but I don’t have the time to fix it. I walk inside, step into the elevator, and I

feel phantom weight on top of me as the elevator accelerates upwards. It's gone in a moment, but the thought lingers in my head. *That's what it feels like*, I quietly realize. *All my mistakes, weighing me down*. The elevator doors open, and I take my seat at my desk. *Jonathan Smith*, the little placard reads. *Risk Analyst*. I have a rare moment of quiet thankfulness as I get to work - *At least I enjoy my job*.

After a little while, we all gather together. Bill Anderson, our Head Manager, speaks up.

"As I'm sure you all know by now, we're taking on our largest client we've ever had today, and I'd like to announce the team that will be working with them." As expected, the meeting that got scheduled just today is another office-work classic: A meeting that should have been an email. I don't even bother listening to the rest of what he says, just clapping along with everyone else as he announces the names, and in just a few minutes we're all filing out of the room again. I was hoping that I would be wrong, that I'd hear him say my name, but instead I just sit back down and stare at my spreadsheets until twelve o'clock rolls around.

At twelve, I'm sitting in the break room, eating a bagel, when someone else walks in. It's George Jones, another risk analyst and a friend of mine since I'd started working here.

"Hey, John!" He waves cheerfully, and I return the wave with a mostly-fake smile.

"Hey, George. You're on the team for our new client, right?"

He nods, sitting down next to me. "Yeah, I am! Exciting, isn't it?"

I nod along, taking a bite out of my bagel. “Mmhrmm.”

“I’m surprised I didn’t hear your name on the team, though.”

I scoff and swallow. “I’m not.” He raises an eyebrow at me, wordlessly asking me to explain. “I knew I wasn’t going to be on the team a week ago.”

“But I thought the team wasn’t decided until just yesterday! Who-”

I interrupt him to answer his question before he can ask it. “Nobody told me. But I could tell you the three things I’ve done that, if I’d done them a little differently, would have *me* being the one deciding who works on what client.”

He stares at me, his expression turning unreadable. I don’t say anything more, and after a short moment he checks his watch and stands up. “...Well, I’ve got a lotta stuff I need to get done by tonight, so I’ll catch up with you another time, yeah?”

I nod, offering a polite smile. “...Yeah.”

He waves as he walks out of the break room, and I find myself staring longingly at the door, going over what else I should have said instead. As I finish my bagel, I think, *I’ve certainly got a lot to talk to my therapist about today...*



“...And then they walked off, and all I could think about was, ‘I should have said something else’.” I let out a sigh, my eyes lazily exploring the mostly-featureless ceiling of

my therapist's office as I recline across the couch. A small speaker on his desk quietly plays classical music, just loud enough to fill any silences while still being quiet enough not to disrupt conversation. I turn my head to look at the only other person in the room – a big, burly man with broad shoulders and arms almost as thick as my thighs, writing in a notebook with hands that make it look almost comically small. If I had never met him, I would be scared to even approach him, and yet here I am, freely divulging my deepest insecurities to someone who looks like he should be carrying steel beams on his shoulders. He looks up from his notes and gives me a warm smile, and I'm reminded of his thoughtful words and kind voice. Even though his outward appearance would normally make me unwilling to even talk, his friendly demeanor always makes me feel safe.

"Yes, right. Now, John, I know we've gone over this before, but can you tell me again about the unhealthy thinking patterns you've been struggling with? It's okay if you've told me this exact thing before, don't worry. Even if it feels like nothing has changed, we're still making progress." He says smoothly, his words dispelling my insecurities before they even have a change to fully form.

I nod, returning his smile before looking back up at the ceiling again. "Well... I feel like I'm always drowning in regret. Every second of every day, I keep thinking about how things would be better if I'd done something differently. And I *know* that it's an unhealthy way to think, but when I try to avoid it I just regret not doing it sooner... which, of course, is ridiculously circular-" I laugh softly, shaking my head in disbelief.

He nods again, his pen quietly scratching words into his paper. “Right, yes. And I believe it’s been affecting your behaviors lately, as well. A few sessions ago, you mentioned wanting to move out of your apartment. How has that been going?”

“...I haven’t even started.”

“You’ve also mentioned plans to start pushing for a better position at work. Have you made progress on that?”

I shake my head. “No, I haven’t started on that, either... And I know I should have. I regret not doing it earlier, I regret not trying harder to get these things done or even started... but whenever I have an opportunity to start, I just think that I might regret whatever action I *do* take more than I already regret the actions I *don’t*.” I pause for a moment, and he nods, quietly prompting me to continue. “...And I *know* it’s all ridiculous, but... I’m a risk analyst. It’s my *job* to think like this, to look backwards and find all the things that went wrong to figure out the worst case scenario for the present. And I’m *good* at my job, and I *enjoy* my job, it’s one of the few things I’m really, properly good at...” I trail off, unsure of how to complete that train of thought.

He speaks up again, allowing me to drop my mental search. “Yes, right... You keep having these faulty patterns of thinking, and they lead to unhealthy patterns of behavior. And you know they’re unhealthy, but when you try to change, you find yourself back again at the same thoughts that caused it in the first place. Does that sound about right to you?” They look up from their notebook at me, and I nod in response. He’s nailed down exactly how I feel, as always.

“Yes, it’s exactly like that... and I don’t know if talking about it like this is even helping at all. I feel like I’m stuck.”

He nods in agreement, putting his pen into the spine of his notebook and quietly closing it. “Yes, I agree. I believe we’ve found a block, here. Now, don’t feel like you’ve failed, John- We’ve made quite a lot of progress.” Once again, he successfully smothers my worries before they’re even given chance to form. I smile at him as he continues.

“We’ve identified the troubling conditions you’re dealing with, we’ve become aware of your thoughts and emotions around these problems, and we’ve identified the faulty forms of thinking that drive it. The only part we’re struggling with now is the final step, to reshape these faulty thinking patterns, and while I’ve enjoyed our sessions, I don’t think that we will be able to make the progress we need just by talking together.”

He opens a drawer in his desk and takes out a business card. It’s not his own business card, which he keeps in a neat little holder on his desk. I sit up as he holds the card out to me. “I have some colleagues that specialize in a different approach, and I believe that they are particularly well equipped to help you find a way through the block we’ve found. I strongly recommend your next few sessions be with them.” I take the business card as he holds it out to me, turning it over in my hands. *Center of Unconventional Treatments for Unconventional Ailments*, the card reads. *What a strange name*, I think to myself.

I slip the card into my pocket, smiling warmly at my therapist. “Thank you, Adam. I really appreciate this.”

Adam flashes that bright, friendly smile of his. “Of course, John. I’m really glad I could help. And feel free to keep in touch with me - Just because we may not be having the same sessions as before doesn’t mean I’m not still here for you.”

As always, his words fill me with a sense of comfort. And this time, I feel a strange sense of purpose as I leave. Finally, I feel like I have a plan.



A week goes by, and instead of my usual weekly therapy session, I find myself on my way to the address listed on the business card Adam gave me. The card itself is nothing special, just black ink on white paper, and I can’t help but wonder just how effective this could really be. But I’d arranged for this appointment right after my last session had ended, and they are expecting me- I can’t back out now. *And besides*, I think to myself, *trying something new here couldn’t hurt. In the worst case, it does nothing, and I just waste a few hours of my time.*

I walk up to the front door of the building. It’s a decently sized complex, looking more like a small hospital than any sort of therapist’s office. I pull the door open and step inside, walking up to the front desk in the lobby.

“...Hello, this is *Center of Unconventional Treatments for Unconventional Ailments*, right? I’m John Smith. My therapist, Adam, referred me here.” I look at the receptionist, who beams back at me with a bright smile.

“Ahh, John! Yes, they’re ready for you now. Take the elevators to your left, go to the third floor, and look for the door labeled ‘Chronesthetic Displacement Treatment’.” She responds, gesturing to the row of elevators. I quickly thank her and make my way there, the elevator doors opening the moment I press the button.

The door she directed me to isn’t hard to find. It’s down a short hallway, past a few doors with labels I don’t bother reading. *Chronesthetic Displacement Treatment... I wonder what that is*, I ponder as I open the door and step in.

I’m greeted by a small waiting room, and a doctor in a white medical lab coat smiles up at me as I enter. They put their phone in their pocket and stand up to shake my hand.

“Ahh, you must be John! I’m Doctor Wahlen. Adam and I know each other from medical school, and after you made your appointment we discussed what method of treatment would be best.” I knew this, of course- Adam had contacted me earlier this week to ask for consent to share his notes, as well as to send me a few other consent forms for the *Clinic*.

I smile and nod, shaking his hand. His grip is firm, but not unpleasantly so. “Right, I remember Adam asking me for consent to do that. So, what treatment do you have planned?” His smile grows slightly as I ask my question.

“Follow me, and I’ll tell you as we prepare.” He turns to walk through a door, and I follow behind him. He brings me to a sterile-looking changing room, with a small stack of folded medical gowns on a table. “Please, take a gown. You can just wear it over your clothes, if you’d like.”

As I pick up a gown and slip my arms into its sleeves, he starts to talk again. “The treatment you will be undergoing is something we call “Chronesthetic Displacement”. In simple terms, you will be able to shift your consciousness *backwards* through time to an earlier point in your life, and then return to the present after a preset length of time.”

I stopped mid-way through buttoning up my gown as he spoke, and I’m staring at him in disbelief. “...So, what you’re telling me is... you’ve invented time travel?”

He laughs and pats me on the shoulder. “No, no, it’s not a time machine. It’s impossible to send matter backwards through time- and, even if we could, whatever we sent would simply appear somewhere in deep space.”

“Deep space? I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

“Well, the Earth is rotating, and it’s orbiting around the Sun, and the Sun is orbiting around the center of the galaxy, and our galaxy is moving through space... When you add up all of that motion, you find that the Earth is moving at a total of about two hundred forty-two miles per *second*. If you sent something back in time just fifteen minutes, it would appear in space about as far away as the surface as the moon.”

I nod along as I slowly piece together an understanding, then close my mouth – I had unconsciously let it fall agape as I was listening. “...Right, that makes sense, I suppose... Wait, but then how does this ‘displacement’ work, if you can’t send anything back?”

“Well, in a nutshell, we’re just sending your brain’s information back in time. You never physically leave the present, but you will *feel* like you’ve been transported back to an earlier point in your life.”

I nod again, quickly buttoning my gown up the rest of the way before continuing. “...Okay, I understand now. But I can’t change anything in the past, or I’ll create paradoxes, right? Or is it a different timeline, and whatever I do makes no difference?”

The doctor laughs and shakes his head, smiling warmly. “No, no, you can change whatever you’d like. And, no, it’s not different timelines, either. When you return to the present, you’ll find that the new results of whatever you did will form in your mind while you come back. It’ll be fuzzy at first, of course, but over about a week or so the new past will become your primary memory, and the old past will feel more like remembering a dream.”

I have to close my mouth again once he stops speaking. “...You mean that... I can travel back in time and change things?”

The doctor nods. “That’s correct – in fact, that’s what this treatment was designed to allow you to do.”

Wow. Can this be possible? Even if it does not work completely, even if it is experimental, it must be worth a try. It is literally what I have dreamed about. How can this be possible? But Adam was the one who sent me here and he knows better than anyone, maybe better than myself, what I need. Ok, shut down that inner skeptic, it is time to just take leap. I smile from ear to ear, the possibilities running wild in my head. I could finally, *finally*, go back and fix all of those mistakes I’ve made!

“That’s incredible! How do I start?”

The doctor chuckles, beckoning to me as he walks out of the changing room and down a hall. “First, we’ll need to perform a minor subdermal surgery. It’s to implant an interface system under your scalp, which uses electromagnetic signals to communicate with your brain.” It takes every ounce of dignity I have not to cheer and pump my fists in the air as if I’d just won the lottery as I follow him into another room, where he lays me down on a surgery table. There’s two other surgeons in the room, already prepared in masks and sterilized surgical scrubs. Doctor Wahlen places a breath mask over my face. “Now, count backwards from 10 for us, please.”

I nod. “Ten... nine...”

And the world fades away as the anesthesia takes effect.



John slowly awakens, opening his eyes to an unfamiliar room. Rather than the sterile surgical theater he lost consciousness in, he looks around to see that he’s been wheeled into a spacious therapist’s office of some sort. The cot that he laid down in has been lowered as far as it will go, and next to it is a wheeled office chair, arranged similarly to the chair and couch in Adam’s office. However, the room also extends lengthwise to accommodate a bulky machine that looks like an MRI, except for the control panel touchscreen attached to the machine’s bed by a jointed arm. As John sits up and begins unbuttoning his surgical gown, the door opens and a familiar face steps inside.

“Ah, good, you’re awake!” Adam chimes happily, startling John.

John turns to look at him with a look of confusion. “Adam? What’re *you* doing here?”

He chuckles softly as he moves to take his seat. “Dr. Wahlen asked me to help supervise your session, and I’m more than happy to. I’ve worked with them on chronesthetic displacement therapy multiple times before, too, so I should be able to answer any questions you might have.”

John nods as he unbuttons the rest of his gown and pulls it off, draping it over the headrest of the cot. “Right, alright. I do have some questions, actually... How many times *can* I go back? Just once?”

“No, no, you can go back as many times as you’d like. In fact, you can even prepare a sequence of destinations, so you can travel to multiple different times before returning to the present. Here, why don’t you lay down in the chronesthetic displacer, and I can show you how it works.” Adam stands up and walks over to the MRI-machine-like contraption, beckoning John over to them. John stands up and walks over to the machine, laying down on the bed and eyeing the touchscreen that he can now properly see. There’s a set of text boxes, one for entering a date and time, and another box labeled “Duration”. Below that, there’s a button labeled with a plus symbol, then another button at the very bottom of the screen labeled “Initialize”.

Adam speaks up again as John adjusts the touchscreen’s position. “You just input the time and date you want to travel back to, and the length of time you want to stay. You

can put in just one time and hit “Initialize”, or add more destinations with that plus button right there. With multiple destinations, you’ll be sent to the next one as soon as the previous one’s time is up, so you don’t have to return to the present between every single jump.”

John nods in understanding, pulling the screen a little closer to his face, then rubs his chin thoughtfully. “Hm... And, like Dr. Wahlen said, anything I do in the past will affect the present?”

“Yes, that’s exactly it. For the destination of your first jump, I recommend something recent – That way, the memories of the new timeline form more quickly,” Adam responds with a smile. John nods again, his hands already moving over the screen, adding two more destinations to the interface and beginning to fill in the text boxes.

“This is *great*. I know exactly where I’ll start! You remember me talking about that project for the biggest client we have ever had, last week, right? Well, I know *exactly* what I need to do differently so I’m put on that project team. Just a couple smaller projects I could’ve done a bit better on, and then there’s no question they’ll put me on the team!” He grins, finishing up the dates on all three destinations. “Twenty minutes in each should do.”

Adam pats John on the shoulder. “That sounds good, John. When you come back, we’ll talk about what you did and what changed, to help the memories sink in properly. And of course, discuss anything else you want to talk about.” John flashes him a thumbs-up and an excited grin, then hits “Initialize”. The large machine whirs and hums, the bed sliding into the bulk of the device and bringing John with it. It stops at about when John’s

knees are barely inside, the hum escalating to a higher pitch. As John slips backwards into the past, Adam walks over to the desk and takes out a small book, sitting down in his chair as his patient experiences time travel for the first time.



The bed of the chronesthetic displacer slides out of its tube as the machine's humming dies down. Adam looks up from his book, then drops a bookmark into it and sets it atop the desk. He stands up and walks over to John's side, pulling his chair along as John sits up and blinks the last hints of grogginess from his eyes.

"So, how was it? What did you do?" He asks, sitting back down in his office chair.

John twists sideways to put his feet on the floor, sitting up on the bed. "Well, it really *did* send me back, and I *did* get to fix those stupid little mistakes I made... but I don't think it worked."

"What do you mean by that?"

John rubs his chin, visibly thinking. "Well... I'm thinking about the recent project for that big client, and I still remember not being added to the team. But that doesn't make sense, I should have absolutely been picked. I noticed some changes in the team, but I am still not on it.. I thought Dr. Wahlen said things could change?"

Adam nods slowly. "Well, things *can* change, yes, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they *will*... When Dr. Wahlen described chronesthetic displacement to me, he said to think about it like throwing a rock into a pond and making ripples."

John frowns a bit, his eyes focusing onto Adam now. “Right. That’s how it’s always described in all those time travel stories, too... But I threw my rocks, and I don’t notice any ripples.”

Adam smiles softly. “You’re thinking about it wrong. You *did* make ripples, but you’re not alone, either. Everything else happening all around you and all the other things you are doing every day makes ripples, too. It’s less like tossing a rock into a glassy pond, and more like tossing it into a lake during a rainstorm.”

John’s gaze drifts as he goes back to thinking. “Right... so that means what I did just wasn’t a big enough rock. These little changes are not substantial enough. I need to make bigger changes, if I want to make a *real* difference.”

Adam just shrugs in response, his face unreadable except for a slight smile. “Well, if you think that’ll help, feel free. You have no limit on how many times you can travel, after all.”

John nods, thinking for a moment longer before he lays back down on the bed to interact with the touchscreen. “Right... Do you remember when I told you about that new company that I got a job offer from? It was a while ago, near the start of my career. I didn’t take the offer – I was worried that I’d regret leaving Insurance International. But it grew fast, and recently Insurance International’s been losing some clients to them... I’m going to take that offer.”

Adam nods, standing up out of his chair. “That sounds like a good plan, John. We’ll talk again once you come back.” John gives Adam another thumbs up and a smile, then

activates the machine. Adam opens his book up once more as the bed slides John into the humming machine.



The machine once again quiets down and slides John out of it, and this time he's sitting up with his feet on the floor before Adam sits down in front of him.

"How was it?" Adam asks with a slight tilt of his head.

John frowns, staring off into space as he works on recalling the consequences of his actions. "Well... I remember working at the other company. But I thought that I'd get promotions more quickly in a startup like that... But no, I'm in basically the same position I was in at Insurance International. I don't think I understand..."

Adam nods as he responds. "I see why you're confused. Maybe if we talk it through some more, it could help. How does that sound?"

John nods, laying back down on the bed of the chronesthetic displacer. "Right... Well. I went back and took that job offer. I remember being excited about it for a little while after, too. But... Nothing really notably different since then. It's all still the same."

"Right. But, even though you switched companies, you still went to do the same job, and you're still just as good at it as you were when you worked for Insurance International, right?"

“Right... And there’s that rainstorm thing you said, too. I suppose...” He rubs his chin, deep in thought. “...I think I get it now.” John looks at Adam, and Adam nods, leaning in to listen. “Things in the workplace change because of way more factors than just what I do... That’s why things end up being the same, even though the details are different. It’s like that that “invisible hand of the market” theory, isn’t it?”

Adam chuckles lightly and nods, though he doesn’t seem totally satisfied. “I suppose that’s one way to look at it, yes.”

John nods, a smile spreading across his face now. “Alright, so that’s why my changes didn’t do anything. But now I *know* what I need to change. It has to be something personal, something where what I do *actually* matters...”

Adam’s smile turns to a mild look of worry at that last bit of John’s statement, and he speaks up as John puts in the date and time for his next jump. “John, I don’t know if that’s a healthy way to think about it-”

He gets cut off by the whir of the chronesthetic displacer starting up, as John initializes it as soon as he can. “I can’t believe I didn’t do this FIRST!” He laughs to himself as he’s slid into the machine. Adam sighs a little and picks up his book one more time.



The machine winds down and the bed slides out once again, but this time John doesn’t immediately sit up. He just lays there with a frown for a few long moments, then rubs his face with both hands.

“Nothing. Still nothing’s different. What, is my life *destined* to be miserable?”

Adam shakes his head, patting John on the shoulder. “Come on now, John. There’s no such thing as destiny. Can you tell me what you did?”

John sighs. “I went back to a party that was a few years ago. It was the last time I saw Sam in person. I don’t think I ever told you about her... We met in college, were fast friends, and stayed close even after we both graduated. I ended up developing feelings for her, but I never said anything – I was too scared that I’d lose her as a friend. We’ve kept in touch even after the party, but only barely. We’ve even talked about getting together to do something once or twice, but nothing came out of it...”

Adam nods. “Right. So you asked her out at the party, then? How did that go?”

“Well... She said yes. It was good. I thought it would be good. But...” He rubs his face. “...I remember us staying together for a little under six months. Mostly long-distance, and after a while we just decided to end it. Neither of us could make the right compromises in our lives to make it work.”

Adam nods knowingly. “I can see how that’d make you feel defeated, especially if you felt like you could’ve spent the rest of your life with her... I see why you feel the way you do. But, you did make a difference - you just spent the last two hours changing the past, and things *are* different, aren’t they?”

“Well, yes, but-...” He stops, caught in thought. “...Well, not *physically*... but I *feel* different. I feel different about those moments. I feel like I learned something from it, even

if the opportunities didn't actually lead to anything. Even though nothing's actually different... I feel better about those choices. I even feel a little better about the choice I made before this – I never missed out on these things because I couldn't see their potential, I missed out on chances to learn because I was scared I'd fail." He nods slowly as the realization begins to dawn on him. "...And all that's actually changed... is that I've stopped thinking about the regrets. Right?"

Adam nods, smiling warmly now. "Yes, that's right. And when you thought about these things before, how did you imagine you'd feel if you actually had done them?"

He rubs his chin, thinking. "...Well. I guess I never really thought about that. I just kept thinking about the things I should've done, instead of what comes after..."

"And do you know *why* these things you did didn't change any of the big things you hoped they would?"

"Because... well, because there's a lot of other things going on, too. It's like that thing you said earlier, about the pond... I'm throwing a rock into a pond, in the middle of a rainstorm. It's not the single little decisions that guide the way my life goes, it's the total of *all* the things I do, even if they don't feel important. And even then, sometimes I don't get to make the choice – Some things, life just throws at you, and the only thing you can do is learn from it."

Adam nods. "Do you think that you could think about the other things you think about in the same way?"

“I... I guess I could try. I think I can stop thinking about these things as missed opportunities, and instead use them to learn, and grow, and improve. I need to use the past to learn from, but not to regret. If I want to change my life’s direction it is not by wishing I chose something different than one time in the past, but rather work on today with a focus on where I want to be in the future.”

“Right. Now, are you ready to wake up?”

John blinks, then tilts his head in confusion. “...What?”

I feel my world shift, and suddenly I’m laying on my back in a bed. I can feel some sort of helmet fit snugly to my head, and I can see the visor that was over my face now lifted up and folded back. “What-”

“Welcome back to the real world, John.” A familiar voice chimes in. I shift downwards a little to pull my head out of the helmet-like thing it’s in, then turn my head to the side. It’s Doctor Wahlen, smiling softly at me.

“I-... What was that? What’s going on?-" John stammers out, questions rapidly bubbling up in his mind. *What just happened? Was it a dream? Was it something else? What kind of crazy machine were they using?*

Dr. Wahlen chuckles and reaches over to pat me on the shoulder comfortingly. “I know you must have a million questions. Just take a moment, and I’ll explain what you just

experienced.” He then leans back to press his thumb against the button of a little intercom on the wall. “He’s awake, Adam- feel free to come inside.”

I take a breath and do my best to calm down my baffled mind as the door opens and Adam steps inside, taking a seat next to Dr. Wahlen. Once I feel calm enough, I nod, and Dr. Wahlen begins to speak again.

“So, what you just experienced is the most advanced and immersive virtual reality simulation produced to-date. With a small implant beneath your scalp, the system can wirelessly interface with your brain to provide stimuli, as well as suppress unwanted muscular movement to keep you from accidentally pulling yourself out of it. The simulation itself is primarily controlled by an AI program designed to accurately simulate interpersonal relationships, and by collecting data from your memories it is able to form mostly-accurate recreations of past events. And as for the memories of the “new pasts”, it artificially stimulates those sections of the brain when recall occurs. These new memories will be the ones to fade like dreams, rather than the “old past” - or, more accurately, the actual past.”

I stare at him with wide eyes and a slightly agape mouth, shocked by this information. *That was all a... simulation?* I wonder to myself, then I realize that my mouth is hanging open and close it. I think about this for a few moments, then something comes to mind that makes me frown. “So... none of that was real, then? The time travel, the talking in between, everything?”

This time, Adam chimes in. “Well, in a sense, yes – you did not travel in time, and there is no such thing as a time machine. But, the *experience* was still just as real as anything else you do. The things you learned in the simulation are things that translate directly to the rest of your life as well.”

“And, this AI system is specially designed to simulate interpersonal interactions over both short and long terms. With our current understanding of physics, this device is the closest we may be ever able to get to real time travel.” Dr. Wahlen adds.

I nod slowly, understanding the situation more clearly now. “Right... I think I see what you mean. Even though I’m in the same position I was before, I know more now... and I think I get what the point of this was, now. It’s that faulty thinking that you kept telling me about, Adam. I kept thinking about and regretting the past, and so I never thought about the future... even though the future is what I *can* change.” I take a deep breath before continuing. “And... it’s not these little events that decide everything, like I was thinking. It’s a million things, every second of every day, PLUS the entire rest of the world... Some things take a long time to change, and some things just *can’t* be avoided, because it’s not always up to me. I just have to learn from my past mistakes, then look to the future with them.”

Both Dr. Wahlen and Adam’s faces break into a bright smile.

“Yes, John, that’s exactly it! I’m very, very glad that this helped.” Adam says as I swing my legs off the bed to put my feet on the floor.

I nod in agreement. “I am too... So, Adam. Same time next week?”

“Same time next week, John.” He responds with a chuckle.