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Chiang, Ted. The Lifecycle of Software Objects

When zookeeper Ana Alvarado decided to refocus her career and become a software tester, she knew it would change her life?what she did not know was just how profoundly. Offered a position by start-up Blue Gamma as an ?animal trainer? for their new digients (?digital entities? designed to be life-like, lovable pets for online gamers in virtual worlds), she leaps at the opportunity. Her background in animal behavior helps the company find success, creating extremely popular artificial intelligences. Their success spawns competitors in the market who use different ?genetic algorithms? and training methods to evolve their own versions of the digients. Unfortunately, these competitors nudge out Blue Gamma and the company folds?but what is to become of those Blue Gamma-style digients already placed with owners, and those still homeless? The creatures are childlike, but still loving and sentient?somewhere between pets and children, but nevertheless wholly unique. Ana adopts her own digient and becomes part of a small, but vibrant and dedicated, community of digient owners fighting for the survival and the rights of their charges. When even the gaming platform for which the digients were originally designed fades into obsolesence, effectively isolating the digients in a tiny pocket universe, Ana and the other digient owners are forced to make some increasingly unpleasant and difficult moral decisions.

Despite its slender size, this novella is filled more tightly with complex abstractions, moral ambiguities, and science fictional ideas than most trilogies can contain. Chiang?s mastery of the short form is evident; while keeping a firm hand on the passage of time he is nevertheless able to pack a lifetime of background, implication, and experience into a small number of pages.

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