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The Time Is Now: Embodiments of the Hyper-Present in Contemporary American Literature

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by

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ABSTRACT

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For many years, writers have argued the predominant temporality of contemporary experience is an intensified present. David Harvey and Fredric Jameson argued that such an intense emphasis on the present was one of postmodernism's principle features. Harvey argued that new communication technologies resulted in a "time-space compression" that created the sense that "the present is all there is." Similarly, Jameson argued that postmodernism reflected the logic of late capitalism, resulting in a society that "has begun to live in a perpetual present" that obliterates one's awareness of the past or future. Although many consider we have moved beyond postmodernism, our experience of the present has only become more intensified. The omnipresence of online connectivity today through communications technologies, such as smart phones and social media, means almost everything can be addressed in the present moment.

In order to better understand this phenomenon, this dissertation examines this intensified experience of the present, what I call the hyper-present, as it is embodied in four different literary texts. Chapters are devoted to *The Mezzanine* by Nicholson Baker, *Only Revolutions* by Mark Z. Danielewski, *Save the Date* by Chris Cornell, and *Queers in Love at the End of the World* by Anna Anthropy. Although the form of each of these texts is significantly different, they each

thrust the reader into a hyper-present reading experience. I argue that these texts challenge the pessimistic attitude that most theorists have towards the hyper-present. Although the hyper-present can present a number of important hurdles for contemporary life, it can also help us better recognize the significance of material objects, ecological threats, the limits of narrative tropes, and affectivity. Additionally, this study highlights the value of synthesizing literary and digital studies. This dissertation examines two print-based novels and two digital games. In the process it highlights both how digitality has profoundly shaped contemporary print media and how traditional literary studies has shaped digital media. Rather than being at odds, it shows how the perspectives and methodologies of literary and digital studies prove valuable regardless of media and how each approach highlights the need for and value of the other.

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Introduction

For more than 150 years, numerous writers have claimed that their current moment was marked by an acceleration in our experience of time. In 1864, Charles Baudelaire described the essential quality of his age to be the ephemeral, fleeting experience of living in the city. The urban metropolis gave life "a transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid."[1] Writers in each subsequent era have only become progressively more concerned with this temporal acceleration. Each new development in communication, production, or transportation technology has resulted in the sensation that time seems to be slipping away more and more quickly and more seems to be happening in any particular moment. This feeling seemed especially pronounced for writers and scholars in the postmodern era. In the eighties, Frederic Jameson and David Harvey both claimed that our experience of time had become so accelerated, so overwhelming, that we were no longer able to contextualize the present moment. In other words, our temporal experience had accelerated to its limit, to the point of instantaneity.

Jameson argues that the consumer society of late-capitalism coupled with the wider adoption of post-structuralist thought resulted in a loss of historical consciousness. He argues that postmodern media cultivates an isolated sense of the present moment, resulting in a "social system [that] has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present."[2] Harvey arrives at a similar conclusion about our experience of time. He argues that developments in communication and transportation technologies have resulted in a "time-space compression" so intense that it creates the sense that "the present is all there is."[3]

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[1] Baudelaire, Charles. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. Translated and edited by Jonathon Mayne. London, Phaidon, 1964, p. 13.
[2] Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. London: Verso, 1988, p. 28.
[3] Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity,* Blackwell Publishers, 1989 (p. 240).

This feeling of a non-stop present so intense and overwhelming that we cannot contextualize it has persisted into our contemporary moment. As digital communications have become more embedded in our lives, the sensation of an intensified present has become even more common. More recent cultural critics continue to invoke Jameson and Harvey's arguments and regularly come to similar conclusions about the reduction of our temporal experience to an intensified present. Those who follow in the tradition of Jameson point to our increasingly accelerating production processes[4] and ephemeral forms of capital. Attempts to periodize a new stage of capitalism are regularly accompanied by an invocation of Jameson's notion of the perpetual present. Jeffrey Nealon's update in *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (2012) further narrows and intensifies the scope of the present, with production moving at the nano-second of computation and reacting in real time. Jonathon Crary's *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013), emphasizes the perpetual nature of this present, highlighting the ways contemporary capitalism demands non-stop work, even in our sleep. Critics focused on communications technology have like-wise echoed Harvey's injunction that the "present is all there is." Zygmunt Bauman argues that we return to this notion because "the long effort to accelerate the speed of movement has presently reached its natural limit," that the electronic signal leaves everything "reduced to instantaneity."[5] Paul Virilio similarly argues that "The new technological time has no relation to any calendar of events nor to any collective memory. It is pure computer time, and as such helps to construct a permanent present."[6]

[4] Russell West-Pavlov points to a number of examples of this such as "faster turnover times, shorter product shelf-lives, increasing production of services, and digital commodities." West-Pavlov. *Temporalities*. Routledge, 2013, p. 139.

[5] Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, p. 10.

[6] Virilio, Paul. *The Lost Dimension*. Translated by Daniel Moshenberg. New York: Semiotext, 1991, p. 15. The threat posed by the speed of digital culture is a recurring theme of Virilio's works; also see: *Open Sky*. London: Verso, 1997; *Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light*. London: Continuum, 2002; and *The Futurism of the Instant: Stop-Eject*. Cambridge: Polity, 2010.

This anxiety over the overwhelming sense of the present moment is not simply a scholarly concern anymore. It has become a general part of culture. Cultural movements around regular meditation and slow food suggest that our lives are moving too quickly. The recent multimedia success of the KonMari tidying method, suggests that many find their lives too complicated and overwhelming. Books with titles such as *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything,*[7] *No Time: Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life*,[8] and *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*[9] have made it on national bestseller lists. Each of these books describes the present moment as intensely overwhelming. Rushkoff, in particular, repeats many of the same arguments of Jameson and Harvey without any reference to them: that our intensified present results in the failure of narrative, the inability to understand cause and effect, and the loss of historical awareness.

The argument that we increasingly experience time as a perpetual present is further confirmed in my own daily experience. The omnipresence of online connectivity today through communications technologies, such as smart phones and social media, means almost everything can be addressed in the present moment. We live in a world where people can reasonably expect you to immediately respond to an e-mail or text message, even if they are on the other side of the world. Politicians today are regularly criticized for short-term thinking and historical amnesia. Media is regularly consumed through live-streaming services such as Facebook Live and Twitch. The present moment has become intensified even in more traditional media due to practices such as live-tweeting television shows and the culture of spoiler aversion. Companies like Snapchat have even begun to commodify ephemerality. The mainstream adoption of the arguments of

[7] Gleick, James. *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*. Vintage, 2000.
[8] Menzies, Heather. *No Time: Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life*. Douglas & McIntyre, 2005.
[9] Rushkoff, Douglas. *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*. Current, 2014.

Jameson and Harvey and the shifting attitudes of our culture suggest that the perpetual present is no longer some new historical development. It is the nature of our reality. It has become the status-quo, a routine aspect of our daily lives.

With these temporal concerns in mind, I began to notice a pattern in the contemporary American literature I was reading. These texts each pulled the reader's attention away from the temporality of their narrative and to the reader's own present moment in the act of reading. Books like Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* and digital texts like *Queers in Love at the End of the World* impede a reader's ability to make sense of their fictional worlds. Instead, they seem to be about the reader's challenge in navigating the text, interrupting routine practices of reading and forcing readers to pay attention to what they are choosing to do and why they are making those choices. These texts all made this move by creating an overwhelming and intensified reading experience. They included large amounts of information, at an accelerated pace, often preventing the reader from spending much time with any one thought.

The similarities between the experience of the perpetual present and the experience of reading these kinds of texts were striking. Both are overwhelming and impede one's ability to assemble moments into a cohesive sequence. These texts seemed the product of our contemporary experience of time. In this way, I saw this body of literature as the next stage of the literary history charted by Ursula Heise in her book, *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and Postmodernism.* [10] Heise argued that postmodern perspectives on time necessitated novelists to adopt new formal innovations in narrative. In the case of the novels she examined, these innovations were required to contend with the fractured temporalities of postmodernism. Now, I argue, a new set of formal innovations are required to contend with our intensified present. Heise

[10] Heise, Ursula. *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and Postmodernism.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

ends her analysis looking ahead to the future. Her book ends, "it would be daring to hazard a firm prediction on whether [narrative form] will evolve…in the next millennium. Whatever is left of time will (perhaps) tell" (265). This dissertation examines how narrative forms have continued to evolve in order to respond to our contemporary temporal experience. It examines literary narratives that embody the sense of an intensified, overwhelming present, a sensation, following Heise, I call the hyper-present.

The Hyper-Present

I use the term "hyper-present" to encompass the various ways that writers describe this sense of a perpetual present. I take this term from Heise's book, but she does not use it as capaciously as I do. In *Chronoschisms*, the hyper-present is only one of many new temporalities of which the postmodern subject has become aware. She writes, "computer use immerses the individual in a 'hyper-present' of sorts, a hyper-intensified immediacy that focuses the user's attention on a rapid succession of microevents and thereby makes it more difficult to envision even the short-term past or future" (26).

I am drawn to her term for my project for a number of reasons. The first reason is that it can encapsulate the numerous different terms writers use to describe this phenomenon. Although Jameson's notion of the "perpetual present," and Harvey's phrase "the present is all there is," frequently appear in the work of others, most writers use their own term to signify the hyper-present. Despite various writers referring to the hyper-present in several different ways, it always results in a consistent experience. The hyper-present is always described as so intense that one cannot help but be simultaneously allured and overwhelmed by it. For example, Jameson argues that the breakdown of temporality creates a "present that suddenly engulfs the subject with

indescribable vividness, a…perception properly overwhelming." Virilio similarly explains that our constantly accelerating time results in a "permanent present, an unbounded timeless intensity." Both writers emphasize the "vivid" and "intense" nature of the hyper-present. In other words, subjects are irresistibly drawn into hyper-present experience. Furthermore, this perception is extreme and seemingly unending; it "engulfs" us, is "unbounded," and is "overwhelming." The hyper-present is so alluring and overwhelming that we lose perception of our actual movement through time. By unifying each of these various scholars under the term hyper-present, I hope to better highlight how each of these writers describe the same phenomenon.

Secondly, the term hyper-present does not limit the scope of the experience. Although most writers agree about what experiencing the hyper-present feels like, they vary in the terms they use to describe its duration. Most commonly the hyper-present is described as an expansion or prolongment of the present. Some of these expansions seem unending, such as "perpetual present,"[11] "permanent present,"[12] "continuous now,"[13] or "continuous present."[14] Others suggest an expansion with an indeterminate duration, such as "extended present,"[15] and "prolonged present." Others describe the hyper-present as narrowing our temporal scope, such as "the present is all there is" or "reduced to instantaneity,…simultaneity, and instantaneity."[16] Finally, others describe it as a series of isolated moments, such as "a rapid succession of microevents," or "a series of fleeting, episodic moments…a series of seemingly disconnected intensities."[17] This

[11] Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." The phrase comes up again in "The End of Temporality." *Critical Inquiry*, 29(4), 2003, 695-718.
[12] Virilio, *Lost Dimension*
[13] Rushkoff, *Present Shock*
[14] Rodowick, David. *The Virtual Life of Film*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 171
[15] Nowotny, Helga. *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience*. Translated by Neville Plaice. Polity, 1996.
[16] Harvey; Bauman; and Adam, Barbara. *Timewatch: The Social Analysis of Time*. Cambridge: Polity, 1995, p.114.
[17] Heise and Davis, Mark. "Hurried Lives: Dialectics of Time and Technology in Liquid Modernity." *Thesis Eleven* 118(1), 2013: 8-9.

variation suggests that one can experience the hyper-present in a variety of ways for various periods of time. By using the term hyper-present, I hope to be able contain all of these possibilities, to consider all the possible configurations for this temporal experience.

Thirdly, the term hyper-present explicitly aligns this particular temporal experience with digital computing. Not only does Heise's original quote use it to describe the imperceptible speed at which computers operate, but the word also alludes to the essential role played by the internet, most commonly navigated by hyperlinks. This allusion is important because our contemporary sense of the hyper-present is essentially connected to our digital media landscape. Beyond the advancements in digital technologies that have made instantaneous communication possible, our current media environment is dominated by Web 2.0 services such as YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook that actively cultivate a hyper-present experience. Web 2.0 refers to websites that rely on user-generated content, such as social media platforms. For example, YouTube requires users to upload a constant stream of new videos to its platform. In turn, it wants to maximize users' interaction with the site. More clicks-per-second results in more monetizable data about each user's behavior. As Berry argues, "For every explicit action of a user there are probably 100+ implicit data points from usage."[18] As a result, the "reliance upon user-generated 'newness' and the emphasis on always-becoming are built into the architecture of Web 2.0."[19] Social media websites such as Facebook want to cultivate a sense of an ever-changing space that "creates a spacio-temporality of immediacy and privileges real time engagement."[20] This explains why social media timelines are arranged so that the most recent submissions are seen first, why Twitter prominently displays the currently trending hashtags, and

[18] Berry, David. *Philosophy of Software*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 152.
[19] Gehl, Robert. "The archive and the processor: The internal logic of Web 2.0." *New Media & Society*, 13(8), 2011, 1228-1244
[20] Gerlitz, Carolin. "Acting on Data. Temporality and Self-Evaluation in Social Media." 2012, p. 2.

why Facebook perpetually asks you "What's on your mind?" Each of these platforms wants you to feel like you need to be engaged in every present moment, otherwise you will be left out. As Web 2.0 becomes more and more a part of our lives, understanding the nature of the hyper-present experience it encourages becomes more and more pressing.

The term hyper-present's allusion to hyperlinks also emphasizes the ways that this temporal experience is a product of the ways we interact with media. Each of the texts examined in this book not only describe characters experiencing the world in a hyper-present fashion, but they force the reader to experience the text itself in a hyper-present manner. Just as hyper-links encourage a hyper-present experience of the web, the formal structure of these texts is essential to the hyper-present experience they create.

Finally, I use the term hyper-present because it does not carry the negative connotations that most of the other ways of talking about this phenomenon carry. Whenever someone gestures to an intensified sense of the present moment, it is almost exclusively as a problem to be solved. Almost every writer sees the overwhelming nature of the hyper-present as having entirely negative consequences. Because the hyper-present prevents us from being able to contextualize our experience, critics argue that it makes planning impossible and erodes our sense of identity.

Planning becomes impossible because the hyper-present prevents an historical perspective. The primary way that writers criticize the hyper-present is that it disconnects the present moment from our sense of past or future. Jameson presents the most severe example of this critique.[21] He argues that the disorienting and overwhelming nature of the hyper-present

[21] Many others highlight the challenge the hyper-present poses to planning without the significant stakes that Jameson highlights. See, Bauman who argues that it leads to "the collapse of long-term thinking, planning, and acting" (3); or Heise who claims that it make it difficult to recognize causes and effects (26); and Harvey who claims that such an "emphasis upon ephemerality… takes matters too far. It takes them beyond the point where any coherent politics are left."

undermines the subject's ability to "organize its past and future into coherent experience." In turn, this "breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present time from all the activities and intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis."[22] In other words, a subject caught up in the hyper-present is unable to respond to the past or take actions with an intended effect in the future. This loss of historical consciousness has significant political ramifications. Without this historical perspective individuals cannot recognize the historical conditions that have resulted in their suffering and cannot change those conditions. For Jameson, in particular as a Marxist critic, this means that the hyper-present limits our ability to recognize the adverse consequences of capitalism and challenge its supremacy.

The hyper-present also makes it difficult for subjects to contextualize themselves within their experience. As a result, critics argue that individuals caught up in the hyper-present are unable to construct a stable sense of identity. Once again, Jameson serves as a touchstone for this critique. He suggests that the hyper-present strands subjects in a schizophrenic state. He insists that "our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the 'I' and the 'me' over time." But the hyper-present "is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence." He argues that this places people in a similar position to a schizophrenic who he claims, "thus does not know personal identity in our sense."[23] Harvey accepts this proposition in his book, invoking Jameson's notion of schizophrenia multiple times.[24] In fact, the experience of the schizophrenic is so closely aligned with Harvey's notion of the hyper-present that it appears alongside his oft-quoted phrase: "time

[22] *Postmodernism*, 27-28.
[23] Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," p. 8
[24] See pp. 53-58 and 287-305.

horizons shorten to the point that the present is all there is (the world of the schizophrenic)" (240).

Having come to an interest in temporality by way of queer theory, I cannot help but question this uniformly negative reaction. Work in queer temporality continually challenges our normative understandings of time. I find great value in the various ways queer theorists have challenged what Valerie Rohy calls "straight time," the normative narrative for the way we experience time marked by the expectation of continual linear progress towards a goal of greater reproduction.[25] This way of thinking can have serious adverse effects on individuals' lives. It suggests an unsustainable narrative for one's lifecourse, inevitably leading to feelings of failure and decline. Under the logic of straight time, when one fails to continually improve and produce, they have wasted their time. Furthermore, investment in this relationship to time can have adverse effects on society. Lee Edelman describes how the perpetual investment in a better future, what he calls reproductive futurity, requires sacrificing the lives and happiness of those living in the present for the sake of the future.[26] But this promised future never arrives. In this way, holding to a rigid expectation for one's relationship to time, investing in an inflexible temporality, can have serious negative effects on individual lives.

To combat these effects, work in queer temporality not only challenges conventional ways of thinking, but it validates other ways of thinking about our relationship to time. I am especially inspired by the work of Lee Edelman, Heather Love, and Jack Halberstam, who each find value in orientations to time that are conventionally considered to be painful or worthless. Edelman embraces rejecting the future, Love finds value in feelings of backwardness, and

[25] Rohy, Valerie. *Anachronism and Its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality*. New York: SUNY Press, 2010.
[26] Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

Halberstam reveals the ways in which failure can be rewarding.[27] In other words, each of these theorists finds valuable possibilities where others saw only problems.

I find this work especially valuable because it fulfills Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's call to practice what she calls reparative reading in her essay "Paranoid and Reparative Reading."[28] In this essay, Sedgwick criticizes what she calls paranoid reading, critical practices that are only concerned with identifying hidden truths that reveal systematic oppression. Although Sedgwick does not challenge the importance of such "paranoid" critiques, she is concerned about what is lost when "paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds" (126). One such alternative, Sedgwick suggests, is what she calls "reparative reading." Reparative reading "is additive and accretive;" it sees the "culture surrounding it [as] inadequate;" and it "wants to assemble and confer plentitude on an object that will then have resources to offer an inchoate self" (149). In other words, it suggests new possibilities and opportunities for living rather than dwelling on the restrictions and limitations we face. Such practices can teach us "the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (150-151). I consider the work of Edelman, Love, and Halberstam to be reparative as each goes beyond simply identifying straight time's potential to create suffering. They also point to alternative ways of living, alternative orientations to time.

With this perspective, I saw the near universally negative assessment of hyper-present experience as an opportunity. I wondered what sorts of possibilities the hyper-present might

[27] Halberstam, Judith (Jack). *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011; Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: Loss and Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009.
[28] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid and Reparative Reading, Or you're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You." *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke University Press, 2003, pp. 123-151.

create alongside the challenges on which other writers have been focused. I wanted to better answer the questions: How does it feel to be caught up in the hyper-present? How does the hyper-present structure our experience and ways of thinking? Does the hyper-present necessarily lead to the loss of a sense of history or self? If so, is that always a bad thing? And, finally, can the hyper-present also enable valuable alternative ways of thinking or living?

Hyper-Present Literature

This dissertation examines contemporary hyper-present literature in order to better understand the hyper-present's nature and implications. Long form narrative fiction and the hyper-present may initially seem to be at odds with one another. According to Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative*, narrative works on a fundamental level by joining actions and events that take place in meaningless succession into a unified sequence of causality.[29] In this way narrative requires the reader to be able to contextualize various moments. As such, the hyper-present would seem to make narrative impossible, since it inhibits our capacity to contextualize experience, but I believe it is this tension that makes literature an especially valuable means to better understand the hyper-present.

The nature of the hyper-present makes simply understanding it a challenge. It is difficult to recognize and apprehend as it is being experienced. As described above, some of the essential qualities of the hyper-present are being overwhelmed and distracted by it. Experiencing the hyper-present means getting caught up in the moment and having difficulty making sense of one's current present. In this way, the hyper-present by its nature resists attempts to better understand it. This challenge is further complicated by the fact that the media that most

[29] Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*. Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1984.

encourages the hyper-present also most obscures it. As Lisa Gitelman explains in her book, *Always Already New,* as new media technology becomes habitualized, "The technology and all of its supporting protocols…become self-evident." In fact, "the success of all media depends at some level on inattention or 'blindness' to the media technologies themselves (and all of their supporting protocols)."[30] In other words, as the hyper-present has become an expected part of our engagements with new digital communications technologies, it becomes more difficult to use those technologies to think critically about it. But, as Gitelman further explains, this problem can revitalize older media technologies, making them newly useful: "When one uses antique media like stereoscopes, when one encounters unfamiliar protocols, like using a pay telephone abroad, or when media break down, like the Hubble Space Telescope, forgotten questions about whether and how media do the job can bubble to the surface" (7). For that reason, attempts to capture the experience of the hyper-present in narrative literature helps to defamiliarize the hyper-present, allowing us to escape our habitual understandings of it and better attend to its implications.

This relationship also works in the opposite direction, just as literature can help us better understand the implications, limitations, and opportunities of this new temporality, the perspective of the hyper-present can reveal new understandings of and opportunities for literature. The texts examined in this dissertation each present new opportunities and challenges for the ways that we tell stories and the functions that they serve. They also reveal the temporal implications of the supporting protocols of traditional print media that readers have taken for granted, such as the structure of a bound book or the grammar of a sentence. The tension between literature and the hyper-present enables us to make new insights about both.

[30] Gitelman, Lisa. *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data Culture.* Cambridge, MIT Press: 2006, p. 6.

This productive tension between literature and the hyper-present, is also a tension between print and digital media. As N. Katherine Hayles explains in her essay "Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes," digital communications technology has profoundly changed the ways that we think, privileging new cognitive modes of thinking.[31] She argues that as younger generations grow up in a wholly digitally mediated world, a shift in cognitive styles has occurred. People are increasingly losing the ability to engage in what she calls "deep attention," but becoming increasingly adept at "hyper attention." Hayles describes the difference between the two thus:

> Deep attention, the cognitive style traditionally associated with the humanities, is characterized by concentrating on a single object for long periods (say, a novel by Dickens), ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times. Hyper attention is characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom. (187)

Hayles finds both of these cognitive modes to be valuable but recognizes they are usually considered to be at odds with one another. In order to address this shift, Hayles argues that educators need to foster ways to synthesize these ways of thinking, ultimately arguing for the need to consider texts that require both modes to be understood.

I am struck by the way that her description of hyper-attention seems to be a direct response to a hyper-present experience. The hyper-present features an overwhelming "multitude of information streams," an alluringly "high level of stimulation," and makes "long focus times"

[31] Hayles, N. Katherine. "Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes." *Profession* 12.1 (2007): 187-199.

impossible. As such, the increasing preference for hyper-attention seems to implicitly suggest that the hyper-present is becoming increasingly commonplace. Furthermore, as this temporality becomes more common, it is profoundly changing the ways that we think and interact with the world. As a result, I argue that Hayles' article highlights the need for a project such as this dissertation.

Hayles' article also suggests that a dissertation exploring the tension between literature and the hyper-present must also explore the tension between print and digital media. Hayles aligns deep attention with print and hyper attention with digital media. Every example of deep attention she includes involves reading a print book, and every example of hyper attention is associated with digital media such as videogames. For example, to demonstrate the contrast between these two modes of thinking she offers the image of "a college sophomore, deep in *Pride and Prejudice*…oblivious to her ten-year-old brother…jamming on a joystick while he plays Grand Theft Auto" (188). Since she argues that most people find deep attention and hyper attention to be at odds, she implicitly suggests that most people find digital and print media to be at odds.

In order to reconcile the tensions between deep and hyper attention in the classroom, Hayles offers a number of solutions. Each of these solutions involves remediating print novels in a digital context, such as rewriting portions of *The Education of Henry Adams* as Facebook posts or reading Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* alongside the computer game *Riven*. I agree with Hayles that both deep attention and hyper attention are valuable, but I argue that her approaches maintain the perception of a separation between print and digital media, between the temporalities of narrative and the hyper-present. Instead, in this dissertation I hope to show some of the ways that print and digital media are profoundly enmeshed, each influencing the other.

I did not initially envision this project as being about digital literature, but as I continued to study the hyper-present considering digital literature became unavoidable. Our contemporary hyper-present experience is so bound up in digitality that any literary embodiment of the hyper-present inevitably gestures toward it. In this dissertation I present four different texts that each grapple with these tensions alone, two print and two digital. The print texts that I examine in the first two chapters highlight the relevance of digitality to the study of contemporary literature, and the digital texts demonstrate how digitality enables new ways to embody the hyper-present that are not easily possible in print media. I ultimately argue that traditional literary studies and new media studies each emphasize the need for work in the other. Work in contemporary literary studies cannot ignore the influence of digitality, but similarly the study of digitality emphasizes the continued relevance for literary studies. The practices and considerations developed in the study of print texts are given new life in digital media, revitalized with a renewed exigence.

Methodology

Because the hyper-present is phenomenological, it cannot simply be described, but must be experienced, lived, felt in the reader's body. As a result, I have chosen texts that not only describe the hyper-present but *embody* it. By embody I mean texts that generate a hyper-present experience for readers through their formal qualities. In this way, I am trying to be attentive to the ways that "readers' distinctive experiences [are] part of the process of making meaning."[32] Each of the texts examined in this dissertation presents an intensified and alluring reading experience that overwhelms readers and makes it difficult to contextualize any moment in the text within the text as a whole. As a result, piecing together a cohesive narrative becomes a

[32] Spolsky, Ellen. "Toward a Theory of Embodiment for Literature." *Poetics Today* 24.1 (2003): 127-137, p. 129.

challenge and the reader is left with nothing but their own reading experience in the moment. In other words, these texts are not only hyper-present in content, but materially and experientially.

Despite each of these texts creating such a similar experience, I also chose texts that captured the hyper-present in different ways. As my review of the different terms writers use to describe the hyper-present indicates, the hyper-present can take many different shapes and last for different durations. As a result, I did not want to treat the hyper-present as if it were one unified monolithic experience. Furthermore, since one of the goals of this dissertation is to better understand the range of opportunities and challenges that the hyper-present offers, selecting a diverse range of kinds of texts maximizes the number of different implications we can observe.

Although I have not tried to limit analytic methods to one or two approaches, my focus on the hyper-present does privilege a couple interpretive modes. Because the hyper-present is an experiential phenomenon, my analyses necessarily gravitate toward my personal reading experience. In so doing, I hope to be attentive to the ways these texts create particular affective responses in its readers, and how each text leverages (and often subverts) our expectations for different types of media and our familiarity with narrative conventions. My emphasis on my subjective reading experience is also a response to the particular challenge that a hyper-present reading experience creates. Since these texts make it difficult for readers to contextualize any specific moment into a larger plot or cohesive meaning, sometimes I have little else to interpret than my feelings at the moment of reading. In this way, such reader-response criticism is not only a useful response to the hyper-present, but a hyper-present mode itself.

This dissertation is divided into four chapters, each focused on a different hyper-present text. The first chapter examines Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*. This novel embodies the hyper-present through the expansion of the moment. The plot of the 144-page novel consists of

the narrator's short escalator ride up to the mezzanine floor of an office building. It is an outlier in comparison to the other texts discussed. It was written much earlier, having been published in 1988. As such, it is much less informed by digital technology than the 21st century texts, but it serves as a useful point of comparison and connection between Heise's work and mine. 1988 is only three years after the novel with which she concludes her book, *Schismatrix*, was published. As such, *The Mezzanine* echoes many of the narrative developments she identifies, while also pointing ahead to the new narrative structures of more hyper-present texts. In particular, *The Mezzanine* shows that under close examination experiencing the hyper-present can provide access to the fragmented temporalities postmodern literature championed. It shows that embracing a hyper-present attitude can reveal how every moment is entangled in a web of temporalities and pregnant with countless possibilities. It also demonstrates how a hyper-present perspective draws attention to the material world and has the potential to defamiliarize commodified objects.

The second chapter focuses on Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *Only Revolutions* (2006). Danielewski's book embodies the hyper-present through the collapse of history into a single simultaneous present. The narrators of the novel each describe their own one-hundred-year long road trip across the United States, spanning 1863 to 2063. Despite being one hundred years apart, the narrators take their trip together and never age; they are perpetually sixteen. *Only Revolutions* demonstrates the essential role digital communication plays in contemporary literature, even print literature. Even though the novel deliberately excludes any reference to computers, such a book could never be possible without the internet or layout software. The book also demonstrates how the sense of the hyper-present can prove to be a useful way of addressing problems with long durations and no single cause, such as incremental environmental destruction.

The third chapter turns to a digital text, Chris Cornell's game *Save the Date* (2013). This text embodies the hyper-present through the repeated moment. In the game, players repeatedly go out on a date with a character named Felicia. Players are given multiple different choices to affect the course of the story, but no matter which they choose, Felicia is always killed. As the player replays the game, they can make new choices based on their knowledge from previous playthroughs, but the outcome is always the same: Felicia dies. In *Save the Date*, the player's feelings of temporal mastery are revealed to be limiting, while Felicia's lack of historical consciousness allows her to consider possibilities the player cannot recognize. In this way, the game suggests that the hyper-present can be a space for the generation of new knowledge. Finally, the game highlights the dialectical relationship between digital and more traditional storytelling. The storytelling possibilities enabled by *Save the Date's* digital nature initially seem to make the concerns of more conventional literary studies outdated, only for these traditional perspectives to suddenly reemerge later in the text, reinvigorated and newly relevant.

The fourth chapter examines the Twine game *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013) by Anna Anthropy. *Queers in Love* embodies the hyper-present by limiting players' reading time. The game consists of a series of passages connected through a web of hyperlinks. In it, you spend the final ten seconds of the world with your lover. Those ten seconds are literal: once the timer reaches zero, the screen is erased, and the player needs to start over from the beginning if they want to continue. *Queers in Love* demonstrates how the hyper-present can be a queer temporality. It shows how the hyper-present's capacity for failure can be a source of valuable knowledge. It shows how the hyper-present can provide greater affective awareness and reveal the invisible structures that mediate software.

These chapters are arranged chronologically based on each texts' date of publication, but this sequence also highlights a number of arcs across the dissertation. Each chapter becomes more and more focused on digitality: *The Mezzanine* was published before the widespread adoption of the internet, *Only Revolutions* is a print-based text only made possible with the use of digital technologies, *Save the Date* is a digital text that reasserts the value of traditional narrative concerns, and *Queers in Love at the End of the World* is a digital text that would be impossible in print. At the same time, as the texts engage more with digitality they (perhaps surprisingly) also become more about human intimacy. *The Mezzanine* is almost devoid of human intimacy, *Only Revolutions* centers around the intense desire between its narrators, *Save the Date* centers around a romantic dinner date, and *Queers in Love* focuses on the intense physical and emotional intimacy between two lovers. As such, these texts demonstrate how an increasingly digitally mediated world does not necessarily blind us to non-digital realities. Instead, digitality and the temporality it encourages can provide new ways for us to recognize the material and natural worlds around us, the continued value of print-based literary studies, and the significance of our bodies.

I

The Mezzanine as a Hyper-Present Response to Postmodernism

I start this dissertation by examining Nicholson Baker's first novel, *The Mezzanine* (1988), for a few different reasons[33]. First, this novel embodies the hyper-present in a straightforward manner: it focuses on a very small time-frame. Over the course of its 135 pages, the plot amounts to a single, one-floor escalator ride. Second, its publication date makes it contemporary with many of the major writers that serve as the foundation for others have thought about the hyper-present. Even though many writers are hesitant to label the book as postmodern, I argue the novel suggests that a hyper-present experience of the world can offer many of the opportunities that postmodern critics and theorists have typically associated with the rejection of such an experience. Even though *The Mezzanine* takes a completely different approach to temporality than most postmodern novels, it has the same effect: multiplying temporality. Baker's novel reveals how the hyper-present is not a reduction of temporal possibilities. It demonstrates how any present moment is the point of intersection for numerous temporal strands. In this way, the hyper-present can make us attentive to the ways each moment is pregnant with countless temporal possibilities. This perspective, in turn, challenges the reductionist perspectives of Jameson and Harvey. *The Mezzanine* opens the door for reconsidering the hyper-present as an experience that provides not only challenges to, but opportunities for, a better understanding of our world and our place within it. Finally, *The Mezzanine* serves as a largely pre-digital example of the hyper-present. It was written before the widespread adoption of internet and more than a decade before the development of the Web 2.0 technologies that so strongly encourage a hyper-present experience today. As a result, it serves as

[33] Baker, Nicholson. *The Mezzanine*. Reissue edition. Grove Press, 2010.

a useful point of comparison to the other novels examined in this dissertation, each of which is profoundly shaped by digitality.

The Expanded Moment

The Mezzanine embodies the hyper-present by expanding the moment to capture all of the thought and observation possible for any instant. It does so in a number of ways, in both its content and its form. The novel employs numerous strategies to suspend almost imperceptibly short time-spans for as long as possible. The expanded moment is most obvious in the focus of the novel. What little plot *The Mezzanine* might be considered to have happens over the course of a single escalator ride. On the first page the narrator, Howie, describes himself as he is about to step onto the escalator. On the last page, one-hundred and thirty-five pages later, he finally steps off it. In between these moments Howie describes every seemingly fleeting thought he has. He recounts the events of his lunch break leading up to this escalator ride (a broken shoelace, shopping at CVS, sitting with a paperback he never actually reads, etc.); he provides detailed lists of his life accomplishments (three of which involve tying shoes); and he explains every object he sees or thinks about in exquisite detail.

As a result, the novel features countless digressions. For example, as Howie first nears the escalator, he involuntarily moves his paper CVS bag from one hand to the other. This action inspires a description about what that bag contains: some shoelaces, a milk carton, and a straw. This description, in turn, leads him to consider the various possible functions of paper bags which results in a discussion of privacy, and finally, an anecdote about buying pornographic magazines. This digressing train of thought features even further digressions in the form of lengthy footnotes. The mention of the drinking straw leads to a footnote describing the changes

in drinking straw materials over time and the inconvenience of straws that float in soda. And the consideration of straws with bendable necks leads to a footnote about finger joints and the possible reasons they crack when you bend them (4-5).

These numerous digressions suddenly end as Howie makes the mundane realization that he likes to be able to carry everything in one hand: "But there was a simpler reason…I had asked for the bag…which I now perceived, walking toward the escalator to the mezzanine and looking at the stapled CVS bag I had transferred from one hand to the other…I always liked to have one hand free" (7). This revelation occurs a full four pages after he initially passes his "CVS bag to my left hand" as he "drew close to the up escalator" (3). In other words, four pages of thoughts on a wide range of topics occur in that single moment. After four pages, the narrator has still not reached the escalator; only a moment of time has passed.

The entire book follows this digressionary structure at every level. Thoughts are inserted inside other thoughts, preventing those initial thoughts from being resolved quickly. For example, the beginning of chapter seven suggests that Howie will describe "the very day that his life as an adult began" (47), but he does not actually start describing that day until the end of the chapter, a full six pages later. Instead, he becomes caught up in a detail in his story that leads to another story. A detail in this new story, in turn, leads to another tangentially related thought. He uses nearly every tool to withhold the resolution of one idea with the insertion of others: chapters, lengthy sentences with multiple clauses, multi-sentence parenthetical expressions, and copious footnotes. In this way the novel is structured like a collection of matryoshka dolls, with thoughts nested inside other thoughts, stories inside other stories.

Baker explicitly describes this digressionary structure in temporal terms. In an interview with *The New York Times Magazine*, he explains that his writing attempts to capture "the most

thought per elapsed unit of time."[34] In particular, he regularly connects his use of footnotes to an attempt to extend the moment for as long as possible. In one interview he explained that "*The Mezzanine* was an attempt to stop time by expanding the length of the paragraph by using the footnote as a kind of fermata. So that you would feel a stop in the middle of a sentence, and then have a whole secondary thought that balloons down the side of a page…What you want to do is stop the world."[35] In another interview he suggests that this realization was foundational to the book's creation, "the realisation that a footnote could take the overflow allowed me to get started with *The Mezzanine.*"[36] In other words, an attempt to freeze fictional time, to suspend narrative momentum is core to the novel. *The Mezzanine*'s digressionary structure and its intense focus on only a fraction of time expands the present moment in order to capture the overwhelming detail of any particular instant, intensifying the present.

This structure is the result of Howie's hyper-present experience of the world. Being caught in the hyper-present means feeling unable to contextualize oneself, and one's experiences. This does not exactly describe Howie, but it is the experience he longs for. Although Howie regularly draws from his memories as part of his digressions, he only draws on the past in order to better experience the present. Almost every object the narrator inspects leads him to consider a memory from earlier in his life. In this way, the function of memory in the novel is another way that *The Mezzanine* pushes toward a hyper-present experience. For example, Howie admits that "my pleasure in riding the escalator…was partly a pleasure of indistinct memories of my father's (and my own) world of mechanical enthusiasms, but memories also of my mother taking my

[34] McGrath, Charles. "Nicholson Baker: The Mad Scientist of Smut." New York Times Magazine. 4 Aug. 2011. https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/magazine/nicholson-bakers-dirty-mind.html.
[35] Laurence, Alexander and David Strauss. "An Interview with Nicholson Baker." *AltX*. 1994. https://www.altx.com/interviews/nicholson.baker.html.
[36] Wroe, Nicholas. "A Life in Writing," *theguardian.com.* 18 Sept. 2009. https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/sep/19/nicholson-baker-interview.

sister and me to department stores" (36). Even less significant objects result in strong memories. For example, Howie describes the perforated toilet paper in his office bathroom. This description, in turn, generates a memory about tearing pages out of his first-grade workbook (74). Any object that Howie observes easily connects to a memory for him.

These regular memories may initially seem to emphasize the past more than they demonstrate a hyper-present experience, but Howie does not ultimately seem interested in the childhood memories these objects inspire. Instead, these memories serve as tools for better understanding the object he is considering presently. For example, Howie invokes his childhood experience on the escalator only to help him better appreciate his "pleasure of riding the escalator" in that present moment. His experience with his mother is marked by warnings and his inability to "comfortably hold the rubber handrail" as a child. His memory highlights how much more pleasurable the present is when compared with the past.

Similarly, his memory of the first grade culminates in disappointment. He considers all the things he was taught in school, "about the Indians of New York State, about the making of the Erie Canal," but bemoans that he learned nothing about how perforation is accomplished (75). As a result, his past only serves as a hindrance to his ability to make sense of his present moment. The present object makes his past clearly accessible, but his past does not always illuminate the present, which frustrates Howie. In *The Mezzanine* the past is valuable only in its capacity to amplify one's experience and understanding of the present.

The past is also useful for Howie in the ways that it can isolate particular moments in order to highlight details or distinctions about an object that might be overlooked. As Graham Thompson argues, despite the frequent memories Howie invokes throughout the novel, the book is "much less concerned, however, with deep memory than texture and detail…that can only be

appreciated if time is virtually stalled, or at least reduced to such slow motion that it may be recorded with a forensic attention to granular structure."[37] Howie suggests this possibility shortly after he describes his childhood memories of riding the escalator. He explains how most objects in our lives, "like gas pumps, ice cube trays, transit buses, or milk containers, have undergone disorienting changes." He believes these changes "normally pass too fast for microscopy" but can be understood by "sampl[ing] early images of the objects in whatever form they take in kid-memory" (41). In other words, as Thompson describes, "the object is not a means to recover an earlier time; 'kidmemory' is, instead, a trigger that helps to slow the passage of time in order to facilitate a closer examination" of that object.[38]

But Howie does not always find his memories to be useful in this way. He also recognizes the ways in which they can inhibit his experience of the present. Memories can negatively affect the present in two different ways. First, they can distract a person away from his or her true experience of the present. Howie explains, "the 'when I was little' nostalgia was misleading: it turned something that I was taking seriously as an adult into something soupier, less precise, more falsely exotic, than it really was. Why should we need lots of nostalgia…when it is now so clearly an adult pleasure?" (39) In other words, the past can take a pleasure that exists in the present moment, "now," and project it into the past, devaluing one's present feelings.

The second way that memory can inhibit one from truly seeing the present, is by making the present moment less clear, "less precise." It can create "sentimental distortions." Indeed, even as he acknowledges the value of "kid-memory's" ability to slow down the present and

[37] Graham Thompson, "Periodizing the 80's: The 'Differential of History' in Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 57:2 (2011), p. 302.
[38] Graham Thompson, "Periodizing the 80's," p. 303.

allow us to apprehend it, Howie cautions that "once you invoke those kid-memories, you have to live with their constant tendency to screw up your fragmentary historiography with violas of lost emotion" (41). For Howie, personal memory seems to operate as a necessary evil. Although it can be the only means of capturing the present, it also threatens our ability to experience that present accurately.

As a result, Howie longs for the ability to apprehend the present without needing to rely on kidmemory. He desperately asks, "Will the time ever come when I am not so completely dependent on thoughts I first had in childhood to furnish the feedstock for my…sense of the parallel rhythms of microhistory?" (47) and wonders "Why do these images have to age before we can be fond of them?" (78). In other words, Howie longs for the ability to experience the world in a truly hyper-present fashion. He longs for the ability to ignore the past in order to better understand his present.

Howie values hyper-present experience not only for its power to decontextualize the present moment, but for its overwhelming nature. Although Jameson bemoans that the hyper-present "suddenly engulfs the subject with indescribable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming,"[39] this is precisely the kind of experience that Howie values. He doesn't want to overlook any present detail. Everything in the novel is worthy of Howie's attention. No matter how mundane or inconsequential things may appear to be, nothing is beneath notice. Every aspect of one's sensory experience is acknowledged, down to the level of tension one feels when pulling a paper towel from its dispenser. Everyday objects become aesthetic objects of contemplation, such as a stapler (14-15), an overflowing garbage can (133), or the escalator itself (36, 65, 103, 135). Finally, every thought is described as if it is a significant discovery, such as

[39] *Postmodernism* 27

Howie's recognition that he could apply deodorant while wearing a shirt, which he describes as one of the "major advances in my life" (16). In this way, Baker draws our attention to the innumerable overlooked and forgotten details immanent in every moment. Furthermore, Howie regularly breaks down details and objects' motion into their component parts. He describes multiple aspects of moving the CVS bag from one hand to another and the various "subtleties" of the design of ice cube trays (45).

Howie's obsession with cataloguing seemingly everything without regard to significance or value, is a characteristic of most of Baker's work. Baker explains that, "With *The Mezzanine*, I was trying to preserve the things we think about when we're thinking about something else."[40] This impulse towards preservation is a quality that many critics have identified in Baker's work. In "The Inclusionist: Nicholson Baker's Art of Preservation," Mark O'Connell identifies this impulse as the unifying theme of both Baker's fiction and his non-fiction. Arthur Saltzman, author of the only book-length study of Baker's work, describes *The Mezzanine* as "an ardent campaign on behalf of retention," and describes him as "a conservationist of the highest order."[41]

This emphasis on "preservation," "retention," and "conservation" all frame Baker's attention to the inconsequential in specifically temporal terms. Each of these words suggests protection from a possible loss in the future. The thoughts and objects Howie intricately describes are under threat from the future, and in order to protect them he prolongs the moment in which they inhabit.

In addition to detailing Howie's hyper-present experience of his world, the novel's structure creates a hyper-present experience for the reader. Howie's countless digressions make it exceedingly difficult to keep track of what is happening in the novel. The novel simultaneously

[40] Anderson, Sam. "Nicholson Baker, The Art of Fiction No. 212." *The Paris Review,* 2011, p. 34
[41] Saltzman, Arthur. *Understanding Nicholson Baker* (University of South Carolina Press, 1999), p. 38, 181

suspends so many strands of thought that it becomes nearly impossible for a reader to contextualize any particular moment within the novel as a whole. This fact is especially clear whenever Howie finally returns to an idea pages later. In moments like these, I was consistently surprised that I had lost track of Howie's train of thought. In other words, I was unable to simultaneously hold each of Howie's digressions in mind; I was so allured by his new train of thought that I did not even realize I had lost track of what he was initially talking about.

The copious and lengthy footnotes also make it hard to physically keep track of my place in the book. I was not always sure when to read each footnote. As Thompson explains, "The reader is confronted with unusual time-management dilemmas: whether to read the footnote that appears half way through a sentence before finishing the sentence, or backtracking once the sentence is finished, or skipping the footnotes entirely."[42] The challenge of knowing in what order to read the footnotes and the text is further exacerbated by the fact that so many of the novel's footnotes are referenced mid-sentence. One of the sentences even references two different footnotes before it is finished (50). As a result, the reader is frequently forced to choose whether to finish reading the sentence he or she is currently reading or interrupt that sentence to read the footnote. Additionally, many of the footnotes are lengthy, sometimes covering multiple pages. This means readers will often need to flip back and forth between different pages as they move between footnotes and the main text of the novel, physically reinforcing the odd temporality that the footnotes create. As a result, regardless of when I chose to read the footnotes, I often found myself needing to backtrack and re-read portions in order to remember what was happening in the main text before I was interrupted by the footnote. In this way, the novel is organized in a manner that regularly inhibited my ability to contextualize any particular

[42] Thompson, "Periodizing the 80's," p. 313.

moment. This challenge of keeping track of Howie's train of thoughts is also overwhelming to readers, further making the experience of reading *The Mezzanine* a hyper-present experience.

Howie's meticulous attention to detail and detailed descriptions overwhelms the reader in another way, it can become exhausting. For example, this description of the mechanics of a stamper is excruciatingly detailed:

> At rest, the internal dating element, looped with six belts of rubber, held its current numerology pressed upside down against the moist black roof of the armature. To use it, you set the square base of the machine down on the piece of paper you wished to date and pressed on the wooden knob…then the internal element, guided by S curves cut out of the gantry-like super-structure, began its graceful rotational descent, uprighting itself just in time for landing…touching the paper for an instant, depositing today's date, then springing back up. (32)

In this passage Howie finds the countless pieces that make up the stamper so alluring as to become distracted from what he was discussing. I also become distracted every time I read this passage, but not because I find this breakdown alluring. Instead, I find it tiresome and confusing. This breakdown does not help me better picture the stamper. It overwhelms me and challenges my ability to stay focused. As a result, I lose my place in the novel and my attention is drawn to my feelings in the particular moment of reading. In this way, the expanded moments of *The Mezzanine* do not only describe the hyper-present experience Howie chooses to have, but they push the reader to experience the book in a hyper-present fashion whether he or she wants to or not.

Postmodern Narrative Structure

The Mezzanine has an interesting relationship with literary postmodernism. Many writers, both popular and academic, consider Baker's first novel to be postmodern but acknowledge tension in that classification. Lindesay Irvine remarks that the novel is "often described as

postmodern, but it has none of the self-conscious irony that usually commands this handle,"[43] and Mark O'Connell describes Baker as "among the least alienated of postmodernist writers, fascinated rather than unsettled by the phenomena of commodity culture."[44] Phillip E. Simmons makes the distinction most explicit:

> Other postmodernist writers have responded to these same conditions either through the poststructuralist strategy of subverting historical representation itself, as in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* or Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, or through the actualist strategy of constructing alternative histories, as in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* or Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. Baker's approach, a third way, is to quit fighting and declare victory…celebrating the present as the only option left.[45]

Each of these writers position Baker as unique among postmodernists, as seemingly unconcerned with the issues with which other postmodern authors were preoccupied. He is not interested in reclaiming or revising history, he is not "unsettled by…commodity culture," and his lack of concern has no "self-conscious irony." These quotes highlight the two major concerns of postmodernism that the remainder of this chapter will explore. For most postmodern critics, the reduction of our temporal experience to an intensified present, is considered a marker for larger issues. Scholars treat the hyper-present both as evidence of the failure of conventional narrative structures and as evidence of the pervasive effects of commodity culture. In both instances, I argue, *The Mezzanine* resists treating the hyper-present solely as symptom of these postmodern concerns. Instead, it reveals how the hyper-present might create opportunities for overcoming these challenges.

Postmodern narrative is often described as a response to the growing inefficacy of traditional narrative. Ursula K. Heise in her book *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and*

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[43] Lindesay Irvine, "Comfort Reading: The Mezzanine by Nicholson Baker," *The Guardian*, theguardian.com, 16 Dec 2013. Web.
[44] Mark O'Connell, "The Inclusionist: Nicholson Baker's Art of Preservation," *Critique*, 53:3 (2012), p. 301
[45] Phillip E. Simmons, "Toward the Postmodern Historical Imagination: Mass Culture in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* and Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*," *Contemporary Literature,* 33:4 (1992), p. 622-623.

Postmodernism charts many of the social and cultural changes that intensified the critique of universal, linear, teleological narratives that had begun in literary modernism. She argues that postmodernism marks a fundamental change in the culture of time. This change was the product of both intellectual and phenomenological developments. In other words, postmodernists both thought about and experienced time in significantly different ways.

Intellectually, postmodernists became invested in challenging notions of linear, teleological notions of time and history. Jean Francois Lyotard's critiques of "grand narrative" in *The Postmodern Condition* is the most emblematic of this position.[46] Additionally, new developments in scientific thought radically challenged traditional conceptions of time. The discovery of subatomic particles and the development of quantum mechanics "revealed that the very mechanisms of observation and measurement which function at the human scale do not apply in the same way to the subatomic world" (Heise 39). In other words, time was not an independent, objective variable. As a result, the temporal problems faced by postmodernists were no longer "just the confrontation between standardized public time with the unpredictabilities of personal, organic time," but that ontologically no one "time" exists which applies in all layers of reality (39).

This intellectual failure of the value of "time" as a measurement coincided with a similar failure experientially. New developments in capitalism together with improvements in transportation and communication greatly accelerated the perception of time. These innovations emphasized new temporal values such as "simultaneity and instantaneity" and resulted in "global networks of information and communication" that humans could no longer "survey or comprehend, let alone control" (24). This experience strands people in the hyper-present,

[46] Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition,* translated by Geoff Bennington and Brain Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

"focusing the attention of individuals and groups on the present…unhinged from past causes and future extensions of effect" (26).

For these reasons, traditional conceptions of time, of past and future, became less reliable, less useful. This recognition in turn produced various claims about the end of history[47]. As N. Katherine Hayles describes, this means that "analyzing postmodernism…amounts to writing the history of no history."[48] These significant changes in postmodern individuals' understanding and experience of time meant that the postmodern novel "can be distinguished in its narrative strategies from the modernist novel of the early twentieth century" (Heise 2).

Surveying accounts of postmodern literature, a significant similarity in these new narrative strategies can be seen. Regardless of the ways that scholars taxonomize these strategies they all seem to respond to the potential end of history with an excess of temporal possibilities. Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* identifies three different approaches to history that he considers essentially postmodern: apocryphal history, creative anachronism, and historical fantasy. Each of these strategies "visibly contradicts the public record of official 'history'" (90). Apocryphal history either "supplements the historical record, claiming to restore what has been lost or suppressed; or it displaces official history altogether…In both cases, the effect is to juxtapose the officially-accepted version of what happened and the way things were, with another, often radically dissimilar version of the world" (90). Creative anachronism flaunts deliberate temporal contradictions, incorporating details from one historical period into another, such as the inclusion of twentieth-century technology in the Civil War era in Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*. Historical fantasy describes the deliberate interaction between historical and

[47] See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press, 1992 and Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?* Translated by Patrick Camiller, New York: Verso, 1994

[48] N. Katherine Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991. p. 281

fantastical entities, such as Richard Nixon meeting Uncle Sam in *The Public Burning*. Thus, McHale describes postmodern narrative's engagement with temporality as characterized by alternative histories self-aware of their constructed nature. These strategies are similar to those used in novels that Linda Hutchinson calls "historiographic metafiction" in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, and Fiction*. She considers historiographic metafiction to be paradigmatic of postmodernism, in part due to its "ironic rethinking of history" and "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs," that create alternative "forms and contents of the past" (5).

The narrative strategies Heise identifies focus less on alternative histories, but rather they create fractured and variable presents and futures. She examines novels such as Julio Cortazar's *Hopscotch* where the chapters can be read in multiple different orders, and Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Topology of a Phantom City* that fragments its story into "incessant repetitions that split many of the most crucial scenes into series of incompatible versions" (146). These strategies echo what Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth calls "rhythmic time" in her book *Sequel to History*. Ermarth also focuses on postmodern novels that offer variable reading orders or contain "descriptions that are repeated with subtle variations…including contradictions that are irreducible" (73). But Heise additionally examines novels that suggest variable and continent futures such as the fragmented fictional futures of science fiction novels such as Christine Brooke-Rose's *Out* and Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix*.

Each of these postmodern narrative structures involve suggesting multiple, divergent, incompatible, and competing temporalities. Furthermore, these strategies are often presented in opposition to the loss of historical consciousness, to the fact that "the present is all there is."[49] As

[49] Harvey, 240

Heise explains, postmodern novels "represent the loss of history in by and large pessimistic terms" (255) and offer "the multiplication of histories…as the obverse side of the posthistorical" (264). In other words, postmodern narrative strategies most often suggest the need for more history, more temporalities. They create competing possible pasts (historiographic metafiction), competing possible presents (rhythmic time), and competing possible futures (science fiction). These strategies, in turn, emphasize heterogenous temporalities pregnant with contingent possibilities.

Following this tradition, many critics have attempted to find similar non-linearity in *The Mezzanine*. This potential is often found in the novel's copious footnotes. For example, Saltzman argues that, "*The Mezzanine* is likened to Jorge Luis Borges's garden of forking paths," because the footnotes require the reader to choose the order in which they are read.[50] More contemporary readers have continued to describe the footnotes as the potential for multiple reading paths by describing *The Mezzanine* as a precursor to hypertext. Soren Pold suggests one might read "the novel's digressive narrative structure and complicated temporal structure as pointing…towards the non-linearity of hyper-text."[51] Baker even seems to support this association. When an interviewer compares *The Mezzanine* to hyper-text, Baker agrees:

> "The footnote is the poor man's hypertext…You can choose. Do you want to go into the subroutine of the footnote and follow it out and move back, or do you want to skip it? So you have that branch…I've heard people read every imaginable way you could do it. Skipping the text. Reading the footnotes first. I wanted it to be optional.[52]

[50] Arthur Saltzman, *Understanding Nicholson Baker*, p. 21
[51] Soren Pold, "Novel Media: On Typological Consciousness and Marginal Realism in Nicholson Baker," *Reinventions of the Novel: Histories and Aesthetics of a Protean Genre*, edited by Karen-Margrethe Simonsen, Marianne Ping Huang, and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (University Press of Southern Denmark 2002), p. 153
[52] Alexander Laurence and David Strauss, "An Interview with Nicholson Baker," *altx.com* (1994)

Each of these descriptions emphasizes the variety of "paths" or "branches" in the novel and the reader's responsibility for choosing the order in which these paths are followed.

But as described earlier, the digressionary structure in *The Mezzanine*, most clearly demonstrated through the footnotes, is not a structure of alternative paths, but of slowing time. The footnotes are a means to prolong the moment. As such, choosing to read a footnote or not is not really a choice in narrative direction, but a choice in narrative duration. Unlike the postmodern novels that McHale, Hutchinson, or Heise examine, the footnotes do not present incompatible temporalities. As described above, postmodern narrative most often features competing versions of the past, present, and future. The non-linear temporalities of traditional postmodern novels are at odds and mutually exclusive. But in Baker's novel, even though the events of Howie's lunch hour are not narrated in chronological order, everything he describes fits together into a plausible whole. It is hard to do, but *The Mezzanine* ultimately can be reconstructed into a single, linear narrative. Each "fork" the book presents, whether in the form of its footnotes or its many digressions, does not result in a different endpoint. The book is always read from beginning to end, from left to right, from the bottom of the escalator on the first page to the top on the last page. As a result, by reading a footnote the reader is choosing to extend the present, rather than open a new alternative future. The footnote simply allows Howie to more comprehensively describe his thoughts and observations in the moment.

Despite this significant difference in narrative structure, Baker's novel still arrives at the same conclusions about time as other postmodern novels, simply from a different direction. Even though *The Mezzanine* features no multiple, divergent, incompatible, or competing temporalities, it still emphasizes temporal heterogeneity, just a heterogeneity present in every particular

moment. Perhaps this is why so many critics cannot help but describe the novel as postmodern even though they are hesitant to do so. They conflate an emphasis on temporal heterogeneity with a rejection of the hyper-present; they consider postmodernism in opposition to hyper-present experience. Ultimately, I am not concerned with whether Baker's novel should be labeled postmodern or not. But I do think other critics' struggle with that question reveals the limitations created when one considers the hyper-present in exclusively reductive terms, and *The Mezzanine* demonstrates that experiencing the hyper-present can actually make us more aware of temporal heterogeneity.

The Mezzanine emphasizes the temporal heterogeneity of hyper-present experience in four different ways: the novel's emphasis on nested memories, its frequent lists, its elevation of the overlooked to the significant, and its numerous repeated motifs. As described earlier, Howie's digressions are frequently allusions to past memories that he uses as a means to better understand his present. The fact that he digresses so often and that he is prone to so many allusions means that almost every page features anecdotes from multiple different moments in time. For example, thinking upon the milk carton in the CVS bag he carries, Howie describes how uncommon it is for him to drink milk now in comparison to his childhood. In an attempt to understand why that is the case, he describes his girlfriend's aversion to milk:

> Before she understood that she was physically allergic, she ascribed her dislike to her father's influence: he, she told me, associated dairy products with a certain cheerful brutishness—blond mezzosoprano camp counselors in Wagnerian horn-hats…drinking bowl after bowl…She remembered his quoting Tacitus's *Germania* darkly, something about "barbarians who buttered their hair." …And I, influenced by her dislike, began to feel uncomfortable...not to be thought of as a hair-butterer. (46)

Howie's dislike is based upon his memory of his girlfriend's memory of her father's memory of a quote translated from a Latin book published in 98 CE. Howie's present thoughts are the result of a sequence of at least five different moments in time covered in only eight lines of the text. As a result, Howie's seemingly non-sensical explanation for rarely drinking milk, as to not be considered a "hair-butterer," is actually the result of a very particular and idiosyncratic history. This explanation becomes even more historically complicated because Howie still has this feeling even though the reason for his girlfriend's dislike of milk is no longer the same.

The book is filled with moments like these,[53] and together they form a collection of diverse idiosyncratic histories that have all culminated in the particular moment of Howie riding the escalator. These histories are so complicated and innumerable, that Howie is rarely able to reconstruct them, let alone would a reader be able to. As a result, the novel fails to form any clear historical context for any moment, but it also gestures to the vast web of temporal possibilities that makes each of these moments possible. In this way, *The Mezzanine* forces the reader to contend with the innumerable, diverse sequences of events that converge in every single moment in time.

In addition to Howie's frequent digressions, he also presents numerous lists throughout the book. These include lists of what he considers the eight major advances in his life, four different theories related to the death of brain cells, and a chart of his recurring thoughts arranged by frequency. Ross Chambers argues that these regular lists "teach us, in short, that the world is listable as well as narratable—it can be constructed paradigmatically as well as syntagmatically" (797). In other words, these lists demonstrate how interchangeable, separate entities are bound up

[53] Such moments are so ubiquitous that I actually opened the book once randomly to find the example quoted above.

into connected narratable wholes, as well as how any narrative whole can be broken down into its separate, seemingly unrelated parts. Additionally, Chambers argues that the lists are simply an exaggeration of the effect of the novel's digressionary structure. By pushing the digression to the extreme, Baker shows how continuous thought ultimately leads to what appears like discontinuity. For him, the novel is entirely about challenging the perceived dichotomy of continuous/discontinuous.[54] In this way, despite the cohesive linearity of the novel, *The Mezzanine* challenges us to rethink our notions of linear and non-linear time. It forces us to contend with the complicated temporal heterogeneity of all moments no matter how simple or unified they appear to be.

Another way that *The Mezzanine* emphasizes the temporal heterogeneity immanent to each moment of time is by elevating often overlooked details of the world to a significant level. Moments of random chance become essential to the "plot" of the novel. Saltzman points out that Howie's broken shoelace is "the precipitating 'conflict' of the novel" (20). This shoelace is what leads to Howie visiting the CVS on his lunch break, ultimately leading to his ride on the escalator. Not only is the broken shoelace what causes the events of the novel to occur, but this moment is the starting point for many of Howie's digressions in thought. Throughout the novel he considers the various techniques he has developed for perfecting shoe-tying and attempts to determine why one shoelace always breaks before the other. This latter train of thought is ultimately resolved in a footnote in the penultimate chapter. Howie describes his discovery of an academic article on "Methods for evaluating the abrasion resistance and knot slippage strength of shoelaces." He does not read the article, but he is satisfied that someone "was going to make the

[54] In addition to analysis of the book's copious lists and digressions, Chambers also highlights the recurrence of images of perforation and wholes made up of parts. The escalator itself is a prime example, made up of separated stairs connected together to provide the illusion of a contiguous whole continuously moving in one direction.

problem [of broken shoelaces] his life's work," and that "humanity would not have to keep retying its shoelaces" (133). The inconsequential moment of a shoelace breaking is elevated to a problem for all of humanity, one that a lifetime could be committed to. In this way, *The Mezzanine* draws the reader's attention to the significance of chance and contingency in the course of human history.

Finally, temporal complexity is demonstrated through the regular recurrence of motifs throughout the novel. Particular thoughts and images repeatedly appear throughout the text. For example, Howie's meandering thoughts separately return to cigarettes eight times, grooves five times, olives four times, and the maintenance men at his office seven times. Howie sometimes muses about these subjects for multiple pages at a time, sometimes they are the jumping-off points for significant philosophical discussion, and at other times they appear as stray observations. The varying degrees of importance these subjects play in the text once again emphasizes the ways that seemingly insignificant details, things that one might just happen across, can profoundly affect our present moment and potential futures. But the use of these repeated motifs also creates various strands of history that crisscross throughout the novel. This fact is made clearest in the final chapter, a single paragraph that describes the end of Howie's escalator ride:

> At the very end of the ride, I caught sight of a cigarette butt rolling and hopping against the comb plate where the grooves disappeared. I stepped onto the mezzanine and turned to watch it for a few seconds. Its movement was a faster version of the rotation of mayonnaise or peanut butter or olive jars…at the end of supermarket conveyor belts…I looked down the great silver glacier to the lobby. The maintenance man was at the bottom. I waved to him. He held up his white rag for a second, then put it back down on the rubber handrail. (135)

This paragraph is written more matter-of-factly than the rest of the novel; it is almost purely descriptive. Howie makes no philosophical musings, and his digressions are surprisingly

restrained. But, almost every detail in this paragraph recalls numerous moments throughout the text. Cigarettes, grooves, olives, and the maintenance man all appear. In other words, this final paragraph is a microcosm of *The Mezzanine*'s motifs, a point knotted up in innumerable threads that weave throughout the novel. Furthermore, the discarded cigarette spinning at the top of the escalator gestures to timelines entirely outside the novel, to people and objects that Howie could never know. In one of his previous ruminations about discarded cigarette butts, Howie attempts to reconstruct the thoughts of the people who discarded them. He wonders whether they "did it simply because they preferred this to stubbing the cigarette out in their ashtray…[because] they knew what moments of sublimity they were creating for the non-smokers behind them…did they associate this cremation and ash-scattering with the longer curve of their own life…etc." (58). The reoccurrence of a cigarette butt here, recalls the rich life of the absent smoker and the infinite possibilities of this "etc." Each detail could potentially lead to infinite digressions, other histories of these objects which in turn connect to other histories of the people that have interacted with those objects. In this way, the final paragraph is emblematic of the novel as a whole, and emblematic of the way any present moment is pregnant with temporal heterogeneity.

The Mezzanine embodies an approach to the hyper-present that ultimately opens up into the temporal heterogeneity that critics have identified as a feature of postmodern literature. Howie's intense focus on the present, the fact that he is overwhelmed and distracted by the present material world surrounding him, emphasizes temporal heterogeneity just as more conventional postmodern novels do. But *The Mezzanine* does not require temporal impossibilities to do so. The novel does not require complicated formal structures like *Hopscotch,* comprehensive historical knowledge like *The Public Burning* or *Flight to Canada,* or science-fiction tropes like *Schismatrix*. Instead, it emphasizes a more everyday, mundane

temporal heterogeneity. Furthermore, *The Mezzanine* does not place this heterogeneity and the loss of historical consciousness at odds. "The multiplication of histories" is no longer "the obverse side of the posthistorical." Instead, temporal heterogeneity and the hyper-present exist simultaneously. Howie's hyper-present focus reveals how every moment is pregnant with possibility and crossed with countless temporalities. *The Mezzanine* begins to suggest the ways that postmodern critics' approach to the hyper-present and hyper-present narrative structures have been limited by the impulse to consider the hyper-present as a purely negative possibility.

The Hyper-Present and Commodified Consumer Culture

Another significant feature of postmodernism with which *The Mezzanine* engages is the pervasive nature of a commodified consumer culture. In their landmark analyses of postmodernism, both Fredric Jameson and David Harvey describe an increased emphasis on commodity culture to be one of the central qualities of postmodernism. One of the central arguments in Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* is that "postmodernism" is best understood as a new period in the development of capitalism. Following Ernest Mandel, Jameson describes this new economic period as "Late Capitalism." He considers postmodernism and late capitalism to be so intertwined that he describes them as synonymous. He considers late capitalism as "something like a literal translation of…postmodernism" (xxi). In particular, Jameson relates postmodernism to an ever-increasing emphasis on commodities. He describes postmodernism as caught up in "a commodity rush, [where]…things tend to arouse an enthusiasm and a mood swing not necessarily inspired by the things themselves." In other words, "Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process" (x).

Furthermore, both Jameson and Harvey explicitly tie commodity culture to postmodern experiences of time that appear hyper-present. For Jameson, the loss of historical consciousness, the reduction of our temporal experience to an overwhelming "perpetual present," is one of the direct results of increased commodification[55]. The emphasis on the commodified object itself results in "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (9) where "depth is replaced by surface" (12). In other words, as consumer culture becomes more commodified, cultural products no longer refer to anything deeper, only to the objects themselves. Left only with these surfaces, Jameson argues we lose the possibility for an historical perspective. Empty commodification can only generate "heaps of fragments" from which "we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images" (25).

Harvey describes the relationship between commodification and the hyper-present in the other direction. Rather than commodification leaving us with nothing but the present, he considers time and space compression to be one of the essential qualities of postmodernism, a phenomenon that results in an increased emphasis on commodification. As time-space compression converges on the instantaneous moment, "commodity production…emphasize[s] the values and virtues of instantaneity (instant and fast foods, meals, and other satisfactions) and of disposability (cups, plates, cutlery, packaging, napkins, clothing, etc.)"(286).

Even though Jameson and Harvey describe the relationship between the hyper-present and commodification in different ways, they both clearly consider the two intimately intertwined. As one becomes more intensified, so does the other. Both also agree that the intensification of

[55] In addition to Jameson's extended treatment of the loss of historical consciousness and commodification in *Postmodernism*, he first explored some of the issues of a "schizophrenic perpetual present" in a talk delivered as a Whitney Museum Lecture in 1982. The title of this talk was, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," explicitly connecting postmodernism, consumer culture, and his anxieties about the "perpetual present."

either has profound negative consequences. Both believe that increased commodification coupled with the intensification of the present overwhelms subjects. For Jameson, the "present suddenly engulfs the subject with undescribable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming, which effectively dramatizes the power of the material…signifier in isolation" (27) In other words, this version of the hyper-present can be understood as an experience dominated by overwhelmingly vivid material signifiers out of context. For Harvey, "the bombardment of stimuli, simply on the commodity front, creates problems of sensory overload" (286). For both, the postmodern subject cannot look beyond the material objects immediately in front of them. They are paralyzed in the present moment by the intensity of the surrounding commodities.

This paralysis is not always perceived as a negative effect—it may be experienced as "euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity" (28)—but both Jameson and Harvey argue that it carries significantly negative implications, both in private and public life. Jameson believes the hyper-present subject loses his or her sense of self. He argues "that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one's present" (26). As a result, when one becomes incapable of that historical unification, one becomes stranded in a "schizophrenic present" (xii). Furthermore, he claims that the overwhelming nature of the hyper-present leads to political impotence, that "the breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present of time from all activities and intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis" (27). Harvey makes similar arguments, explaining that time-space compression makes it "harder and harder to react accurately to events" (306) and that the first line of defense is to withdraw into a kind of shell-shocked, blasé, or exhausted silence and to bow down before the overwhelming sense of how vast, intractable, and outside

any individual everything is" (350). In other words, the hyper-present, commodified world overwhelms to the point of powerlessness. Harvey sees this result in postmodern fiction which he describes as "the flattest possible characters in the flattest possible landscape in the flattest possible diction" (58), an echo of Jameson's assertion that "depth is replaced by surface." In this way, both Jameson and Harvey share the same fundamental assumption about the nature of the hyper-present. They only consider the ways it might be reductive. It's always marked by loss. But what are the implications for the hyper-present when we also consider it as a site for new opportunities, as *The Mezzanine* suggests?

A product of the same moment as Jameson and Harvey's work, the novel also presents Howie's hyper-present attitude as a symptom of a culture of commodification. But *The Mezzanine* pushes back on the implications of the hyper-present. Howie's hyper-present perspective does not necessarily lead to more and greater commodification as Harvey argues, nor does it paralyze him and limit his ability to resist this culture of commodification. Instead, I argue that *The Mezzanine* suggests that the hyper-present is not simply a symptom of our predicament under late capitalism, but it can also serve as a point of resistance.

Baker's novel describes a world essentially shaped by the expansion of commodification. Howie is obsessed with "commercial culture," and commodities dominate the novel in numerous ways. First, almost every object that draws Howie's attention is an object of consumption. He describes disposable straws, milk cartons, and paper towels in great detail. Similarly, he almost always takes pains to describe the packaging of objects. He describes the piece of cardboard found in a new dress shirt before "tossing it on the pile of cardboards I had already saved" (50), and aestheticizes the aluminum foil that covers a stovetop Jiffy Pop: "you tore back the thin foil in triangles, thus making bloom a flower no bee will ever fertilize" (107). This attention to

packaging, to the parts of a product that will be immediately thrown away, further emphasizes the act of consumption. Furthermore, the packaging is also integral to the commodification of these objects. It highlights an object's branding, facilitates its circulation, and is a marker of its value.

Second, Howie's obsession with commodification is further visible through his constant use of brand names. Throughout the book he refers to countless brand name products, including Coke (4), Carlton cigarettes (7), Bates and Swingline staplers (15), Keds and Redball sneakers (18), and Ronzoni pasta (102). Additionally, he often compares various brands to each other. For example, he details his changing brand allegiance in regard to earplugs. He uses "the old Flents stopples, in the orange box" until "a company called McKeon Products began…offering Mack's Pillow Soft®… [which created] a mild vacuum in your ear canal—a vacuum!" (109-110). In addition to identifying the brand names in this passage (including a registered trademark symbol), Howie differentiates between these commodities with reference to their packaging and production companies. Furthermore, his final exclamation seems like it would be more appropriate in a Mack's Pillow Soft commercial than a novel.

Third, Howie regularly relies on analogies to consumer objects to be able to make sense of the world around him. These analogies range from the philosophically profound—comparing one's lifetime to perforated paper towels (74)—to the mundane and comic—comparing a coworker's flatulence to "air blown over the mouth of a beer bottle" (83). Howie even makes analogies to commodities to better understand other commodities, such as likening the cardboard found packaged with new dress shirts to "pre-SX-70" Polaroid film (50) or describing his earplugs as "Tootsie Roll behemoths" (110).

Finally, commodities not only make up a large portion of the content of the novel, a commodity and its purchase also serves as the inciting action for what little "plot" the novel has. Howie's lunch break begins with a broken shoelace. As a result, he heads to the nearby CVS to purchase new laces. It is this action that provides him the opportunity to make all of his observations in *The Mezzanine*. It is this action that finds him riding the escalator. Saltzman even describes Howie's broken shoelace as "the precipitating 'conflict' of the novel" (20). As such, the entire novel demonstrates the profound ways in which our relationship to the consumption and purchase of commodities shapes our day to day lives. Howie highlights the significance these commodities play in our lives when he reverentially describes the CVS as "a whole chain dedicated to making available the small, expensive, highly specialized items that readied human bodies for human civilization" (113). Commodities are so significant for Howie, they are what make us civilized, human.

The Mezzanine affirms many of the negative consequences that Jameson and Harvey believe such an obsession with commodities creates, but Baker always seems untroubled by these possibilities. Just as Jameson and Harvey believe a greater emphasis on commodification leads to a depthless culture, Howie's obsession with consumer objects and commodity culture coincides with his emphasis on "surfaces." After bemoaning his inability to prevent the intrusion of "kid-memory" in his description of objects, Howie describes the ideal way in which he believes one should examine objects. He describes this method as the "clean-background trick." This trick involves examining an object in isolation against a clean, empty background such as a "rusted railroad spike…placed on an expanse of garage concrete that I had carefully swept smooth." This isolation allows any object in the world "to take on its true stature as an object of attention" (38).

In order to accomplish Howie's "clean-background trick," one needs to have an intimate understanding of the surface of the background. Howie demonstrates this fact with his description of the railroad spike. The swept garage concrete served as a suitable background because Howie understands that "Garage dust fills in concrete's imperfections when you sweep with it, making it a very smooth surface." Only through close attention to the surface of the background and the ways in which that surface mediates the perception of an object of attention, can one truly recognize that object's "true stature."

But Howie's obsession with surfaces is not a reduction of his ability to make sense of the world around him. Instead, this emphasis allows him to recognize mediating surfaces that often go ignored. Howie demonstrates his awareness of the significance of mediating surfaces in two other instances. The first occurs when he is describing the pleasure of wearing socks on carpet. He explains, "the fibers of sock and carpet mesh and lock, so that though you think you are enjoying the texture of the carpeting, you are really enjoying the slippage of the inner surface of the sock against the underside of your foot" (12). The second occurs in one of the only conversations Howie has with another character in the book. His coworker points to the sky outside remarking, "Ooh, it's gorgeous out." But in a footnote, Howie acknowledges that the sky his coworker finds so pleasurable is not truly the sky: "Really it wasn't blue sky at all…the reflective layer of the glass shifted colors from true" (34). In both of these instances, Howie reveals the ways in which we often ignore the surfaces that shape the way we experience the world every day. Attention to surfaces proves to be important not only in contrived scenarios such as Howie's "clean-background trick," but also in common, everyday moments, such as looking out a window. In this way, *The Mezzanine* suggests that surface level attention is not a

bad thing. It argues that in order to truly be attentive to the present world around us, we must adopt a greater awareness of the surfaces that mediate our experience.

The novel also suggests that such awareness is facilitated through the hyper-present. The emphasis on surfaces as seen in Howie's "clean-background trick" not only isolates his object of contemplation in space, it also isolates it in time. As described above, Howie first mentions this trick in response to his inability to separate his present observations from his "kid-memories." He explains, "I have lately become increasingly uncomfortable about including [kid-memory] in descriptions of the things I love." And the recollection of his "trick" helps him reach a "firmer position on the whole issue" (37). Similarly, after describing his clean-background trick, he returns to temporal concerns: "Though simple, the trick was something that struck me as interesting and useful *right now*. Thus, the 'when I was little' nostalgia was misleading" (39). Howie presents his clean-background trick as a solution to the distorting effects of memory. To truly recognize an object's "true stature" it must be considered as separate from memory, as separate from the past. His trick is useful *right now*. In other words, when truly paying close attention to the objects around him, historical consciousness becomes a hurdle for Howie. But by taking a hyper-present perspective, he can better recognize the significance of these surfaces.

Howie's intense focus on the objects all around him requires a hyper-present attitude in another way as well. Without such a narrow temporal scope, Howie's keen attention to detail would be impossible. As Levey describes, "Howie wants to tells us *everything* about the contents of his CVS Pharmacy bag and a broken pair of shoelaces, but it means he can't tell us anything beyond these small moments unless the book is to grow to unmanageably immense proportions."[56] In other words, the hyper-present not only better facilitates Howie's obsession

[56] Levey, Nick. *Maximalism in Contemporary American Literature: The Uses of Detail.* Routledge, 2016.

with consumer objects, it is the only way such an obsession is possible. But this obsession, in turn, can offer the opportunity for a greater understanding of these objects.

Despite Howie's ability to understand these objects as the level of the particular, he appears to be incapable of significant political or personal engagement. Phillip E. Simmons offers the most critical reading of *The Mezzanine* in this regard.[57] He sees Howie's emphasis on "the rhythms of microhistory" (Baker 47) to be at the expense of any macrohistorical perspective. He argues that "in Baker's fiction mass culture promises to replace history entirely" and that "any larger historical frame…is gestured at only through the irony of its absence" (603). This absence is most evident in Howie's failure to recognize his own position as a consumer in a larger system of social relations. Any gesture towards larger consumer trends always ends with an idiosyncratic and affective personal response. Howie even seems to acknowledge this tendency when he considers the shampoo aisle at the CVS:

> And here were the shampoos! Was there really any need to study the historical past…when we had dynastic shifts, turbulence, and plenty of lather in the last twenty years of that great Hindu inheritance, shampoo? Yes, there was. Yet emotional analogies were not hard to find between the history of civilization…and the history within the CVS pharmacy.

Despite his acknowledgement of the importance of history, Howie is compelled to explore the "emotional analogies" shampoo creates for him. As Simmons highlights, the "history" that follows this acknowledgement is simply a series of personal anecdotes. Howie reminisces about the "throatiness of womanly voice-overs" in commercials and his "friends' older sisters who used those old shampoos". These memories reveal nothing about the history of shampoo, let alone the "history of civilization." Although I agree with Simmons that the conflation Howie makes between history and his emotional memories about products is troubling, I find Howie's

[57] Phillip E. Simmons, "Toward the Postmodern Historical Imagination."

description of shampoo as “that great Hindu inheritance,” to be an even greater indicator of his inability to engage with larger systems of power. This description gestures towards a history of cultural appropriation and colonial domination in capitalism that is entirely ignored. At least he pays lip service to the value of global history, but he is completely oblivious to the ways in which that history is shaped by exploitative economic forces.

In addition to failing to consider his position as a consumer, Howie gives the reader no sense of his position as a worker. Although the book takes place almost entirely in a corporate setting, we are never given a sense of what Howie’s company does or what his position in it is. Every reference to his job is vague almost to the point of meaninglessness. For example, he notices some workers from the mailroom in the lobby and mentions that he “knew them from a time I had had to send a number of last-minute packages…for a philanthropic thing the company got involved in” (61). All this statement reveals about his company is that they have a mailroom. Howie does not specify what the “philanthropic thing” is or in what capacity his company became involved with it. Furthermore, this “thing” is something the company “got involved in.” This phrase makes the company’s involvement seem unmotivated and potentially inconsequential, and it highlights the fact that such “philanthropic things” are outside the norm for his company’s operations.

In a footnote on the same page, Howie also describes a project he worked on with a coworker. This statement is similarly vague. He explains that they “worked together briefly on a thirty-page cross-departmental requisition for a fleet of trucks.” Again, he does not specify what the trucks were for, what they were transporting, or where they were going. All we learn is that his company is large enough to have multiple departments and that it involves the movement of goods at some point. From both of Howie’s statements all we know about his job is that it

involves the circulation of products in some capacity (they "send packages" and employ a "fleet of trucks"). In other words, Howie lets us know that his work, like the rest of the novel, is deeply embedded in commodity culture, but he refuses to critically examine that culture or how it works.

In these ways Howie's obsession with commodities certainly has negative political implications, especially in regard to the issues with which Jameson is most concerned, those connected to "class consciousness" (418). But it is not only postmodern culture that inhibits Howie's capability for political engagement. More significantly for this dissertation, Howie's vagueness about his job is also a product of his hyper-present attitude. He admits that when someone leaves a job he thinks that:

> One of the hardest decisions you have to make on cleaning out your desk is what to do with the…958 fresh-smelling business cards. You can't throw them out—they are proof to yourself that you once…solved complicated, utterly absorbing problems there; unfortunately, the problems themselves, though they once obsessed you…two weeks after your last day…you find yourself unable to recreate the sense of what was really at stake. (92)

The fact that figuring out what to do with his leftover business cards is one of his "hardest decisions," highlights his disinterest in the past or the future. On their last day, most other people would likely be anxious or excited about what they will end up doing next. Or, conversely, they may wonder what sort of legacy they will leave behind. Instead, Howie is concerned with the material objects in front of him. Even though his business cards no longer perform any particular function, he believes they hold a symbolic value, one that is more valuable than the historical reality that he lived. He admits that in almost no time at all he would entirely forget his past if it were not for the presence of some material object in his present moment. But the business cards can only remind him that he solved problems, not what those problems were or most importantly, what was at stake in them. Even if the material ephemera of his previous job can

help him retain the memory of that job's existence, it is unable to preserve the history of what he worked for.

The Mezzanine also suggests that a hyper-present existence fragments one's sense of identity. Although some writers have pointed to Howie's brief mentions of coworkers, family members, or his girlfriend as evidence that *The Mezzanine* is "actually a very human book, full of insights into how we behave,"[58] I believe these moments only serve to highlight Howie's lack of interpersonal or intrapersonal understanding. Very few of the human characters in the novel have names or faces. In contrast to the intricate detail with which Howie describes the material objects he observes, he spends at most only a few words commenting on a coworker's hairstyle (28). More often he fixates his attention on an object in someone's possession, such as a businessman's tie-clip or a maintenance man's cleaning rag (62). This fixation, in turn, leads to a lengthy description of that object, so that by the time Howie mentions the person again, the reader may have indeed forgotten that Howie's description of a cleaning rag had even begun with the mention of a person at all.

This fixation on objects over people even carries over into the rare moments when Howie refers to those closest to him. In a number of places Howie fondly remembers personal interactions he had with his father or his girlfriend "L." As with any other character in the novel, though, we learn very little about who these people are. His father remains unnamed and his girlfriend is only given an initial. Furthermore, every interaction Howie has with them is heavily mediated by consumer products. For example, Howie devotes a lengthy footnote to proudly describing his father's taste in ties. It culminates in the only conversation between him and his father in the book:

[58] Ben East, "The Mezzanine by Nicholson Baker – review."

> My father turned toward me and caught sight of my tie, and said, "Hey, hey—*nice*," fingering the silk. "Is this one of mine or one you bought?"
>
> "I picked this one up a while ago, I guess…This is one I haven't seen before, have I?" fingering his tie in turn. "Really nice."
>
> "This?…I picked this up at Whillock Brothers…"
>
> Later still, when I went home to visit, I swapped a tie with him…I spotted what had been my tie in the midst of all the ties he had bought himself, and it fit right in, it fit right in! (28)

The entirety of Howie's conversation with his father is about their ties. Neither of them asks any questions about the other person, only about their ties and where they purchased them. Howie's final moment in this passage most significantly demonstrates the ways in which he and his father's relationship is really about each man's relationship to his ties. He ends this anecdote with the repeated exclamation "it fit right in!" This enthusiasm echoes the common trope of a son seeking acceptance or approval of his father, but it displaces this acceptance metonymically onto the ties. Howie writes as if his father is accepting him, but his father is really just accepting his tie. Howie seems incapable of recognizing the difference between a relationship between commodified objects and a relationship between human beings.

This mistake is repeated when Howie describes his relationship with his girlfriend "L." Howie begins with a description of his earplug purchasing history. Eventually, he also describes his earplug wearing habits which leads him to mention L:

> In bed I kissed L. good night while she wrote down the events of her day…then I selected a promising used earplug…and pressed it into whichever ear was going to point toward the ceiling first. If she asked a question…I had to raise my head off the pillow…to hear her…
>
> I learned how to transfer the single warm plug from ear to ear in my sleep whenever I turned…sometimes, to demonstrate special tenderness [L.] would get the wooden toaster tongs, take hold of an earplug with them, drop it into my ceilingward ear before I had gotten around to doing so…saying, "You see? You see how much I love you?"

Even though Howie believes this anecdote is indicative of the love L. has for him, this scene depicts personal separation rather than connection. Howie's earplug, an object which has been

clearly associated with commodity culture in the preceding paragraphs, literally prevents interaction between him and L. Once the earplug is in his "ceilingward" ear he is unable to hear her. This fact puts L's final quotation into question. He is suggesting that he can hear her questions even though he is sleeping, and L. has pressed an earplug into his ear. As a result, this quotation is likely only Howie's interpretation of this exchange, rather than something L. literally says. Additionally, this interpretation seems suspect. L. places the earplug in his ear without any physical contact. She even picks up the earplug with "toaster tongs" suggesting some level of revulsion towards the earplug. Finally, by placing the earplug in his ear, she is literally blocking his ability to acknowledge her. As a result, this scene shows an even greater misunderstanding of interpersonal interaction for Howie. In addition to mistaking his relationship with a commodified object as an interpersonal relationship, his positive feelings toward that object cause him to misinterpret a scene of separation as one of connection.

Similarly, although some writers believe "*The Mezzanine* demonstrates a deep engagement with character psychology,"[59] I argue it only demonstrates how poor Howie's understanding of himself is. Although the novel could easily be described as Howie's stream-of-consciousness, we ultimately learn very little about him other than his obsession with examining material objects and his desire to live in the present moment. In fact, Howie's name is only mentioned twice in the entire book, the first time not occurring until page 85. This absence devalues the narrator in the same way he devalues other characters; they all are less worthy of contemplation than material objects.

[59] Eric E. Casero, "Mind Against Matter: Isolating Consciousness in American Fiction, 1980-2010," dissertation, University of Kentucky, 2016, p. 15. Although Casero points to a number times when Howie is introspective, he does not question whether his conclusions seem accurate or not.

Howie does have two moments of significant introspection, though. The first regards his preoccupation with becoming an "adult." Following his dissatisfaction with his inability to ignore his "kid-memory," Howie tries to identify the moment in his life when he became an adult. He initially claims that he knows when that exact moment occurred, "It happened when I was twenty-three…at a time when I owned only five shirts" (49). This is one of the few moments in the novel that he specifies a particular time, but he immediately also describes the number of shirts he owned, as if one's life could be measured by consumption. The precise moment of his adulthood occurs as he is riding the train to work. He attempts to read a stranger's watch, but it is obscured by his shirt cuff. He thinks, "The cuff was possibly more starched than my own." Then, for no clear reason at all, Howie is overcome with the feeling "that as of that minute…I had finished with whatever large-scale growth I was going to have as a human being…I was now permanently arrested…I was the kind of person who stood in a subway car and thought about buttering toast" (54). Almost immediately this feeling subsides, though. He tries to revive this feeling but cannot, and at the beginning of the next chapter he even admits that he learned later, "I wasn't quite so developmentally fixed as it had seemed that morning" (57).

This moment is one of the clearest examples of the hyper-present in the whole book. It describes a single fleeting moment in time that seems entirely disconnected from the past or future. The moment that immediately precedes Howie's realization is almost identical to every other moment in the novel: Howie examines the world around him in detail and he becomes distracted by a material object. Nothing about the moment would seem to inspire a revelation. Likewise, this moment carries no relevance after it is over. Almost immediately, Howie decides he was wrong, and this moment which Howie describes as so significant has no bearing on the rest of the book. Finally, if this moment is a revelation for Howie, it certainly is not one for the

reader. The fact that he is someone who thinks about buttered toast on a subway car would not be a surprise to anyone who has already read fifty pages of his ruminations on drinking straws, paper bags and other mundane objects. In other words, Howie's moment of adulthood does not demonstrate his capability for self-understanding. Instead, he highlights how little he must have ever understood himself before this point.

Howie's other significant moment of introspection occurs at the end of the book. The penultimate chapter culminates in his attempt to chart the frequency of his idle thoughts in a year. He believes such a list will be fairly illuminating about a person, that it "might prove to be more revealing than any statement of beliefs…or even than a frozen section of potential thoughts…at any one time in particular" (127). This second comparison is especially interesting because it describes the rest of the book so well. Above all else *The Mezzanine* is a "frozen section" of Howie's "potential thoughts" during a very particular lunch hour. In other words, he thinks this chart of "the periodicity of regularly returning thoughts," will be more illuminating about him than the rest of the book is.

But this list does not prove to be very useful. Just as was the case with his recognition of adulthood, Howie immediately undermines this moment of introspection. He admits that "compiling the list…was not the enlightening process of abstraction I had expected it to be" (128), and this certainly proves true for the reader as well. Howie presents his subjects of thought as a list organized by frequency. Such a structure gives the reader no sense of when or why any particular thought tends to occur. In this way, Howie's scientific approach actually obscures the significance of his thoughts, rather than revealing anything enlightening about him.

Furthermore, if his list is compared to the rest of the book, Howie seems to be very wrong in his self-assessment. He believes that his most common thought is "L." occurring 580

times a year, while "shoes" is one of the least common, occurring only 6 times a year. But Howie thinks about shoes 28 different times in the course of *The Mezzanine* alone. His girlfriend, on the other hand, is only mentioned 14 times, and in every one of these instances, Howie only mentions her briefly. In contrast, Howie's thoughts about shoes and shoelaces span multiple pages, open two different chapters, and serve as the inciting incident for the entire novel. As a result, Howie's thoughts about shoes are both more frequent than his thoughts about L. and much more significant.

The Potential Value of the Hyper-Present

Although *The Mezzanine* suggests that the hyper-present can inhibit our ability to understand others or ourselves, the novel also suggests that such an experience can encourage us to recognize other valuable connections within the world. In reaction to the allure of the hyper-present, Baker does not push back against it, he embraces it. But that does not mean his strategy is incapable of offering a form of resistance in a world where we seem powerless in the face of a vast system of overwhelming commodities. Rather than pulling away from those commodities, Baker fully gives into their allure and, in turn, reveals another way to maintain one's agency in a hyper-present world. Levey emphasizes the ways in which Howie's comprehensive gaze works to mentally take apart the objects he examines. He analyzes Howie's description of the self-inking stamp which I previously quoted in excruciating detail. This description turns the date-stamp into a complex collection of connected forces, movements, and parts. By slowing down the moment in which the stamp is pressed to the paper and isolating his attention on the stamper, Howie can better "see" the date-stamp for what it really is. Levey points to *The Mezzanine's*

numerous moments like this as examples of Bill Brown's "thing theory."[60] Brown makes a distinction between "objects" and "things." He defines objects as non-human items that people look *through* "to see what they disclose about history, society, nature or culture—above all what they disclose about *us.*" In other words, "objects" are items we understand in relation to humans. A "thing," on the other hand, is an item people look *at*, noticing its unique particularities and features, independent of any meaning it may convey. The simplest example is a window. A window is inherently an "object" because we look through it to see something else, but if we turn our attention to the glass, its shape, its colors, its imperfections, we can begin to apprehend it as a "thing," instead (4). Interestingly, this distinction almost perfectly describes the difference between the way that Howie and his coworker look out the office window (Baker, 63).

But turning one's attention to "things" rather than "objects" can prove challenging. In fact, Brown argues that "Things lie beyond the grid of intelligibility," and the best we can do is encounter the thing "badly" (5). As a result, things can only be apprehended in brief moments where an objects typical relation to humans is broken. One way Brown thinks this is possible is when objects "stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy" (4). In other words, we see things in moments of failure. This is how Levey interprets Howie's tendency to intricately describe the various individual parts within an object. He reads Howie's tedious description of every individual part of the date stamp as a means of "breaking" that object. He argues that by breaking these "objects" into "things" in this manner, Howie makes "the nature of our relationships with them clear" (98).

I certainly agree with Levey's interpretation, but there is another way of "breaking" an object into a thing that Brown describes. Levey quotes Brown regarding the broken drill and

[60] Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 1-22.

dirty window, but he stops the sentence short. Brown argues that we are confronted with the thingness of an object not only when it breaks, but "when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily." This momentary temporal isolation describes not only Howie's "clean-background-trick," in particular, but the entire novel's structure as well. *The Mezzanine* is nothing but a particular moment in time, suspended and expanded, broken down into its particularities. Baker even explicitly claims that he wanted *The Mezzanine* to be "a veritable infarct of narrative cloggers,"[61] an image of "arrested flow." In other words, adopting the hyper-present seems particularly suited for encountering "thingness." In this way, a hyper-present perspective can offer an opportunity to recognize objects as "things" rather than as commodities.

The revelation of an object's thingness resists increased commodification in two ways. First, it helps us to recognize the "more immediate physical qualities of objects and their uses" (Levey 107). According to Lukács, the commodity form conceals "all the immediate—qualitative and material—character of things as things."[62] In other words, commodities encourage us to overlook their specifics, but Baker's particular brand of hyper-presentism highlights those specifics. It draws attention to the material qualities of consumer objects, defamiliarizing their commodity forms, and making them visible as things.

Second, once these objects are recognized as things, one can develop unintended, idiosyncratic uses for them. Howie regularly develops such uses. He finds that the cardboard in new shirts makes "a nice receptacle to hold under your chin" (50) and he explains four additional uses for bathroom paper towels beyond drying his hands (90). But Howie is not the only one who develops such unintended uses for commodities. His attention to the particulars of his moment

[61] Baker, Nicholson. *U and I: A True Story.* Vintage, 1992, p. 72.
[62] György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, Translated by Rodney Livingstone (Merlin Press, 1971), p. 92

allows him to recognize "a mute folklore of behavioral inventions, unregistered, unpatented, adopted and fine-tuned without comment or thought":

> Nobody could have predicted that maintenance men would polish escalator handrails standing still, or that students would discover that you can flip pats of pre-portioned butter so they stick to the wall, or that tradesmen would discover that they could conveniently store pencils behind their ears, or later they would gradually *stop* storing pencils behind their ears, or that windshield wipers could serve as handy places to leave advertisement flyers. (95)

Howie's "mute folklore" here operates as a form of Raymond Malewitz's "rugged consumerism," where consumers can find agency in the midst of capitalism by "creatively misusing, repairing, and repurposing objects."[63]

In this way, Baker leans into the hyper-present nature of a world dominated by commodification. Although the hyper-present may make it almost impossible to retain an historical consciousness, although it may erode our capacity for human relationships, *The Mezzanine* also suggests how the hyper-present may create new opportunities for creating autonomy and for forging valuable relationships with things, instead. Although hyper-presentism may have a number of negative consequences, it may also be the means to forge new paths to help us survive those consequences.

The Mezzanine's relationship to consumer culture echoes the novel's relationship to postmodern narrative conventions. In each case, other writers identify a problem and suggest alternatives to that problem as a means to reject them. Postmodern narrative conventions developed as an alternative to the loss of historical consciousness and the increasing significance of the present, pointing to temporally heterogenous, mutually exclusive pasts, futures, and presents. But rather than turning away from the lure of an overwhelming, cohesive hyper-

[63] Malewitz, Raymond. *The Practice of Misuse: Rugged Consumerism in Contemporary American Culture*. Stanford University Press, 2014, p. 527

present, *The Mezzanine* embraces it. In doing so, it finds the very thing that postmodern literature championed in the thing that it fought against. *The Mezzanine* shows that any moment in time, no matter how mundane, monolithic, or normative, when examined closely, is also always filled with temporal heterogeneity. Likewise, rather than completely rejecting consumer culture as a means to eliminate the pernicious effects of increased commodification, *The Mezzanine* reveals how close examination of those commodities from a hyper-present perspective can also undermine their commodified nature. Furthermore, it shows that the hyper-present, although bound up in commodification, does not necessarily have to reinforce it; it can also serve as a site of resistance.

Considered in relationship to postmodern literature and criticism, *The Mezzanine* begins to reveal how the hyper-present is not necessarily as limiting as it is considered to be. Through Howie's attention to detail, his focus on material component parts, and his refusal to consider any interaction, thought, or thing to be trivial, he is able to find opportunities in the hyper-present, not just the negative consequences. Even though *The Mezzanine* suggests a number of dangers and challenges presented by the hyper-present, it also recognizes ways to make it valuable and even liberating. If we approach the hyper-present world with the fine-tuned observation that it demands, we too might be able to apprehend these new temporal possibilities, even in a cigarette butt at the top of an escalator. In other words, *The Mezzanine* offers a glimmer of hope for our contemporary moment. As new digital technologies have further compressed time and space, have allowed even ephemerality to become commodified, and have created a present even more filled with overwhelming and distracting noise, Howie's hyper-present has become less idiosyncratic. It has become a common experience, one that has become increasingly difficult to avoid. The hyper-present poses a number of significant challenges, but

as *The Mezzanine* reveals, thinking of it solely in reductive terms can blind us to other sources of knowledge and perspective. The hyper-present can help us recognize the temporal heterogeneity inherent in any moment of time, it can draw our attention to the mediating surfaces that shape our perception, it emphasizes the significance of the material objects around us, and it can break down and interrupt conventional modes of thinking, forcing us to recognize new possibilities.

II

Turning the "Perpetual Present" into the "Extended Present" in *Only Revolutions*

Mark Z. Danielewski's second novel, *Only Revolutions* (2006), presents a complicated and even paradoxical temporality. It tells the story of two lovers, Sam and Hailey, who road-trip together across the United States, despite living a century apart. This complicated story is further complicated by the novel's idiosyncratic layout. Like *House of Leaves,* Danielewski's first novel, *Only Revolutions* subverts the physical form of the book. The novel is split horizontally between Sam and Hailey's narration, flipped one-hundred-and-eighty degrees. As such, *Only Revolutions* presents time as tightly organized and structured, but simultaneously operating in multiple contradictory ways. The novel features linear, cyclical, and eternal times passing at variable speeds and in opposite directions.

Surprisingly, though, this complicated temporality is rarely the focus of critic's work on the novel. Instead, most critics discuss either the novel's relationship to digitality or environmentalist degradation. But this complicated temporality is central to understanding the novel. I argue both the experience of its narrators and its readers is hyper-present, and that recognizing it as such enables us to better understand both the effects of digitality and the environmental destruction we face from the effects of climate change. *Only Revolutions* demonstrates how many of the markers of digitality are synonymous with the hyper-present, and it reveals how the hyper-present operates as both a threat to the world and as the means for recognizing and addressing that threat.

The Complicated Temporality of Digitality in Print Form

The plot of *Only Revolutions* is extremely simple. Hailey and Sam are two teenagers on a road trip across the United States. Over the course of the novel, Sam and Hailey meet, fall in love, get married, and ultimately watch their partner die. Along the way, they encounter various individuals who try to slow them down or keep them in one place, but each of these encounters plays out exactly the same: Sam and Hailey speed off to their next destination.

In contrast to this simple plot, the novel's formal qualities are particularly complicated. Like Danielewski's first book, *Only Revolutions* subverts the physical form of the novel. He experiments with multiple fonts, font colors, and the arrangement of the text on the page. But unlike *House of Leaves,* where almost every page took a different form, the formal experimentations in *Only Revolutions* are tightly constrained. The book consists of three-hundred sixty pages, and each page includes exactly thirty-six lines and one-hundred eighty words. The novel is simultaneously narrated by both Sam and Hailey. Each page is divided horizontally: Sam's narration on one half and Hailey's narration printed upside-down on the other. Each of the books covers is both a front and a back cover, marking the beginning of one narrative and the end of the other. In other words, the narratives run in opposite directions, meeting in the middle of the book on pages 180 and 181. As a result, at the bottom of each page the reader sees the other character's narrative, upside down and at a different place in the story.

In addition to the two narratives, each page includes two entries from a timeline (one for each narrator) including a date printed in purple, a list of historical global events, and snippets of quotations. These entries, described on the copyright page as "chronomosaics," begin at November 22, 1863 on the first page of Sam's narration and continue chronologically to

November 22, 1963 on the last page of his narration. The timeline then resumes with Hailey's narration, starting where Sam left off and ending January 19, 2063.

Finally, the novel is constrained through its word choice. Inside each cover is the "Now Here Found Concordance." This is a collection of alphabetized lists of words printed backwards and arranged together with thematically similar words in various elliptical shapes. It includes lists of colors, religious terms, words related to vision, familial associations, and synonyms for "house." Every word on these lists are found nowhere else in the novel. In other words, these are lists of words that Danielewski did not allow himself to use. Some of these words would be uncommon to use, but others, like the conjunction "or," are used regularly by most other writers.

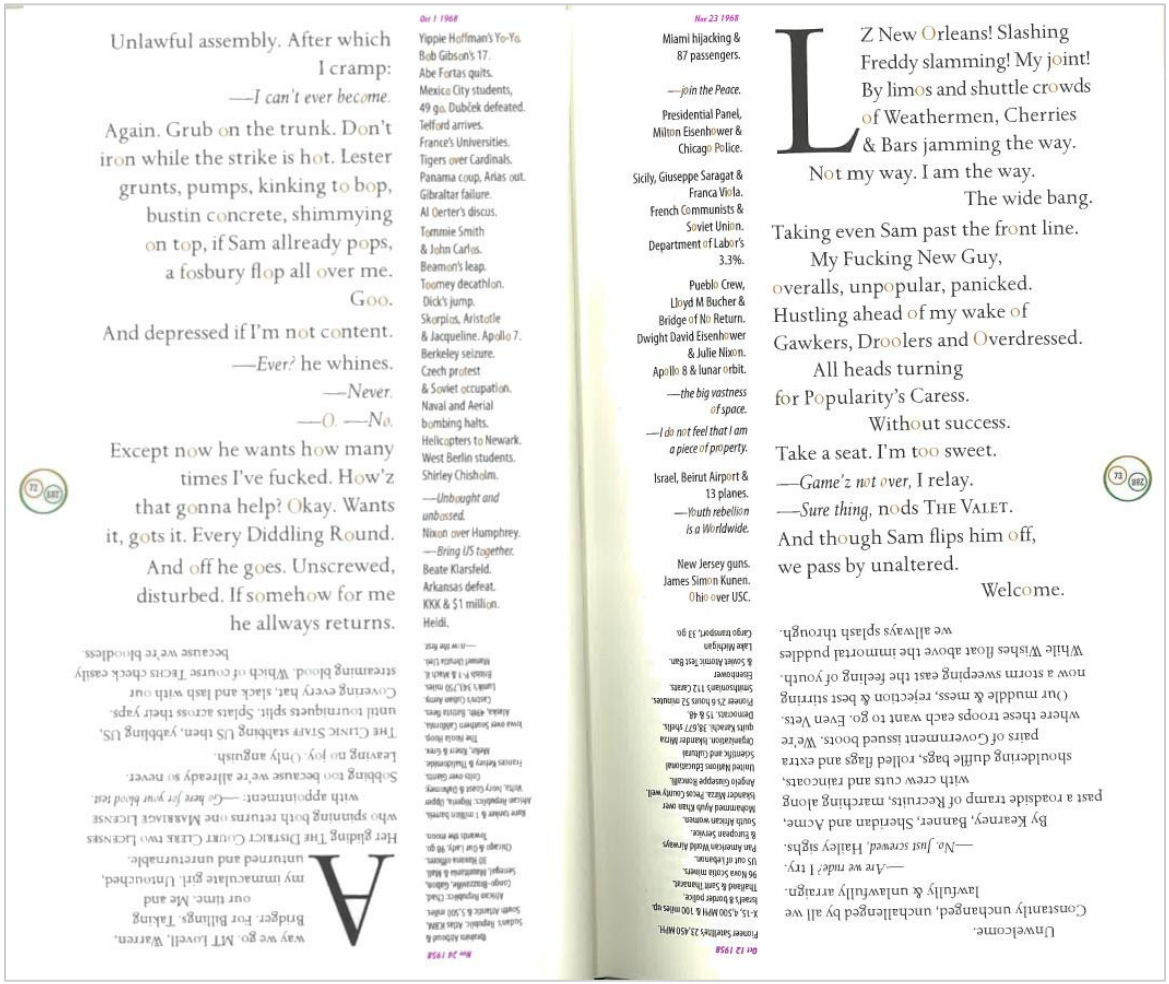

Figure 1. An example of a chapter break in Only Revolutions

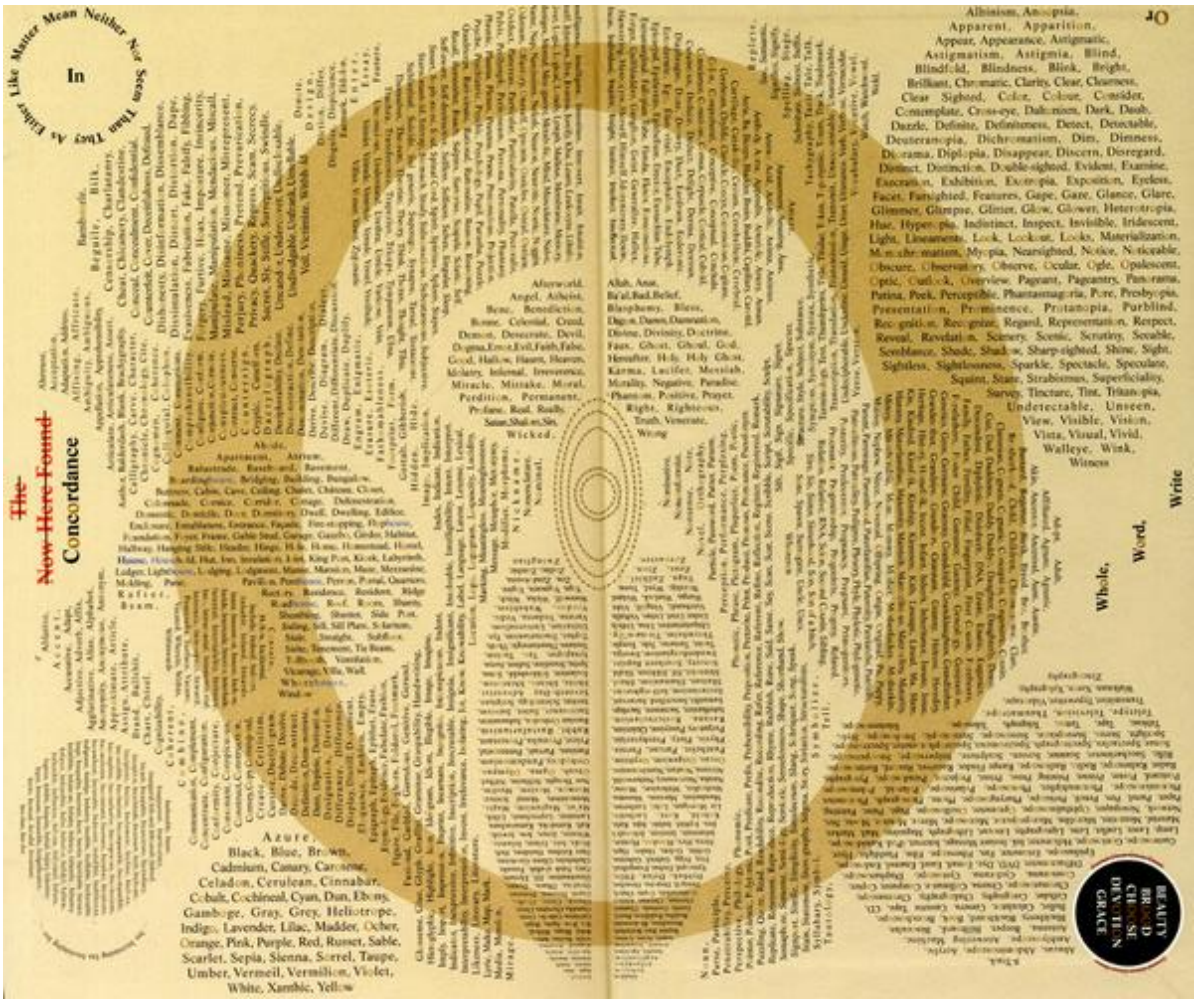

Figure 2. The Now Here Found Concordance as printed on Hailey's front cover

Most critics read these formal experimentations as examples of the ways in which print media is "evolving by adapting and incorporating the influences, aesthetics, and reading practices of the Internet."[64] The precise layout of the novel's pages is hard to imagine as even possible without computer assistance. In particular, the font size of the narratives progressively changes size throughout the novel. Even though each narration includes the exact same number of words on each page, the beginning of each dominates the page. As Sam and Hailey continue, the font size of their narration shrinks. At the mid-point of the novel each splits the page exactly

[64] Pressman, Jessica. *Digital Modernism: Making it New in New Media*. Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 160.

in half, but by the end, one narrator is dwarfed by the other. The novel also includes numerous idiosyncratic spellings and color changes. For example, the word “always” is consistently written as “allways" and “us” as “US.” Additionally, every letter “o” is printed in the narrator’s eye color, either green or gold. Each of these substitutions become trivial with the find and replace function of modern word processors.[65]

The chronomosaics are most frequently described as exemplary of *Only Revolutions’s* intimate relationship with digitality. N. Katherine Hayles ends her book *How We Think* with a discussion of Danielewski’s novel. The central argument of this book is that digital communications technologies have profoundly changed how we both write and read. She argues that the overwhelming amount of information contained in the chronomosaics “gesture[s] toward a vast ocean of data…in inexpressible whole.”[66] In other words, the chronomosaics reflect the wealth of information available on the internet. Furthermore, she argues that these entries are only readable through computer assistance. This was certainly true of my attempts to make sense of the chronomosaics. For example, the entry for December 21, 1998 includes “Sihanoukvilles’ 1,000. / Knesset’s 81-30. Khieu Samphan. / Nuon Chea…Clinton’s senate acquittal / — profoundly sorry. / Leaving. Nunavut. Skip Away.” Although some references, such Clinton’s acquittal and its associated quote, were clear enough to me, most entries were not. Almost all these references required a Google search, and I frequently found myself following a string of Wikipedia links in order to understand them.

Jessica Pressman argues that the chronomosaics were made through a similarly digital process. She describes how Danielewski sent a message to members of the *House of Leaves*

[65] Hayles, N. Katherine. *“Mapping time, charting data*.” *Mark Z. Danielewski*. Edited by Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons. Manchester University Press, 2011, p. 238
[66] Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Think*. University of Chicago Press, 2012, p. 230

forum in 2005. The message asked readers to identify important moments in history as well as favorite types of animals, plants, and cars. Many of these moments found their way into the chronomosaics. Similarly, copious references to different animals, plants, and cars are found throughout the novel. As a result, Pressman argues that the novel "represents and traces the communication process between author and readers across the digital network."[67]

The "Now Here Found Concordance," also draws our attention to the influence of digitality in the novel. Despite so many critics reading *Only Revolutions* as about digitality, communications technology is surprisingly never mentioned in the novel. But Portela argues that the novel's strict rules about words that are not allowed in the narratives highlight the significant impact of the novel's absences. One of the lists of banned words in the concordance entirely consists of communications technologies. He points to the concordance to support his argument that contemporary novels will inevitably be shaped by digitality regardless of their content.

In these ways, critics have read *Only Revolutions* as emblematic of digital communications, but I argue that these same formal experimentations reflect the experience of the hyper-present. The novel's complicated form also creates a complicated temporality. the novel's formal constraints create a number of challenges for the reader. One of the most significant challenges is determining how to approach reading the novel. As Portela points out in his in-depth analysis of the formal arrangement of the text, the various parallels created through the novel's constraints create "several reading trajectories [that] have been produced in advance as preferred courses." The book contains numerous kinds of circularity that principally are "experienced at the level of the book as a whole, as well as at the chapter level, and the page

[67] Pressman, p. 162.

level, all three of which are structured as symmetrical halves."[68] As a result, the book suggests three different ways to read it. The first approach, structured around the book as a whole, is to read the entirety of one narrative before the other. This approach matches traditional reading habits as it reads each page sequentially from left to right, and it is supported by the linear timeline found in the chronomosaics. The second approach, structured around "chapters," is to read eight pages before rotating the book and reading the same eight pages from the other narrator. To facilitate this approach, the hardcover edition comes with two color-coded bookmarks attached at opposite ends of the binding, and every eighth page begins with a large, bolded, capital letter. Of the three approaches suggested by the book's structure, this approach is the least similar to traditional ways of book reading, but it is also the publisher's suggestion, as a note on the inside jacket cover makes clear. The final approach, structured around pages, is to read each page in its entirety, including both Sam and Hailey's narration. This approach best matches the way books traditionally are read, but it requires reading one of the narratives in reverse order.

Reading the novel structured around "chapters" emphasizes the similarities and differences between Sam and Hailey's narration. By reading eight pages at a time in each narrative, one re-reads every scene, event, or description twice but from different characters' perspectives. This pattern causes the reader's temporal experience to differ from the one Sam and Hailey experience. As readers move forward through the narrative, they do so through regular loops back in time.

Differences between Hailey and Sam's accounts can also create temporal anomalies within the narrative. Sometimes, the narrators describe completely opposite and paradoxical

[68] Portela, Manuel. "The Book as Computer: A Numerical and Topological Analysis of Only Revolutions." *Openings: Studies in Book Art,* 2012.

experiences. For example, Hailey describes letting Sam drive at the same time that he lets her drive. Each describes the other as terrible at driving (52).[69] Similarly, the two go for a swim in the Mississippi. Sam describes Hailey as "too slim to take / on such opposing peril," and he must rescue her from the water (S134-135). On the other hand, Hailey describes Sam as "too flimsy to fend / off the opposing surge" and she easily saves him from drowning. Although both of these characters are presumably telling the same story they are in opposite positions with opposite abilities. These types of moments create temporal paradoxes not only because they describe different situations, but because these characters live one hundred years apart. Even if Sam and Hailey's describe similar experiences, they happened at completely different moments in time.

Finally, reading by "chapters" is temporally complicated because the publisher's suggestion does not fully answer how to read the novel. Each of the book's covers looks like a front cover and the spine of the book is perfectly mirrored. In other words, the book's design does not identify which narrator with whom to begin. Additionally, although the hardcover includes colored bookmarks to help the reader keep track of where they are in each narrative, they cannot indicate which narrator the reader was previously reading. As a result, when I was following the publisher's recommendation and would return to the book, I rarely remembered with which narrator I should continue reading. As a result, the order of my reading was always in flux and the two narratives became conflated and jumbled.

Reading the novel organized around pages likewise reveals unique insights as it introduces new temporal complications. Reading in this manner requires reading one narrative as it moves forwards in time and the other progressing backwards, but it also highlights the chiastic

[69] Since each narrator in *Only Revolutions* has their own page numbers, specific references will include the narrators' initial alongside the page number. If initials are not included the reference equally applies to both Sam and Hailey's narration on that page.

structure of the two narratives. For half of the novel, each narrative moves closer to each other in time. Then, in the middle, they briefly describe the same moment before diverging again. This fact is further emphasized by the design of the center of the book. The eight-page section spanning pages 177 to 184 is the most similar between the two narrators, with the central pages of the novel being identical.

Reading each page in its totality also reveals how each individual page has a chiastic structure. Although each narrator is most often describing very different things at a very different time, related words, ideas, and circumstances often echo between the passages. Furthermore, the structure of each narrator's passage is regularly a reflection of the other's. For example, about a third of the way into the novel Sam takes Hailey to the hospital. While there, he suffers from heart problems. The page on which he describes his recovery begins:

> Calm. Allready the flutters subsiding.
> *–Shock? –Cardiac?*
> But Hailey's kissing me. Smiling.
> Wiggling my toes. Petting my head.
> *–It's slowing! –It's evening!*
> And The Wheel rolls on.
> *–How'd that happen?*
> Relaxing now. Head cushed on the
> pillow. My hand mushing Hailey's
> *–Improvement.*
> … (S112)

On the same page but rotated, Hailey describes her frustration trying to get a marriage license from the county clerk. Her description ends:

> …
> *–Improving,* he nods,
> letting go of my hand to return to the counter.
> *–Can we speed this up?*
> But even Sam is dismissed with a sneer.
> He scratches his head. Taps his foot.
> I stay back.

This hold up, oddly, starts racing
my heart. (H249)

Hailey's passage inverts the order of Sam's narration in several ways. Sam's stanza begins with his heartbeat and Hailey's stanza ends with hers. Each includes a reference to a foot, a head, a speed, and a hand, each mentioned in opposite order. Finally, the middle of both Sam and Hailey's stanzas begin with someone speaking a variation of the word "improve."

The numerous chiasms in the novel create numerous points of connection across various moments in time. In fact, the two narrations reflected on the same page share the same mix of similarities and differences found between the narrations of the same moment. As a result, the passage of time seems more inconsequential to the novel; sharing the same space is just as significant as sharing the same time.

The third way readers might interact with the text, reading each narrative individually in sequence, initially seems to eliminate some of the temporal complications presented through these other reading methods. Staying with one narrator throughout the book is a much more traditional reading experience. It only requires flipping the book once, at the end of the first narration, and it allows the reader to follow the books pagination. This method also makes it easier to follow the sequence of events in the story. But this clarity also reveals how little plot there is in the novel. The novel follows an episodic structure: Sam and Hailey stop for a moment, interact with a number of characters who try to get the narrators to stay, and Hailey and Sam speed off to the next destination.

Rather than the plot changing, relatively insignificant details rapidly change instead. For example, the names of characters often change multiple times, even in the course of a single page. For example, Sam describes stopping at a civic fair where they encounter a politician (Hailey describes the same scene, but it takes place in a junkyard and they encounter a poor

man). Within two pages, Sam names him “Civilized Man,” “The Mayor,” “Nambypamby Congressman,” “The Senator,” and “Establishment” (S54-55). Interestingly, these name changes seem to suggest the passage of time and contain a narrative unique to this character. This man progressively becomes more and more involved in politics. He starts out with no political position and ends as the avatar of the political establishment. These changes would require a great span of time, but for Sam, it all happens within the span of a single conversation. The changes to the politician’s name and his narrative arc also have no bearing on Sam’s narration. He appears, Sam buys some shoes from him, and then he is never mentioned again. Sam and Hailey clearly experience time differently from the other characters they encounter. Even huge spans of time experienced by others have no effect on the narrators.

Reading a single narrative chronologically also highlights the disconnect between Sam and Hailey’s narrative and the chronomosaics in the margin of each page. According to this timeline the narrators’ trip across the United States takes one hundred years. Additionally, the speed at which time passes in the timeline changes over the course of each narrative. In Sam’s narrative time passes very quickly in the beginning and progressively slows down: the chronomosaics begin at a pace of a year a page and end at a day a page. Demonstrating another chiasmus, Hailey’s timeline starts at a day a page and ends at the pace with which Sam begins. Sam and Hailey also narrate the story at a variable pace, but the pace of the narration does not match that of the chronomosaics. Instead, Hailey and Sam narrate at the same pace, moving between places and “episodes” much more quickly in the early and later pages, and spending much more time in one place in the center of the novel.

The Hyper-Present Nature of *Only Revolutions*

If the formal complications of *Only Revolutions* are emblematic of digital communications, I argue that the unique temporality created by those complications is also emblematic of the hyper-present. Each of the formal choices that critics argue reflect digitality also encourages a hyper-present reading experience. *Only Revolutions* provides an overwhelming and alluring experience that inhibits one's ability to contextualize any particular moment into a larger narrative history.

The chronomosaics demonstrate this most clearly. They are written in a very different style, rejecting the indirect, poetic style of Sam and Hailey's narration. Instead, the chronomosaics read like encyclopedia entries, focusing on proper nouns and statistics. Politics, war, deaths, and sports are featured prominently. This separation from the primary narrative on the page and the significant stylistic differences between the two suggest that the chronomosaics are not a part of Hailey and Sam's narration. They initially seem to represent exactly what is missing from Sam and Hailey's experience. As a result, they help to remind the reader of the presence of history and insulate them from sharing in the narrators' hyper-present existence. But this separation also makes it difficult for the reader to incorporate the chronomosaics into their reading strategy. Regardless of the approach the reader takes, whether alternating at the book, chapter, or page level, the chronomosaics serve as a hurdle. Combined with the fact that Sam and Hailey's prose-poetry narration can be vague and inscrutable at times, I often found myself needing to ignore the historical sidebars on each page just so that I could keep track of what was happening in the narrative.

This experience does not seem unique. Looking at early book reviews, writers describe their reading experience as "exhausting"[70] and "head spinning."[71] Some reviewers even ignore the presence of the chronomosaics entirely.[72] Even academics seem to treat the chronomosaics as a frustrating hurdle whose absence would make reading *Only Revolutions* much easier. These sentiments often pop up in parenthetical statements, as if these feelings are not appropriate but also impossible to repress. Hayles explains, "A complete exploration of the connections between the narratives and chronomosaics would require researching thousands of factoids, a nearly impossible (and certainly tedious) task,"[73] and Brian McHale states, "across the gutters…are other blocs of text, but how (if at all) we are to integrate their meanings with those produced by the passage remains an open question."[74] Even Danielewski seems to anticipate readers ignoring the historical sidebars. The chronomosaics are printed in a much smaller font than anything else on the page, as if to facilitate readers ignoring it. And in an interview, he explicitly highlights the possibility that readers will ignore them: "You deal with history on some level when you read the book. If you decide to read the history columns, or if you choose not to read them, you have to deal with that fact."[75] In this way, *Only Revolutions* encourages readers to experience the book as Sam and Hailey experience the world. It pushes readers to ignore the omnipresence of history on each page. As a result, the chronomosaics simultaneously demonstrate the insistence of history and the allure and ease of the hyper-present.

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[70] Poole, Steven. "O how clever." *The Guardian*. 30 Sept. 2006. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/sep/30/featuresreviews.guardianreview16

[71] Moore, Steven. "Spin Cycle." *Washington Post.* 22 Oct. 2006. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/19/AR2006101901283.html

[72] O'Hagan, Sean. "I wouldn't say this is unreadable…" *The Guardian*. 23 Sept. 2006. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/sep/24/sciencefictionfantasyandhorror.features

[73] Hayles, 230.

[74] McHale, 147.

[75] Miller, Callie. "LAist Interview: Mark Z. Danielewski." *LAist.com*. 23 Oct. 2007.

Even if a reader resists this rejection of history, the chronomosaics present information completely out of context. They frequently refer to global events with significant political implications, but without this context, the historical significance of these references is inscrutable without outside research. For example, the entry for December 21, 1998 describes, "Sihanoukvilles' 1,000. / Knesset's 81-30. Khieu Samphan. / Nuon Chea/…Nunavut." Each entry is an international political event. In 1998 a Taiwanese company was revealed to have dumped toxic waste in the Cambodian province of Sihanoukvilles after six people died. The Knesset is Israel's legislative branch that voted 81-30 to hold new elections in 1998. Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea were the final leaders of the Khmer Rouge and they surrendered on December 26, 1998. Nunavut is a Canadian territory created in April 1999. I would not have understood any of these references without outside research, but even with the research, I am unsure how to make sense of their inclusion in the novel. These events have no relationship with the narrative around it, nor any clear relationship with the other events in the timeline.

The format of the chronomosaic further inhibits understanding their inclusion. For the most part, each line refers to a separate event, but the references to Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea seem to refer to the same event and Khieu Samphan appears on the same line as the reference to the Knesset. This kind of inconsistency happens regularly in the chronomosaics. As a result, it is often unclear where one historical reference ends and another begins. The reference to Nunavut presents a different problem. Even though it appears in the entry for 1998, the territory was established in 1999, the date of the chronomosaic on the next page. As a result, I am unsure why it is included where it is. It seems less relevant to this date, and its inclusion here makes it harder to historically contextualize. Finally, the last entry in this list is "Skip Away." Unlike the other references, this is not a political event. Instead, Skip Away is a reference to the

"Horse of the Year" for 1998. The chronomosaics reference a wide range of historical moments, including many like Skip Away that many readers would consider historically insignificant. The chronomosaics function simply as a collection of indiscriminate data. Information contained within them have no clear relationship to each other or to the narrative. In other words, by modeling the experience of the internet, the chronomosaics necessarily create a hyper-present experience for the reader. Jameson's description of the hyper-present could just as easily describe *Only Revolution's* chronomosaics. They "suddenly engulf [readers] with indescribable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming,"[76] and they inhibit readers' ability to "organize the past…into coherent experiences."[77]

The complicated and contradictory temporalities of the novel also encourage the reader to take a hyper-present approach towards the novel. Because the numerous temporal complications in the novel are impossible to resolve, the reader is either encouraged to give up making sense of the novel's temporality or needs to develop his or her own subjective temporality unique to the reader's present moment. A number of critics encourage the first approach. Hayles reads the novel's temporality as a model of the unfathomable excess of data, information, and connections found in the vast interconnected web of the internet[78]. Courtney Traub agrees with Hayles that the various temporalities in the novel create "an inexpressible whole," but she reads this impossibility from an ecocritical perspective. She argues that *Only Revolution*s "serves to materially instantiate the unrepresentable ecological and technological crises" created by climate change.[79] Dirk Van Hulle reads the impossible temporality of the novel in yet a third way. He

[76] Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Duke University Press, 1991, p. 27.
[77] Jameson, 25.
[78] Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We* Think. University of Chicago Press, 2012, p. 230
[79] Traub, Courtney. "Ecocatastrophic Nightmares: Romantic Sublime Legacies in Contemporary American Experimental Fiction." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 72(2): 2016, p. 30.

describes *Only Revolutions* as a "work in process."[80] As such, the unresolvable temporalities become markers for the unfinished nature of the novel.

Although each of these critics ultimately offers a different reading of *Only Revolutions*, they each respond to the novel's temporality in the same way: they conclude that it is impossible to make sense of. As such, they each determine that the reader is not intended to make sense of these complications. Although I find the readings presented by Hayles, Traub, and Van Hulle to be valuable and persuasive, interpreting the novel's temporal complications as impossible to resolve acts as a means to dismiss those complications and refuse to engage with them. The details in the narratives or chronomosaics and the particular ways each element structures time become entirely inconsequential.

A number of other critics take a slightly different strategy for contending with *Only Revolutions'* impossible temporality. Rather than concluding that the novel's temporality is impossible to account for, these critics emphasize the necessary role of the reader in navigating the novel's temporal paradoxes. Like Hansen who believes "*Only Revolutions* is constituted by the reader's activity of bringing these two times together, not once, but repeatedly,"[81] Alison Gibbons privileges the reader role. She argues that "the time of the novel is in the hands (quite literally) of the reader…*Only Revolutions* is deeply subjective and deeply personal."[82] Joe Bray reaches a similar conclusion. He argues that, "The book demands to be read 'allways' both in the

[80] Van Hulle, Dirk. ""Only Revolutions and the Drug of Rereading." *Mark Z. Danielewski*. Edited by Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons. Manchester University Press, 2011,
[81] Hansen, Mark B. N. "Print interface to time: Only Revolutions at the crossroads of narrative and history." *Mark Z. Daneilewski.* Edited by Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons. Manchester University Press, 2011, p. 181.
[82] Gibbons. Alison. "'You Were There.' The Allways Ontologies of *Only Revolutions*." *Revolutionary Leaves: The Fiction of Mark Z. Danielewski*. Edited by Sascha Pohlmann. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, p. 175.

physical and temporal sense" (207), and he interprets the novel to be about the necessity and value of rereading.[83]

This emphasis on the reader draws attention to the present moment in the experience of reading. In these readings the reader's present experience becomes the most significant element of the book. Hansen examined a number of comments on the official *Only Revolutions* forum. He notes that "More than one reader has pointed to the sense of being present that comes with temporal proximity to, if not personal experience of, historical events."[84] In particular, many readers described the Kennedy assassination in this way. For example, one forum poster wrote, "The point I was making…was that the Kennedy Assassination was one of those events where everyone remembers where they were when it happened." In other words, it is a moment in history that people experienced in a way not unlike Howie's escalator ride in *The Mezzanine*. This moment in history is especially significant in *Only Revolutions* as the date of Kennedy's assassination marks the last page of Sam's narrative and the first page of Hailey's. It is the only date that appears in the chronomosaics for each narrator. As a result, if one were to read the chronomosaics as the "true" time each narrator inhabits, this would be the only time in which Sam and Hailey could actually be together. Hansen argues that the interplay between the narratives and the chronomosaics in *Only Revolutions* captures the feeling people have about the Kennedy assassination and creates it for all moments of history. He writes that "the effect of citing actual utterances of history is to emphasize their once-presentness, a presentness that is reproduced or rather reduplicated in the register of reading."[85]

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[83] Bray, Joe. "*Only Revolutions* and the Drug of Rereading." *Mark Z. Daneilewski.* Edited by Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons. Manchester University Press, 2011, p. 207. See also: Bray, Joe. "Going in Circles: The Experience of Reading *Only Revolutions*." *Revolutionary Leaves: The Fiction of Mark Z. Danielewski*. Edited by Sascha Pohlmann. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, 183-198.

[84] Hansen, 185.

[85] Hansen, 186.

The novel's structure also encourages readers to be aware of their physical manipulations of the book in the act of reading. As *The Mezzanine* makes clear, an increased awareness of the non-human actants around us facilitates a hyper-present experience, and *Only Revolutions* forces readers to contend with the material qualities of the physical object that is the book itself. Most traditional print books are constructed and arranged so that readers can ignore the ways they are physically manipulating the book object as they read. But *Only Revolutions* requires the reader to constantly consider those manipulations. For example, the inclusion of colored bookmarks draws attention to the process of turning pages. This is especially true for readers alternating between narrators after every "chapter." When reading in this way, the bookmarks come closer together, touch in the middle of the book, and then move away from each other. Furthermore, the act of repeatedly removing one bookmark and rotating it around the pages to insert it in a new place draws greater attention to the act of turning pages.

In addition to turning pages, the novel requires readers to turn the book. Regardless of the reading strategy that the reader chooses, they will at some point need to rotate the book one-hundred and eighty degrees in order to read the novel in its entirety. For some readers this will happen numerous times throughout the process of reading. Sam and Hailey seem to be aware of this fact to some extent. As Bray identifies, "they frequently describe themselves as participants in the processes of rotating and revolving that the book demands" (212). They mention countless "cycles" (169, 192, 324) and describe the other narrator arriving as they depart (169, 192). Sam describes Hailey, saying "Does she turns heads! / Turns me upside down. And the World…because she spins the World, she spins me too…Allways close by" (246). Hailey is indeed always "close by" because her narrative always appears on the same page as Sam's. But to read her account, Sam's narrative needs to be "turned upside down," an act that involves

spinning the whole "World" Sam and Hailey inhabit: the book itself. As such, *Only Revolutions* draws readers' attention to the physical object in their hands in the present moment, encouraging a hyper-present experience of the book.

Finally, the formal constraints on the novel make understanding its narrative especially difficult. The novel privileges its stylistic choices over clarity. The requirement of a specific number of words and lines on each page and the banning of common words mean the language in *Only Revolutions* is idiosyncratic. Furthermore, Danielewski's tendency to mirror the language and syntax between the two narrations on a page results in odd sentence structures. Finally, Sam frequently references countless animals and Hailey countless plants throughout the narration, and both list numerous varieties of cars. These references have little bearing on the plot, and their frequency interrupts and distracts from the narrative. As a result of these stylistic choices, very little in the novel is straightforward, and it can be difficult understanding what happens in any scene, let alone connecting those scenes together. This difficulty can cause readers to simply give up trying to conventionally "read" the novel. To be honest, when I first started reading the book before envisioning this project I gave up in this fashion. Instead, I simply flipped through the book trying to understand its various formal patterns. I was more interested in the novel as an interesting object, rather than as a story. Even when I returned to the novel for this project, I often had to consult outside sources to understand what was happening. The forums on the *House of Leaves* website were especially useful.[86] In these posts, numerous users worked together to try to summarize the plot of each of these chapters. The discussions in these threads demonstrate that I was not alone in my difficulty. These discussions are marked by disagreement and guesses. But these readers are the most hardcore Danielewski fans. Many other

[86] http://www.houseofleaves.com/forum/showthread.php?t=4438

readers would likely decide the novel is not worth this kind of effort to understand, as many of the reviews at the time seem to suggest. For example, Steven Poole describes it as "typographical tour de force" that should be "admired for its sheer zest of invention," despite being "often baffling and tiresome.[87] Maintaining the novel's various patterns seems more important than character development, coherence, or consistency. By emphasizing these formal elements at the expense of its narrative, *Only Revolutions* encourages its readers to appreciate the book in a hyper-present fashion. The book is most easily appreciated when the reader makes no attempt to piece its various parts together, and it actively resists attempts to do otherwise.

In these ways, the formal experimentation in *Only Revolutions* that many critics point to as an embodiment of the experience of the internet also pushes readers into a hyper-present reading experience. Although Danielewski structured this novel to recreate digitality in print, encouraging the hyper-present seems to have been an inevitable effect. As such, *Only Revolutions* suggests that the hyper-present is an inescapable byproduct of digital communications. It suggests that the only possible response to the indiscriminate mass of information contained within the internet is a hyper-present one. This perspective emphasizes the necessity for considering the nature of the hyper-present and its implications. This is especially true, because the primary digital communications technology Danielewski was responding to in 2006 was the information archive of Web 1.0. But as the introduction describes, Web 2.0 thrives on the perception that we exist in a hyper-present state and in turn, has only intensified the inescapability of the hyper-present.

[87] Poole, Steven. "O how clever." *The Guardian*. 30 Sept. 2006. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/sep/30/featuresreviews.guardianreview16.

The Implications of the Hyper-Present

In addition to creating a hyper-present experience for readers, the narrative of *Only Revolutions* offers a potential case-study for the effects of the hyper-present. The narrators of the novel navigate the world in a hyper-present fashion, and their experience highlights a number of problems that such an experience can create. Sam and Hailey are practically avatars of the hyper-present. They spend the entire book hurtling across the country in ever-changing models of cars. In other words, like the hyper-present, they are in a constant state of acceleration enabled by ever-changing technology. Both narrators regularly emphasize how quickly they move from place to place. Even before the narrators find cars, they move quickly. When Hailey first meets Sam, she treats him like any other character. She assumes he will slow her down and so she runs off without him: "No dillydallying for me. But / silly boy so impressed still gallops / after me…no one keeps up. / I'm that fast, man" (H9). She already considers herself faster than anyone else at this point, even though she is on foot and has no shoes. She "gather[s] it all. / Especially speed" (H10).

The appearance of cars not only allows her to attain greater speeds; it creates greater acceleration of that speed. The first thing Hailey does upon finding her first car is to push the accelerator to the floor: "PedaltothePasPasMetal, gassing it, / hitting it hard…Accelerating more until I'm / hardly touching the tar" (H49). She steps on the gas pedal so quickly the spaces between the words disappear. In addition, the introduction of technology marks a change in Hailey's focus. Previously she seemed most concerned with greater speed, but now she cares more about greater acceleration. The significant role of cars in the novel also highlights how advancements in technology changes one's temporal experience. Cars are the only technology present in the novel, and they are constantly changing. Every time the car the narrators are

driving is mentioned, its make and model changes, becoming newer and newer. In this way, cars seem to metonymically stand in for technology in general, including those communications technologies that have been relegated to the Now Here Found Concordance.

The increased acceleration made possible by the introduction of cars also coincides with the narrator's loss of awareness of their surroundings. Sam describes the beginning of their trip: "Passing through Gettysburg, / Chambersburg Pike to Taneytown / Road. By Round Top. / By farms, stacks and plows, / blurring fences and furrows of / handtilled land" (S50). As he and Hailey start driving, Sam is very aware of what they are passing, providing specific place names. As they continue, those proper nouns become more general, and, ultimately, everything is "blurring" together. Moving so quickly, Sam and Hailey become fixated on the only other thing moving at this speed, each other. They become oblivious to the world around them and the ways in which they affect that world.

This fixation on themselves also creates the illusion that it is the world that moves, not them. Shortly after they begin driving, both narrators write the same line: "And so everything else around / US also goes" (60). This line is repeated by each narrator on the next page in the same place. The repetition of the line and its exact reproduction in each narrative mark it as significant. The line demonstrates the relationship between the acceleration of time and hyper-presentism in spatial terms. As Sam and Hailey cover distance at an ever-increasing speed, they experience their location as stationary and unchanging. Despite great changes in space, they always inhabit the same place: "here." This line is also significant because the chronomosaic uses the word "go" as a euphemism for death. Therefore, as the world around Hailey and Sam goes away spatially, it also goes away temporally: it ceases to exist.

The connection between space and time in the present occurs in other ways throughout the novel. The words here and now regularly both appear in the same line. For example, when each narrator encounters their first car, they find it "For now here, weirdly" (48). Sam and Hailey also frequently describe themselves as both "here" and "now," often using the exact same words at the same point in the narrative: "I'm the all. The all available. / Ever now. Ever here" (S27), "But now here with Sam" (H155), "So I coast. Here for now. / Forever" (174), "Somehow, now, here, we're one" (182), "Because we're. Now. Here" (271), "My breath / pounding. Allone. Too left. Now. Here. Only" (328).

Another way Hailey and Sam embody the hyper-present, is that time is threatening to them. Both Sam and Hailey are "allways pursued" (H45). Sam tells Hailey he is "*on the lam"* (S58), "*evading arrest*" (H58) and that "*The Man* / [is] *Racing to tag me for dodging the draft*" (H60). Hailey responds that she is "*Dodging zed too*" (H60). Hailey's pun is significant, as the letter "z" signifies the end. It also highlights how Sam "evading arrest" can also be read as a pun. In other words, both characters are running from the end, from having to stop.

Sam and Hailey constantly encounter this threat throughout the novel. A "DOCTOR" tells them to "*stick around…Slowing down's your only bet"* (H117), a "COP" pulls them over (H230) and characters are regularly chasing after them "desperate to catch up" (H271). The character who most explicitly threatens to stop the narrators is "THE CREEP." He is the closest thing the novel has to an antagonist, and he is the only character to appear multiple times in the novel without his name changing. He appears twice in each narrative, each appearance occurring on the same page as the other, rotated and part of the other narration. Each time he appears he attempts to ensnare the narrators (67-87 & 274-280).

"THE CREEP's" presence further emphasizes the hyper-present nature of the narrators because he appears to be the personification of time itself. "THE CREEP" most obviously stands out from other characters who attempt to tie Hailey and Sam because his name is printed in purple ink. This color connects him to the dates in the chronomosaics, also printed in purple. Additionally, whenever "THE CREEP" appears in either narrative, his presence coincides with more historical details from the chronomosaics bleeding into the narrative. When he first appears, Hailey describes him as "miles of / Viet Cong and Carpet Bombs" (H69). Sam's description of "THE CREEP" contains even more historical resonances. He "falls back, shellshocked, / except not. / THE CREEP's miles of / Machine Gun Nests and Trenches," and "ragtime cackles, / ignoring Hailey" (S69). This last historical resonance is especially significant. Hailey includes references to the Vietnam War where Sam refers to World War I, but she does not include a musical corollary to Sam's mention of "ragtime." Instead, Hailey describes Sam flatulating, "yapping: / --*Mustard gas!*" (H69). Mustard gas was a common chemical weapon of the Germans in World War I. The sudden emergence of a reference to World War I in Hailey's narrative coming from Sam's body emphasizes the temporal separation between the narrators. This is one of the few points in either narrative where Sam and Hailey seem to inhabit a different time, and it coincides with the presence of "THE CREEP."

Another way "THE CREEP" is connected with time mirrors Sam and Hailey's connection to the phrase "here and now." The word "time" regularly appears alongside "THE CREEP." For example, when he appears the second time, he tells Sam and Hailey, "*I'm your salvation. / Your hard times…Time's up. Time to tie you down.*" (H98). Since "THE CREEP" is trying to tie the narrators down, this passage can be read as him explicitly explaining that he is the personification of time. Similarly, when Sam attempts to fight him off, Hailey says he

"immediately / thrashes back, bashing for time" (274). She describes Sam attacking "THE CREEP" and "bashing for time" in the same breath.

Finally, printed opposite "THE CREEP's" first appearance, Sam and Hailey are getting married in the other narration. The narrators are married by "THE GENERAL" who begins the wedding ceremony with the words "—*We gather now to forever bind these two.*" This statement echoes "THE CREEP's" attempts to ensnare Hailey and Sam. As the ceremony continues, both narrators feel something "creeping" out of the forest nearby. Although this word is not written in all caps, the word "creep" in "creeping" is printed in purple. Shortly after they are married, Sam and Hailey have procreative sex for the first time (previously Sam had always pulled out before he ejaculated). The novel's conclusion quickly follows with Hailey and Sam dying in each other's narrative. In this way, THE CREEP ultimately seems to achieve his goal. The narrators' marriage marks the end of their hyper-present existence. They begin to act as if considering their own futures, and they are destroyed as a result. Once Sam and Hailey cease to experience the world as hyper-present, they cease to exist.[88]

Hailey and Sam also are hyper-present in the way they are distracted by the surface-level details around them. Material elements engulf the hyper-present subject's senses, distracting them from everything else, and Sam and Hailey are obsessed with the details of the physical world. They spend much of their narrative noting the surrounding flora and fauna, identifying the models of cars they are driving, and describing their sexual exploits in detail. As a result, they pay little attention to consequences, causes, change, or human psychology. In fact, the words

[88] The incompatibility between marriage and the hyper-present depicted here also gestures to the ways in which the hyper-present can resist heteronormative temporalities, that Annamarie Jagose describes as "always linear, teleological, reproductive, future oriented" in "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13(2-3): 2007, p. 186. I consider the relationship between the hyper-present and queer temporalities in more detail in my fourth chapter.

relegated to the "Now Here Found Concordance" include those related to interiority. This list of banned words includes everything from internal organs to mental and emotional states, including "amaze," "comprehend," "delight," "inquire," "naïve," "rationalize," "remember," and "unconscious." These prohibitions prevent readers from ever getting a true sense of either narrator's thoughts or feelings. Instead, Sam and Hailey's interior states can only be alluded to through external, material details. As Hayles points out, "When Sam indulges in an orgy, for example, Hailey's distress is shown by the tears she cries, not by explicit reference to her emotions" (234).

As a result of their hyper-present attitude, Sam and Hailey fail to recognize the impact of history. The chronomosaics infrequently affect elements described in the narrative. For example, when the chronomosaics alongside Sam's narrative coincide with World War I, he mentions Xylyl Bromide and Benzyl Chloride (68), two elements used in chemical weapons at the time. At the same place in Hailey's narrative the entry in the chronomosaic is from 1968. She mentions Uranyl Nitrate and PCBs, instead. Uranyl Nitrate is used in the nuclear reprocessing necessary for developing nuclear weapons. PCBs are a toxic chemical that contaminated some chicken feed in Japan in 1968. This contamination led to the death of 400,000 chickens and the poisoning of over 1800 people. Both narrators reference dangerous chemicals at this point in the story, but each refers to ones that are specific to their particular point in history. Although some other moments in each narrative resonate with the dates found in the chronomosaics on that page, these resonances are always inconsequential details for Hailey and Sam. The chemicals the narrators observe have no effect on the plot; both narratives continue just like the other despite their historical differences.

This indifference to history extends to Sam and Hailey's interaction as well. If the chronomosaics are read as a timeline for each character, Hailey and Sam live 100 years apart. But they ignore their historical separation; each narrator describes the other as present alongside them. History seems to mean nothing to Sam and Hailey, and it has no effect on them. Danielewski acknowledges this in an interview: "The characters are moving and are oblivious to history…They have no awareness of history. They have no memories."[89] Hailey and Sam do not even the passage of time even though it is visible to the reader.

Hailey and Sam's inability to acknowledge past and future even extends to their personal history. The words "past" and "future" appear together twice in each narrative. Each appearance is in a significant place in the book. The first instance of the words is found in the middle of the book, framing the identical center pages. The final instance occurs at the end. Each of these occurrences are identical between the two narratives, and both the past and the future are described as terrible things to be rejected or avoided.

The final shared instance of the words is the more straightforward and explicit use. At the end of the book each narrator writes, "Future breezes implore / me to stay / But I'm no future. I'm no past. / Only ever contemporary of this path" (358). At this point, the "future breezes" attempt to stop the narrators' constant movement. Like all of the characters the narrators have encountered throughout the novel, the future "implore[s] me to stay." In this way, the future is aligned with all of the other antagonists the narrators have encountered. This statement is followed by the clearest declaration of the narrators' hyper-presentism. The narrators each reject both future and past. Instead, they are "only ever contemporary;" they are only ever in the present.

[89] Miller, Callie. "LAist Interview: Mark Z. Danielewski." *LAist.com*. 23 Oct. 2007.

The other instance of "past" and "future" occurs in an even more significant section of the book, the middle. At this point, the narratives are the most in unison with one another and Sam and Hailey most explicitly profess their love to each other. They describe their hopes for each other and describe the worst hardships they are willing to endure for their love:

—I want you just this way. To never have to go away.
From you. From US. Allways kissing, adored.
The rest. And smiling. To hold you when we're
happy, we're lazy. Sad. When you're stubborn.
When you're brave. When you're mad. When you're
scorned. But allways beside me and my moods.
—That's too easy.
—Then be difficult.

—I want to let you go. Betray US.
Give US Torment, Deaths, and Futures.
Then curl up with you through
Reunions, Abuses and Departures.
Too when you arrive. When you're alone.
When I go. When I'm allone. But
allways beside you wherever we roam.

Reflected by the other narration on the same pages:

—Whenever we roam be beside me.
When you're allone. When you go.
When no one comes along. And for all we
Wander, Encounter, Open
allways curl up with me.
Give me Pain, Past and Fury.
Betray my way. I won't abandon you

—That's too difficult.
—What's easier?
—My rudeness. Besides I curve when I'm cruel.
Bring sorrow. And terror. When I'm defenseless.
When I'm crazy, anguished and brutal to behold.
Ravaging the best. The rest. Taking away their
breath. Their lives. For US. For me. Until all's
away and our Love is clutched by no one.

Sam and Hailey begin to discuss their hopes for their partner. They want each other "just this way. To never have to go away." In other words, always physically present and never changing. One wants things to stay this way forever, to "allways" be kissing and be beside each other. This initial description is not all naively positive, though. The speaker acknowledges that sometimes this will be difficult. They want to remain with their partner when he or she is lazy, sad, stubborn, mad, and scorned. In this way, the beginning of this section echoes the wedding vows of "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health."

But the partner argues "That's too easy." In order to really put their love to the test, the lover considers something the narrators have seemingly ignored until this point: time. Almost all of the difficulties that follow have temporal dimensions: Deaths, Futures, Reunions, and Departures. "Futures" seems the most out of place in this list. It is much more mundane than Torment or Abuses, and it is not an occasion such as a reunion or a departure. Its inclusion in this list makes it seem as though it just as terrible and momentary as the other items. The mirrored text treats "Past" in the same way. Sam and Hailey again consider something "too difficult:" the possibility of suffering through pain, past, fury, and betrayal. Again, past sticks out as the only element that does not traditionally have a negative connotation. In other words, Sam and Hailey consider the thought of past and future alongside the greatest suffering they can imagine. Instead, they choose to live as if "all's away," leaving only their "Love." Past and future are too unbearable. All they want is their lover's eternally present presence.

Hailey and Sam's rejection of history also means they are incapable of recognizing the effects of their actions. As a result, they fulfill Jameson's argument that the hyper-present subject is incapable of participating in meaningful social or political action. Every encounter between the narrators and a larger social institution fails catastrophically. Their experiences at the hospital,

working at the restaurant, and attempting to obtain a marriage license are all dysfunctional. Figures of authority are regularly the narrators' enemies. Furthermore, Sam and Hailey seem to have no lasting effect on the world around them. They appear for a moment in the lives of others before hurtling off to their next destination. Living perpetually in the moment they are free from the ensnarement of society or its institutions, but society and its institutions are likewise free from their influence.

Instead, the narrators are immensely self-absorbed. They constantly make assertions about themselves. Each narrative opens with the pronouncement that "I can walk away from anything" (1) and this claim proves true. No matter what happens each narrator continues to move on. The circular construction of the novel means that each character even "walks away" from their death. One character's death at the end of one narration is immediately followed by that character opening the other narration. In this way, each narrator continually dies and is immediately reborn "Allmighty sixteen and freeeeee" (1).

They also profess to have an intimate knowledge of their partner. Just as with themselves, Sam and Hailey frequently make confident assertions about their counterpart, but even more frequently they speak of "US." Other than Sam or Hailey, character names in Only Revolutions are always written in all capital letters. In other words, by writing "us" always in capital letters, Sam and Hailey make it clear that they collectively regard themselves as a singular entity. This fact is further emphasized by their frequent use of the phrase "US allone" (S116, 130, H152, H243, 303). This misspelling of "alone" emphasizes their collective singularity, together they are "all one." This sense of togetherness is maintained even in moments when Sam and Hailey become separated. This fact is reinforced in the center of the novel, when each narrator exchanges their "for better or for worse" style vows. Each states "*When I'm allone. But / allways*

beside you wherever we roam" and "*—Whenever we roam be beside me. / When you're allone*." They make it clear to each that even when they are separated, they will always consider themselves together.

Despite their confidence in themselves, Hailey and Sam's self-awareness and knowledge of each other is regularly called into question. Among the lists of banned words in the "Now Here Concordance" is the following sequence: "Self, Self-Aware, Self-destructive, Selfless, Selfness, Selves." In other words, these are attributes that are deliberately absent from the novel. Danielewski seems to be suggesting to the reader that Sam and Hailey are incapable of being self-aware or selfless and fail to recognize how they are self-destructive. Hailey and Sam's sense of unity is also undermined by the text. "Allone" not only connotes togetherness but loneliness. This is most clear at the end of each narrative. Even in the face of Hailey and Sam's death, they refer to themselves as "alone:" "Impossibly gone. Just still. Dead. / To where I'm allready gonegoing. / Yet over him sill slobbering, kissing him, plugging his nose, pounding his heart. My breath / pounding. Allone. Too left. Now. Here. Only" (H328). As Hailey tries to revive Sam's dead body, she describes herself as if she is also dead, "I'm already gonegoing." When she realizes he is too far gone, "too left," she realizes she is "allone." But the sequence of these sentences suggests a number sequence, causing the reader to read "too" as "two." As a result, even as she acknowledges Sam's death, Hailey insists that there are still "two" of them left who will perpetually remain "Allone" in the "Now. Here." Additionally, Sam's death has caused no change for Hailey or her relationship. She is "Now. Here" as she always has been. And as each narrative ends, this proves to be true as each one endlessly cycles back in to the other. Sam and Hailey are incapable of recognizing what may have led to the death of their lover or what their deaths mean for their future. They are incapable of recognizing cause and effect.

Another way their self-awareness is called into question is through their obsession with surface-level details. Sam and Hailey's relationship is almost purely physical. They are intensely aware of each other's physical body. Even though Hailey and Sam never describe their interior thoughts and feelings, they describe each other's bodies in great detail. Most specifically, extended descriptions of the couple's lovemaking are featured throughout the novel. In these descriptions distinctions between Sam and Hailey often dissolve. For example, Sam writes "Wrizzling to go. / Hailey too. / Flip forward, head first, onto the / hood, ecstatically under, bottoms / asunder, over, upside down" (S59). In this moment it becomes unclear whose body Sam is describing. Even less sexual physical interactions are described in this way. Sam holds Hailey's hand, "curling one fist from two…peacefully mixed" (H130). As a result, Hailey and Sam's attention to each other's body simply proves to be another way that the overwhelming allure of the physical results in the inability to contextualize. In other words, their relationship, like everything else, is hyper-present.

This self-absorption not only inhibits Sam and Hailey's capacity for understanding themselves or each other; it makes them blind to the environmental destruction that surrounds them. Each narrative begins in spring and ends in winter and features a list of plants or animals that fade over time before eventually disappearing. At the beginning of each narrative these plants and animals are capable of speech. They initially offer praise and encouragement to their respective narrator. But they also recognize their subservient position, frequently referring to the narrators with honorific terms. Sam is immediately addressed as "Lieutenant General" (S1) and "Master" (S3), and Hailey is called "ruler" (H3). Furthermore, neither Sam nor Hailey ever respond to the plants or animals. They record what they say, but they do not appear to listen to them. As each narrative continues, this encouragement becomes words of caution, before they

fall silent and appear dying beside the road. Despite these changes, the narrators continue to catalogue the flora and fauna in the same dispassionate way.

These lists are contrasted with the novel's exhaustive list of ever-changing automobiles. Unlike the plants and animals, the cars are often described in detail. Sam and Hailey explain what the cars sound like, how they feel, and the need to constantly fill them with fuel. They prove to be intimately familiar with the cars they drive, but as a result, they are oblivious to the natural world. When reading the novel focused on the human narrative of Sam and Hailey, the countless automobiles are symbols of freedom, independence, and excitement. But if the reader ignores Sam and Hailey, the catalogue of cars becomes a parade of ecological degradation instead.

The chronomosaics also point to ecological disaster. The timelines catalogue wars, natural disasters, and the numbers of people killed. Since these details are not contextualized, these deaths are not assembled into a narrative or history. As a result, the chronomosaics depict human history as a consistent sequence of conflict, death, and destruction. This fact is made even more apparent as the chronomosaics reach the date of *Only Revolutions'* publication. The chronomosaics on the last seventy-five pages of Hailey's narrative each consist of only a date. The timelines, spanning from January 18, 2006 to January 19, 2063, are completely blank. A number of critics suggest that these absences are to be filled in by the reader,[90] but another possibility is that this blankness suggests the end of human history. Read from the perspective of ecological destruction, these pages are blank because the future holds nothing but annihilation.

This particular reading is further supported by the fact that the chronomosaics leading up to this point become more and more concerned with tallying the dead. In the four chronomosaics

[90] See Hansen, Gibbons, and Bray

that precede January 18, 2006 the word "go" appears at the end of thirty-six of the total ninety-four lines. In comparison, "go" appears in the chronomosaics on the opposite pages only six times in one-hundred and twenty-nine lines. In other words, the chronomosaics track a history of ever-accelerating death, an acceleration that if left unchecked will ultimately lead to extinction. In this way, *Only Revolutions* captures hyper-presentism's complicated relationship to the ecological problems we face. The hyper-presentism as embodied by Sam and Hailey demonstrate hyper-presentism's destructive potential. Their never-ending drive for greater and greater acceleration ultimately consumes and erases the world around them. Furthermore, their rejection of historical consciousness blinds them to their role in that destruction. Hailey and Sam certainly notice the world around them, but they make no efforts to save it. Despite cataloguing the countless dying plants and animals, they are not capable of seeing this as a problem.

As a result, critics have read *Only Revolutions* as an allegory for the difficulty of representing long-term ecological degradation. Courtney Traub gives the clearest account of this interpretation in her essay, "Ecocatastrophic Nightmares."[91] She reads the overwhelming detail in the novel as an attempt to figure the unrepresentable crisis of ecocatastrophe. She draws on the work of Timothy Morton in *Hyperobjects*, who argues that climate change is so vast both in time and space that it resists traditional ideas of what constitutes a "thing."[92] He believes we cannot sufficiently understand the problem that faces us because we are subsumed by it. Traub reads *Only Revolutions* as emblematic of the horror of being faced by such an "inexpressible whole." She focuses on Hailey and Sam's final moments, climbing a snow-covered mountain: they "find

[91] Traub, Courtney. ""Ecocatastrophic Nightmares: Romantic Sublime Legacies in Contemporary American Experimental Fiction." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 72(2): 2016, 28-60. See also, Elias, Amy J. "The Dialogical Avant-Garde: Relational Aesthetics and Time Ecologies in *Only Revolutions* and *TOC.*" *Contemporary Literature* 53(4): 2012, 738-778.

[92] Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press: 2013.

themselves at the foot of 'The Mountain,' a stark, icy landscape. Sublime terror crescendos with the protagonists witnessing each other's respective deaths."[93] In other words, she reads the book from Sam and Hailey's perspective. From this perspective, *Only Revolutions* can only help us finally see this horror. We can do nothing in response to it. But I do not consider Hailey and Sam to be our role models. Instead, if we read resist the elements of the narrative that the narrators see as most important, a new hyper-present response becomes possible.

From "Perpetual" to "Extended" Present

As described above, Sam and Hailey's hyper-present experience maps almost perfectly onto the "perpetual" present described by Jameson. But readers do not have to respond to their hyper-present situation in the same way that the novel's narrators do. In the perpetual present, the past and future cease to exist, but in *Only Revolutions,* the past and future are on every page in the form of the chronomosaics. Rather than eliminating the past and future, the novel treats the past and future as if they are the present. As a result, I find the model of the "extended present" as described by Helga Nowotny to be particularly useful for understanding the book.[94]

As is the case with most other theorists concerned with the hyper-present, Nowotny traces the emergence of the extended present to new developments in communication technologies resulting in the sense of "a world-wide condition of simultaneity" (9). This state threatens the value of the future. Technology has developed so quickly and the experience of time has become so accelerated that "A present geared to accelerated innovation is beginning to devour the future" (11). In other words, the acceleration of time means that addressing future problems in the future is already too late. Nowotny argues that the future "is increasingly

[93] Traub, 49.
[94] Nowotny, Helga. *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience*. Translated by Neville Plaice. Polity: 1996.

overshadowed by the problems which are opening up in the present" and is "drawing closer to the present" (12).

The significant difference between Nowotny and those more critical of the hyper-present is that she considers a hyper-present perspective to offer a solution to these temporal problems. She believes that replacing our conception of the future with an extended present allows us more time to consider and effectively act on those problems that were once deferred into the future. Furthermore, she describes the extended present as something people actively do to the future. She writes "The present is being extended in order to have more time for urgently impending decisions" (59). In this way "extended" is an action people take.

Nowotny's "extended present" may initially seem similar to Jameson's conception of the "perpetual present," but Jameson's description differs significantly from Nowotny's. Jameson argues that the postmodern subject "does not have our experience of temporal continuity, but is condemned to live a perpetual present with which the various moments of his or her past have little connection and for which there is no conceivable future on the horizon."[95] Although Jameson agrees with Nowotny that the future is no longer conceivable, he does not see the "perpetual present" as its replacement. Instead, it is all the subject is left with: they are "*condemned* to live a perpetual present." The subject is given no choice; they are simply a victim.

Another way that Nowotny's "extended present" is unique is its temporal heterogeneity. The extended present "tries to diminish the uncertainty of the future by recalling cyclicality and seeking to combine it with linearity" (58). The extended present retains a linear sense of time, but also recognizes the ways in which that time features "recurring cycles which all follow their

[95] Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society."

own duration and typical curves of development" (59). This structure accounts for a plurality of times interacting simultaneously but at different scales and moving in different directions.

This description fits the structure of *Only Revolutions* in every aspect. It explains the numerous cycles around which the book is structured, but it also accounts for the linearly organized chronomosaics. It also offers an explanation for the way that Sam and Hailey's hyper-presentism borders on eternity. The extended present results in the future and past being experienced simultaneously in the present moment. In other words, Hailey and Sam are not apart from the future, as much as they already inhabit it. Finally, understood in relation to Nowotny's extended present, the challenge of putting the narrative or the events in the chronomosaics into a causal sequence becomes an advantage, not a problem. We no longer need to understand the causes for environmental degradation in order to recognize that it is happening or to realize we need to respond immediately. The extended present helps us see the urgent problems we are facing and does not allow us to wait to act, the only time is now.

By reading the novel in a hyper-present fashion without regard for Sam and Hailey's narrative, we can see how every page of the novel attests to the problem of climate change. If we focus on the material nature of the book (the way Howie looks at the world around him in *The Mezzanine*) we can recognize how the human elements of the novel, the primary focus of the narrative, are actually distractions. The relationship between the novel's dustjacket and the physical covers serves as a clear metaphor for this structure. The covers of the dust jacket each show an eye. One is a green eye flecked with gold and the other is a gold eye flecked with green. In the center of each eye is the title of the novel and Mark Z. Danielewski's name. These covers are respectively the eyes of Sam and Hailey. As such, the dustjacket covers suggest that the most significant focus of the book are its human elements, its narrators and its author. But hidden

underneath the dustjacket, the physical covers of the book suggest a different story. The covers are completely devoid of references to humans or language. Instead, they are covered by a photographic collage of dead plants and animals. In other words, the dustjacket cover obscures the true nature of the book. Sam and Hailey literally cover up the dying natural world that surrounds them.

Figure 3. Only Revolutions' *physical covers.*

This principle can be applied to the contents of the novel as well. If the reader were to eliminate the parts of the book concerned with Sam or Hailey and refuse to look for a human narrative in the book, everything that remains paints a picture of ecological destruction. When the reader focuses on the material qualities of the book itself, this environmental message is clearly revealed to be its central concern. The chronomosaics, previously ignored due to their

irrelevance to Sam and Hailey's story, are shown to be at the literal center of the book, running down the margins along the binding. Ignoring their sequence over time, the chronomosaics become an account of the unchanging death and destruction caused by humans. Outside the chronomosaics, death is revealed to be present on every page. Because of the novel's chiastic structure, as one narrative begins in spring, the other is in winter, surrounded by death. The same is true for the fading lists of plants and animals. As the lists are bolded and full of life in one narrative, on the same page they are faded and dying in the other. Even the middle of the book, when Hailey and Sam are most in unity and professing their love to each other, they acknowledge the inevitable loss of everything. The central four lines read: "*Everlasting Whims & Everlasting Loss. / Against Horrors passing with Love's passing. / Love & Horror's impermanence forever against / Loss & the Caprice of endurance."*

Death and loss are the only enduring elements in the novel, and in the end, the death of Hailey or Sam proves to be fairly inconsequential. In other words, *Only Revolutions* reveals the limits and futility of human history and shows how the hyper-present is not necessarily the opposite of geologic time. Instead, it can be the means for people to recognize and understand geologic time. Even more significantly, *Only Revolutions* creates an extended present in which we might recognize the ways in which we have created and are still presently creating this apocalyptic future. No matter what time the chronomosaics reference, *Only Revolutions* always insists that the time is "now." Ecological destruction is not a problem to consider in the future, it needs to be urgently addressed, now, in the extended present. We cannot continue to think of time as some long, sequential narrative. If we get too caught up in the story of humans, we will ultimately miss those important details hidden in plain sight, in places we have become trained not to look. Printed upside-down at the bottom of each copyright page is "Expiration Date:

Now." Although hyper-presentism may have had a hand in creating these ecological problems, it may also be the means to respond to them. We may not have a future, but we may still be able to extend the present.

III

The Perils and Potentials of Videogame Time in *Save the Date*

As we have seen in the previous two chapters, any exploration of the hyper-present seems to inevitably contend with Jameson's critique that the hyper-present results in "the disappearance of a sense of history."[96] For Jameson, it is this loss of historical consciousness that creates numerous problems for politics, culture, and personal identity. Despite their many differences, *The Mezzanine* and *Only Revolutions* challenge this critique in the same way: by disagreeing with the initial premise. In both novels, although the hyper-present can create challenges for historical coherence, each suggests that the hyper-present also has the potential for creating different historical awareness. In *The Mezzanine*, the expansion of the moment and Howie's hyper-attention reveals the ways in which the present moment is pregnant with numerous possibilities and crossed with countless temporalities. In other words, *The Mezzanine* suggests the hyper-present does not necessarily result in the loss of historical consciousness; it can allow us to recognize heterogeneous pasts and presents. In *Only Revolutions*, the collapse of two centuries into a single extended present not only results in a loss of historical awareness, but it also reveals the ways in which past and future are implicated in the present moment. In other words, *Only Revolutions* reveals how the hyper-present can potentially make us more aware of the urgencies of pasts and futures in the present.

The final two chapters of this dissertation take a different approach. The texts examined in the following chapters, Chris Cornell's *Save the Date* (2013) and Anna Anthropy's *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013), both embody a hyper-present that results in a loss of

[96] Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. London: Verso, 1988, p. 28

historical coherence, but they also question whether that loss is a bad thing. In particular, the text examined in the present chapter, *Save the Date*, offers a critique of conventional historical narratives. It suggests that predetermined narrative expectations, especially those that assume a teleological goal, can limit potentials for living and enforce exploitative and coercive thinking patterns. In this way, it suggests that the hyper-present's potential for impeding historical thinking is not necessarily a problem, but it can be valuable. Ultimately, it positions the hyper-present as a useful position from which we can recognize the oppressive potential of traditional narratives and as a position that enables our capacity to imagine radical alternatives for temporal experience.

These chapters also mark another significant shift in the focus of this dissertation. *Save the Date* and *Queers in Love at the End of the World* are both digital texts. Both *The Mezzanine* and *Only Revolutions* have pointed to a connection between the hyper-present and digital communications technologies, but from opposite directions. In the case of *The Mezzanine*, Baker explicitly attempts to capture as many details and thoughts as possible in every particular moment. As the first chapter demonstrated, this emphasis on the hyper-present ultimately offers a perspective that could be considered a proto-example of object-oriented ontology, a philosophy born from critical engagements with digital communication technologies and popular among theorists in the digital humanities[97]. In the case of *Only Revolutions*, Danielewski explicitly attempts to recreate the experience of digital communications technologies such as the internet in a non-digital text. As the second chapter demonstrated, this emphasis ultimately creates a hyper-present experience, one that treats two-hundred years of history as if it was one simultaneous present. In other words, *The Mezzanine* is most concerned with the hyper-present, but ultimately

[97] See the work of Ian Bogost as an example of a game theorist heavily invested in OOO.

points to concerns informed by digitality. *Only Revolutions* is most concerned with digitality, but ultimately points to concerns of the hyper-present. In this way, these texts seem to confirm that our contemporary experience of time is necessarily the result of the pervasive nature of digital communications technologies today. As a result, I find it necessary to direct our attention to digital texts, texts only possible in a digital environment. In turn, I hope to demonstrate why scholarship on contemporary literature needs to seriously consider digital texts such as these, some of the new narrative possibilities these digital texts enable, and why the pervasive nature of digital technologies today creates an even greater need for the skills and perspectives offered through more traditional literary studies.

In this chapter I argue *Save the Date* offers a valuable perspective on the relationship between traditional print literature and the exciting new possibilities offered by digitality. *Save the Date* creates a reading experience that could not be possible in a print medium. As a result, it initially seems to suggest ways digital texts move us beyond the concerns of traditional literary analysis. It offers a new experience of rereading, where the text can change as it is reread; it allows greater narrative control for readers as they control its narrative direction; and it draws our attention to the coercive possibilities latent in digital structures. But in each of these cases, after seemingly moving beyond the perspective of traditional literary studies, those traditional perspectives surprisingly reemerge in a new and vibrant way. As a result, *Save the Date* challenges both utopic and dystopic approaches to digitality, highlighting how new digital possibilities reinvigorate pre-digital concerns and make them newly relevant.

Save the Date and the Repeated Moment

Save the Date is a piece of interactive fiction written and programmed by Chris Cornell, a game designer. The text puts the reader in the shoes of an unnamed protagonist and begins with a phone call from Felicia, a woman the reader-protagonist is dating. She asks you where you would like to meet for dinner. This question presents a number of choices that result in a branching narrative. The reader can initially choose to meet her for burgers, Thai, or fish tacos. Each of these choices leads to a different location and different dialogue. Over the course of your date, you are presented with additional choices leading to different conversation topics and a further branching narrative. Each of these dates ends fairly quickly, though. A sudden development always results in Felicia being killed. If you go out for burgers, she is hit by gunfire from outside; if you go out for Thai, she orders Pad Thai and chokes due to a peanut allergy; or if you go out for tacos, the patio crumbles and she drowns. The final screen always reads "~The End~ Your date has ended in disaster" and returns you to the title screen.

At this point, you can restart the narrative, potentially picking new options. Since there are numerous diverging points throughout the narrative, to fully read the text readers must reread significant portions of the text. As they return to portions of the text they have already read, they may find new options appearing based on their choices in previous readings. For example, if you have already gone out for fish tacos and seen Felicia drown, you can tell her to step aside, right before the patio crumbles and kills her. This choice leads to further conversation before an entirely new situation arises that leads to Felicia's death. In this way, every re-reading potentially opens up entirely new narrative opportunities. In other words, in order to read the entire text, readers need to return to portions of the text numerous times looking for new narrative branches that might open up further choices in different narrative branches. As a result, *Save the Date*

embodies the hyper-present in a new way. Like *The Mezzanine*, the story only covers a very narrow period of time, a single date that is abruptly cut short, but rather than expanding that moment, *Save the Date* repeats it over and over. In this way, rereading becomes the primary means to engage with *Save the Date*.[98] Since rereading serves many purposes, it can create a wide range of relationships to time, but I argue that the surprising emergence of brand-new text in any rereading of *Save the Date* emphasizes rereading's hyper-present possibilities.

Many theoretical considerations of rereading begin with an acknowledgement that "a general theory of rereading is impossible,"[99] because readers reread for many different purposes. Despite this impossibility, rereading is most often described as directed toward the past rather than the present or the future. For example, Matei Calinescu begins his book *Rereading*, one of the most comprehensive sources on the subject, with a metaphor of haunting. He describes texts that haunt their readers drawing them back to reread them and the ways that texts are haunted by previous texts such that even reading something for the first time functions as a rereading of those previous texts. In this way, rereading is figured as an attempt to return to the past or the past emerging in the present.

Less metaphorical descriptions of rereading also tend to emphasize the past. Two of the most popular functions for rereading would be to reexperience previous pleasure and to create greater understanding. Leitch describes the first group of rereaders (such as those who might watch a favorite childhood film for the twentieth time) as those who reread "not looking for new

[98] According to Michael Joyce in his essay "Rereading Hypertext Fiction," rereading could be considered a fundamental aspect of *Save the Date* even if it didn't have such a cyclical structure. Although "hypertext fiction" is rarely used to describe texts today, many of the text heavy, choice driven games like *Save the Date* would likely be considered hypertext fiction if it had been developed in the early 90's when hypertext was a much more novel concept. Joyce argues that "hypertext fiction in some fundamental sense depends upon rereading" (327) for both readers and writers.

[99] Thomas M. Leitch, "For (Against) a Theory of Rereading," MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 33, Number 3, Fall 1987, p. 491.

experiences but for repetitions of an old one" (493). These readers want to recreate and relive a past experience as much as they can. Rereading in this mode is purely nostalgic. The other most common purpose for rereading is to supplement past readings. As Cannon describes, "people normally reread for no other reason than to improve their comprehension of a difficult text."[100] This is how rereading most often functions in the classroom. Students' rereading is driven by gaps in their understanding left over from their initial reading. Many texts are even written in such a way that privileges this kind of rereading.[101] This kind of rereading treats the present as a means to rectify past misunderstandings. Academic rereading such as this can be even more oriented towards the past because instructors often valorize rereading that "makes explicit the ways in which the consensual responses have been secured," rather than "arouse[s] new responses."[102]

In all of these cases, rereading is driven by past experiences, not by the present. But many traditional forms of rereading can also emphasize the present. Rereading can create entirely new surprises for a reader, performing the same function as *The Mezzanine*, highlighting the countless possibilities in any present moment. As Clayton and Hirsch describe, "In the act of re-reading, the present is the space of contradiction, of multiplicity and non-coincidence."[103] Another way rereading can emphasize the present is by facilitating both self-awareness and greater appreciation for the formal and material qualities of the textual object in front of them. Leitch argues that "the first time we read a story, we are paying attention to the story; on subsequent

[100] Christopher Cannon, "The Art of Rereading," ELH, Volume 80, Number 2, Summer 2013, p. 402.
[101] Elisabeth Ladenson highlights common examples of this writing strategy such as passages from Proust that "readers would initially be mystified by…the meaning of which would only become clear retrospectively, upon their reaching subsequent volumes." "Rereading Proust," in *Second Thoughts: A Focus on Rereading*, ed. David Galef, 1998, p. 250.
[102] Leitch, p. 495
[103] *Time and the Literary* p. 6

rereadings, we are studying ourselves," and that texts "gradually lose their narrativity, their story-ness, on repeated rereadings." In other words, rereading can draw attention to the situated nature of both the reader and the text in their present moment.

Although initial rereadings of *Save the Date* might be motivated by many of these past oriented functions,[104] the emergence of entirely new choices on subsequent rereadings emphasizes the latter functions that emphasize the present. The first time an entirely new option is discovered will be a surprise for the reader. The text does not let the reader know to expect such a possibility. This discovery transforms each rereading into a brand-new reading. Furthermore, subsequent rereadings are driven by the possibility of additional emerging options. In other words, the reader begins to reread in order to have a new experience rather than recreate or supplement a previous experience.

This method of rereading also fundamentally changes how the reader reads. As Calinescu highlights, any theorization of rereading requires "that the problem of attention is immediately brought to the foreground" (xiii). Rereading involves more structured and controlled attention. Once the reader begins to read *Save the Date* hunting for each new option, for each new narrative path, they begin to ignore those portions of text that were already read, those portions that don't seem like they would lead to new possibilities. Personally, I found myself clicking through conversations with Felicia as quickly as possible trying to get to the next moment where I am presented with a choice, hoping to find to find one that I had not seen before. I began to care little about Felicia's story, I was simply hunting for the solution, a way to keep her from dying at the end.

[104] For example, readers might reread the text to fill in the blanks of the narratives they skipped the first time through, or out of dissatisfaction with their first experience of the story (maybe they want to try to save Felicia).

In this way, *Save the Date* challenges readers' ability to assemble the text in a cohesive whole in the same way that *Only Revolutions* does. Readers are presented with so much information, so many possibilities, that it overwhelms and distracts them. The text becomes so difficult to reassemble into a cohesive whole that they can only fixate on small fragmented experiences and moments. In this way, *Save the Date* encourages a form of rereading that evolves over time, from being informed by the past, to emphasizing the surprise and discovery of the present, to recreating the overwhelming and disorienting flood of the hyper-present.

Such an experience could only be made possible in a digital text. Although a reader may discover something that had gone overlooked when returning to something like a novel, poem, or film, only in a digital text could a rereader be confronted with something entirely new, something that was not there the first time around. As a result, *Save the Date* begins to highlight both the new narrative possibilities made possible by digital literature and its capacity to create the experience of the hyper-present.

Videogames and the Promise of Temporal Mastery

The overwhelming and disorienting nature of *Save the Date* is made all the more palpable when the reader treats the text as a videogame. Although I believe *Save the Date* ultimately fails to fulfill most players' expectations for what a videogame entails, players would certainly begin reading the text as if it was one. Chris Cornell is a game designer, and he describes *Save the Date* as a game even though he admits it is "kind of weird and experimental, even by my standards." Furthermore, the text is designed in the program Ren'Py, a game engine for creating visual

novels, a popular genre with a long history in videogame culture.[105] *Save the Date's* designation as a video game creates significant expectations for both its narrative structure and its relationship to time, expectations that are ultimately undermined in a way that mirrors how communication technologies promise temporal mastery only to trap us in the hyper-present.

Videogames are often predicated on the promise of temporal mastery for the player. Almost every discussion of digital texts highlights their emphasis on narrative variability and the reader's capacity to control the order in which that narrative unfolds. In one of the earliest books devoted to understanding the narrative potential of computer-based media, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), Janet Murray asserts that one of the "essential properties of digital environments" is readers' ability to manipulate the course and pace of the narrative. She explains that "digital environments are participatory… we can induce their behavior…This is what is most often meant when we say that computers are interactive" (71-71). Scholars of electronic literature have continued to champion the essential nature of such interactivity. For example, N. Katherine Hayles in one of the landmark texts in this field, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, suggests that the potential for readers to control the course of the text is one of the most exciting new possibilities that this medium creates. She argues that the challenge of "How to maintain conventional narrative devices as tension, conflict, and denouement in interactive forms where the user determines sequence" is what has created a "burst of innovation and experimentation" in electronic literature (16-17). Nick Montfort, in his book *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*, also argues that the interactive nature of electronic literature is essential to the experience of the reader. He considers this role to be so essential that

[105] Although less popular in the United States, visual novels are massively popular in Japan, accounting for 70% of PC game sales there. Daniel Fandino. "The Visual Novel CCP." *H-Net: Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association*. 07-08-2015. https://networks.h-net.org/node/13784/blog/it-cae-internet/74612/visual-novel-ccp

he uses the term "interactor" to describe readers or players of these texts, "so as to emphasize that the actions of reading, writing, playing, and figuring out are all involved," when engaging with digital narratives. In other words, one of the hallmarks of digital texts, of which games are a part, is that readers are actively engaged in creating, or "writing," an electronic narrative as they are reading it. They determine the narrative's temporal trajectories.

Such an emphasis on interactivity, on variable narratives of which the reader has some level of control, means that, on an essential level, electronic narratives offer the possibility of temporal mastery to readers. They can potentially determine what happens, the order in which those things happen, the pace at which things happen, and the order in which events are encountered by the reader. This level of temporal control is certainly present in other media (readers determine when to move between footnotes and main text in *The Mezzanine* and determine in what order to read pages in *Only Revolutions*), but this potential is most often ignored in traditional texts. In electronic media, it is foregrounded and often celebrated.

This emphasis on temporal mastery is even more prevalent in videogames. Alison Gazzard argues that "Videogames are a time-based medium." In particular, "It is through the condition of time that many game reward systems are designed…[including] the collection of points, achieving high-scores and beating the clock."[106] In this way, time is positioned as an obstacle for the player, an obstacle over which the player progressively gains mastery. As the player improves, time becomes less of an obstacle and more of another variable that can be manipulated for maximizing a high-score. This mastery of time is not only regularly encoded into games' reward systems but also into their essential mechanics. One of the most common mechanics of games is the ability to retry after failure. For example, in *Super Mario Bros.*

[106] Gazzard, Alison. "Unlocking the gameworld: The rewards of space and time in videogames." *Game Studies* 11.1 (2011).

(1985), if a player dies as they attempt to navigate a level, they simply restart the level over again, in the hope of doing better the next time. In other words, players can endlessly rewind time in order to learn from their mistakes. This game mechanic provides the player with explicit control over time.

This control is regularly a component of the power fantasy that many games offer players. For example, a promotional trailer for the game *Braid*, a game where the player can rewind time at will, asks the questions, "What if you could learn from your mistakes . . . but undo the consequences? What if you could reverse death? What if you could see multiple realities? What if you could warp time? . . . Then what would you be?" These questions highlight the significance of the power implied by such rewinding mechanics. They suggest that the ability to control time allows for even greater capabilities for control in other aspects of our lives. Games position temporal mastery as foundational for other forms of mastery.

The repeated suggestion of "learning from your mistakes," in videogames that has appeared in these discussions points to the final way that videogames usually privilege past experience and teleological thinking: they require players to draw on previous playthroughs to inform their present actions in order to achieve some future predetermined goal. In this way, videogames essentially enact one of the most predominant myths of history: the history of progress. As, Franklin states, "The videogame as a medium is predicated on progression as narrative."[107] Such progression can be emphasized in terms of its story (progressing from beginning to end), game mechanics (progressively gaining skills; progressively increasing one's

[107] Seb Franklin, "'We Need Radical Gameplay, Not Just Radical Graphics': Towards a Contemporary Minor Practice in Computer Gaming," *symplokē* 17.1-2 (2009): 163-180.

highscore; progressing from level to level), and player knowledge (progressively learning the systems of the program).[108]

Save the Date initially seems to follow in this tradition. As previously described, whenever Felicia dies, you can play the game again, potentially picking new options. In this way, *Save the Date* appears to suggest the mastery of time created by the rewind mechanics in games like *Super Mario Bros* and *Braid*. Furthermore, as you return to moments you have previously played, new options appear. These new possibilities allow the player to explicitly learn from their past "mistakes," and it suggests the same temporal power fantasy offered in most games. After you save Felicia, she questions how you could know what would happen: "How did you know the deck was going to give? And that it was safe over here?" Almost all of the answers the player can choose at this point suggest he has superhuman powers: "I'm actually a wizard," "I'm actually from the future," "I'm psychic." The final option is much more mundane and truthful: "I reloaded from a saved game." Because it is placed alongside the other more fantastical options, though, the game seems to suggest that ones' ability to reload a game and learn from past experience is similarly impressive. This interpretation is further reinforced by Felicia's reaction to these suggestions. Regardless of whether the player tells her he's a wizard or just playing a videogame she responds in the same way: with disbelief. At this point, she asks the player to demonstrate his powers. She thinks of a random number or word and asks the player to guess it. The first time you play through this scenario guessing the correct answer is impossible, the

[108] Numerous games scholars argue that "learning the system" as the most essential aspect of a player's engagement with a game: Ted Friedman argues that games require players "to internalize the logic of the program. To win…You have to figure out what will work within the rules of the game. You must learn to predict the consequences of each move, and anticipate the computer's response." Lev Manovich highlights the progressive nature of this learning, explaining, "As the player proceeds through the game, she gradually discovers the rules that operate in the universe constructed by this game. She learns its hidden logic."

correct option is simply not available. Upon replaying, though, the player has learned the correct answer, and he can now select it.

Playing in this way allows the player to avoid a hyper-present experience. What seemed to encourage the hyper-present from the perspective of traditional literary studies, the sudden emergence of new possibilities in the moment of rereading, becomes a conventional experience from the perspective of video games. This approach is essentially focused on both the past and the future. It relies on player's past experience with videogames and their conventions and on the expectation that the player will "win" at some point in the future.

But the game begins to undermine these assumptions and the power fantasy suggested by the game's reloading mechanics. Although Felicia is impressed whenever you successfully read her mind, her surprise is always quickly cut short as some new threat appears and kills her. For example, if she survives the collapsing patio, a sea monster appears, or if she avoids eating the pad Thai, ninjas attack the restaurant. Even when you take advantage of knowledge learned in previous plays, Felicia still dies. In fact, the more you try to prevent her death, the more implausible and fantastical her deaths become.

Despite having all this power and a greater understanding of the game's systems, you can never save Felicia. The structure of the game and its mechanics, combined with the expectations built up from decades of videogame history would seem to suggest that with enough past experience the player could make the right choices in the present in order to produce an expected future: Felicia surviving, or put in game terms, a win-state. As a result, the expected temporality for videogames fails the player in three ways. First, the temporal mastery suggested by the reloading mechanic proves to be limiting, rather than liberating. The player is given copious choices, but they are all preprogrammed and lead to the same disappointing ending. Second, the

promise of progression essential to videogames is undermined. The more the player learns of the game's systems, the more often they fail. Finally, the more familiar players are with the history of videogames and visual novels in particular, the more likely they are to be caught in the futile cycle of trying to save Felicia.

The damsel in distress is one of the most common tropes within videogames.[109] In particular, the plot of many of the biggest Nintendo franchises rely on this trope. The Super Mario games feature Mario repeatedly rescuing Princess Peach from the clutches of Bowser, the Zelda games feature Link repeatedly rescuing Princess Zelda from the clutches of Ganon, and the original *Donkey Kong* arcade game featured the player rescuing Pauline from the clutches of the titular ape.[110] Each of these games culminate in the damsel's rescue, establishing saving imperiled young women as an expected win-state.

The history of *Save the Date's* particular genre, visual novels, suggests similar narrative expectations. One of the more common subgenres of visual novel games is the "dating sim," in particular, the "bishōjo" game.[111] These games are marketed toward heterosexual males and involve a male player character going on a series of dates with attractive women. As is typical of visual novels, these games feature numerous possible endings. As Emily Taylor explains in one of the few articles on the subject:

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[109] Although non-academic, Anita Sarkeesian devotes two videos in her *YouTube* series "Tropes vs. Women in Videogames" to the ubiquity of this patriarchal trope in videogame culture.

[110] Mario has rescued Peach from Bowser at least 24 different times over the past 23 years. ClownPuncher139, "How Many Times Has Bowser Kidnaped Peach?" https://aminoapps.com/c/mario/page/blog/how-many-times-has-bowser-kidnaped-peach/vdVi_nu0DqwkPzjrLlZmz28gdzjoJz. Nineteen different Zelda games have been released since 1987. Princess Zelda is captured in nearly every one. http://nintendo.wikia.com/wiki/The_Legend_of_Zelda_(series). *Donkey Kong* explicitly ties the videogame industry to filmic depictions of the damsel in distress trope. Not only does the title and the premise echo *King Kong* (1933), but Edward Wesp notes that Pauline "echoes the similarly distressed title character from the early *Perils of Pauline* serials." "A Too-Coherent World: Game Studies and the Myth of "Narrative" Media," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 14.2 (2014), note 17.

[111] Japanese for "pretty girl game."

> Some are "good endings," in which the main character ends up with one (or more) of the female characters and lives happily with her, usually entailing marriage; others are "bad endings," which vary widely but may involve the death of a female character, one of the characters moving away, or the male and female characters living together unhappily. Usually, each female character has the potential to bring about both a good ending and a bad ending; the player must select the options carefully to get the one he wants.[112]

If the player is aware of the history of this genre, Felicia's death would not be that surprising of an outcome, it would be a typical "bad ending." This would also imply that a "good ending" should exist somewhere in the game, presumably one where the player and Felicia marry.[113] Furthermore, players would expect the fact that they keep "losing" means that they must not be choosing the "right" options. As a result, the more aware a player is of videogame history and its conventions, the more likely he is to repeatedly fail, the more likely he is to persistently seek out a future that is not available.

In fact, familiarity of this history seems to be essential for creating this particular play pattern. The game never instructs the player to attempt to save Felicia, or to replay the game. The only way for the player to learn that new options can arise in subsequent playthroughs is for them to deliberately replay scenarios. Other than its title, the game never suggests that your objective should be to save Felicia. The game provides no instructions, begins in medias res, and the final screen is never explicitly a failure, but just an ending. Furthermore, the game never instructs the player to start again.

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[112] Taylor, Emily. "Dating Simulation Games: Leisure and Gaming of Japanese Youth Culture." *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 29 (2007): 192-208

[113] As the matrimonial allusion in "Save the Date" might seem to imply.

Even the title, which seems to be a command, does not need to be. The most common use of the phrase "save the date" is to mark the date of a wedding that you will attend. Although, this reference to a wedding suggests a particular normative temporality of a relationship with a teleological end, you receive a "save the date" for others' weddings, not your own. In other words, this title should not suggest that the goal of the game is to have a successful date with Felicia. One might assume that she is supposed to end up in a relationship with someone else. Additionally, after playing the game, the title takes on new meaning. It seems more likely that it is a reference to the game's primary mechanic: saving. The player can save the game at any time and return to that same moment later. This particular feature is especially useful as it can be used to return to decision points to explore different narrative paths without having to start the game from the beginning. In this way, it allows the reader to more easily ignore parts of the game that do not lead to new options. In other words, the saving mechanism does not necessarily imply the traditional temporality of videogames. It also can also be used to play the game in a more hyper-present fashion, one in which you experience moments out of context.

Because the game exploits players' knowledge of videogame history, narrative conventions, and familiarity with game mechanics, players without this knowledge would likely never find themselves trapped in the endless cycle of failure that the game creates.[114] As a result, greater awareness of the context surrounding *Save the Date* becomes a liability. The more the player is aware of the history of videogames, their traditions and conventions, the more *Save the Date* emphasizes his temporal impotence.

[114] As a piece of anecdotal evidence, after I described the game to a colleague of mine who does not play games, he explained that after Felicia died a couple times he would have assumed that was the point of the game and quit. His ignorance of videogame history would have allowed him to easily escape this cycle of failure.

Temporal Mastery, Sexism, and the Radical Potential of the Hyper-Present

Repeated failure is not the only way that *Save the Date* undermines the player's attempts at temporal mastery. The game also reveals the sexist nature of videogames' underlying power fantasy. The more the player tries to exert his mastery over the game the more Felicia parallels his attempts to save her with common strategies men use to coerce women into romantic relationships against their will. This connection is subtly suggested the first time the player successfully predicts which numbers Felicia is thinking of. After guessing two numbers correctly she responds, "…Okay. It's getting harder to explain these by luck. That's actually kind of creepy." At this point, one might assume "creepy" is used here as in its dictionary definition: "producing a nervous shivery apprehension; also, eerie." At this point the player has successfully convinced Felicia that he is capable of something supernatural such as reading her mind. Of course this might be unsettling, it would challenge anyone's perception of reality.

But the word "creepy" appears two other times in the game which cast this moment in a much more sinister light. Eventually, after the player sees Felicia die at least three different ways, a new option becomes available at the beginning of the game. Now, when Felicia asks where you would like to meet for a date, you can tell her, "We can't go out to dinner tonight. It's too dangerous." Unsurprisingly, Felicia finds this notion ridiculous, and you need to convince her that you have the ability to know that if you go to one of the restaurants she will die. At this point you can reference personal information about Felicia that she has offered in previous run-throughs. As you talk with Felicia when you first arrive at each restaurant, she will tell you personal details about her life. For example, if you go out for burgers, she tells you about her dad leaving her family when she was young and how hard that was for her. If you have encountered this conversation in a previous playthrough, the game will remember, and you can bring it up at

the beginning of the game: “I know that you still miss your dad and used to fantasize about getting him and your mother back together.”

This moment is a demonstration of the player’s greatest mastery over time. To achieve this, not only must he have developed a history with the game at this point (he would have to have played the game a minimum of five times to receive this option), he is using his knowledge of Felicia’s own past to convince her. Finally, this moment requires a mastery of the game’s mechanics of temporal manipulation. In each of these ways he is trying to leverage the past to enforce a particular future.

But flexing your powers of temporal mastery for Felicia does not convince her to trust you. Instead, Felicia responds as a real person would; she feels violated:

> I…Why would you even bring that up? And how do you even know about that? Have you been talking to Mom? Or stalking me or something? I’m not sure I’m comfortable with you digging around in my personal life like that. I think I’m going to call off dinner. You have creeped me out enough to get out of dinner, at any rate.

In this way, your attempts to manipulate time and the game’s mechanics are revealed to parallel the abusive strategies men use to attempt to manipulate women they are romantically pursuing. Your behavior in the game is described as stalking. Depending on the personal details you try to take advantage of, Felicia assumes you are talking with others behind her back, spying on her, or reading her diary. In all instances you are violating her privacy. Even though these are details she willingly offered at later points in the game, bringing them up at this point of the game fails to acknowledge the particularities of each present moment that make the information she offers appropriate to that time and place. The only way to progress beyond this point, is to break the fourth wall, convince her that you are playing a video game, and acknowledge the ways your

behavior is similar to stalking: “This is going to sound weird, but I need your help to convince past-you to trust me, and that I’m not a creepy stalker.” In other words, you need to admit your failure and recognize that your attempts to help her have been manipulative.

By this point, “creepy” clearly means something more troubling than “eerie.” Rather than the traditional dictionary definition, the word takes on its slang meaning. The top entry for “creepy” on Urban Dictionary is a “slang term for sexually inappropriate or perverted or for attempting to derive sexual gratification through dishonorable means.” The second entry is even more unflattering: “A slang term to describe a person who displays actions to that of a rapist, serial killer, or pedophile.” In other words, *Save the Date* parallels the player’s unending attempts to exert his mastery of the game (and his mastery of time) with perverse, abusive, exploitative, and even criminal attempts to exert mastery over other human beings.

In this way, the more traditional effects of rereading suddenly emerge and can catch the player off guard. Rather than opening new options, this moment of rereading changes the reader’s perspective and recasts his previous actions in a new light. By obsessing over saving Felicia, the player focuses only on a predetermined end to the narrative, completely ignoring both Felicia and the player’s actions and motivations in the present. Playing the game encourages the player to ignore the particularities of the present and treat it only as a tool for creating their desired future. After Felicia’s first death, each subsequent date with her seems meaningless beyond its capacity for opening new options in the future. A player interested in unlocking a “good” ending where she survives will only look for clues to that solution, rather than listen to Felicia’s conversation. The content of new dialogue options is only valuable in how they signify past actions that effectively opened new pathways or suggest the potential for new possible narrative choices. Similarly, in the pursuit to uncover all possible outcomes, the content of

already existing dialogue options does not matter, only whether they have been chosen before or not.

The valorization of players' choices and the promise of their ability to impact the future also places undue emphasis on their actions over Felicia's. In fact, it is possible for the player to quickly click through Felicia's dialogue, never reading it, and still make progress as if they had. The necessity of replaying aspects of the game multiple times to unlock new options even encourages this behavior, as does an option to skip over dialogue by pressing "ctrl" on the keyboard. Personally, I found myself doing this as I continued playing. After exploring countless options, I began quickly clicking through many other options looking for potentially novel outcomes. As a result, I was surprised when a new option appeared in a different place in the game. In addition to telling Felicia I knew about her dad leaving, there was suddenly an option at the beginning of the game that read, "I know that you once sent a letter to Hogwarts." But I did not remember this fact, even though the game did. This was a detail from one of the conversations I sped through.

Curious about how a Harry Potter reference fit into this story, I hunted through the game, looking for the conversation I had skipped over. In this way, I began to adopt more traditional forms of rereading: reading for greater comprehension, to find information I had missed. Once I found the original reference to Hogwarts, the conversation was not as whimsical as the reference seemed to suggest. Felicia sent that letter to Hogwarts because she dreamed of escaping her difficult childhood:

> I had a kind of messed up childhood, honestly. The idea of escaping to a magical place where I was uniquely special was pretty appealing…I think it was because Mom drank a lot back then, and I was always seeing empty bottles around. Somehow I decided that if I could fill them with magic potions, I could cure Mom and maybe Dad would come back.

This was not only a moment where Felicia acknowledged a traumatic past; she also makes it clear that this trauma persists into the present. For example, if you convince her you are a wizard, she is still excited about the possibility of escaping to Hogwarts. In other words, she still longs for the possibility of "escaping to a magical place where [she is] uniquely special." Furthermore, this reference to her Dad coming back connects this moment with the conversation she has with the player in a different timeline about her father leaving. These connections gesture toward a fuller backstory for Felicia, one that makes her more of a character than a simple damsel for the player to rescue. Looking at her conversations as a whole, one begins not only to recognize the ways in which she still struggles with her traumatic past, but also the ways she is in a precarious economic position. Throughout your conversations she makes passing references to finishing school and worrying about "what comes after."

Returning to these conversations forced me to recognize the ways I had completely ignored Felicia's concerns in the moment. I was so obsessed with the possibility of saving her from some anticipated future death, that I was oblivious to her explicit descriptions of the things she struggled with in the present. Focusing so much on creating a predetermined future, made me unconcerned about a character's emotional well-being or economic insecurities in the moment. Instead, I only worried that she might be eaten by a sea-monster.

In this way, *Save the Date* emphasizes how greater awareness of one's historical context can actually create problems. This greater understanding can lead to framing particular moments as part of a narrative trope or convention. In the case of *Save the Date*, players with this historical knowledge can more easily fall into the teleological thinking of video game progression or the sexist trope of the damsel in distress. As such, the game shows how the

player's position of temporal mastery can actually be limiting, and Felicia's hyper-present existence can be liberating.

As described above, in order to continue opening new narrative options, the player needs to acknowledge how his actions in the game reflect the behavior of a "creepy stalker." This moment connects players' attempts at temporal mastery with sexism, but it also coincides with a significant narrative shift in the game; it coincides with Felicia's empowerment and the obliteration of the damsel in distress trope. To continue in the game, the player needs to turn to Felicia for help. Without her, everything the player tries to do to convince her to trust him fails. They can predict a number or word she thinks of, reference knowledge there would be no way for them to know, but it always fails. Instead, the player must relinquish their mastery of the game: "I need you to help me solve a puzzle. I think I know what to do, but you keep accusing me of being a creepy stalker." Felicia eventually thinks of a way to convince her past self not to go out to a restaurant. In this way, Felicia begins to "save" herself, and the player begins to follow her lead.

After Felicia provides the solution to this "puzzle," the player can convince her to avoid any of the restaurants, and they meet on a hillside. At this point, the player has broken the fourth wall and acknowledged that she is a character in a videogame, so Felicia begins discussing the nature of the videogame the player is currently playing. She begins to ask the player questions, rather than the other way around. Throughout this discussion, Felicia explicitly acknowledges and makes fun of the sexist tropes found in videogames and narratives in general. For example, when she considers why she might be repeatedly dying, she considers "maybe…I'm supposed to die in order to, you know, embolden you! Strengthen your resolve, so you can complete your epic quest!" The use of exclamation marks and the fact that the player's "quest" is fairly

mundane (successfully going on a date) underline the absurdity of this trope. Her follow up to this possibility makes this trope much more nefarious. She makes the player complicit in her repeated deaths: "You could say I keep dying because of you…because you keep playing."

Not only is the moment on the hill a reversal of sexist tropes, but it also reverses the roles of victim and hero. Felicia ultimately suggests she is not the one who needs to be saved by the player; players need to be saved from themselves and their slavish devotion to narrative conventions. She encourages players to ask themselves why they are playing, what they hope to accomplish, and what a "good" ending might be for them. Finally, she suggests that rather than trying to change the game, players should change themselves. Felicia tells the player, "maybe the choice you need to make to 'win' isn't something you can *do*, but rather something you have to *be*?"

More specifically, she encourages the player to stop being just a player and become the writer. She highlights the collaborative nature of any work, "The very act of storytelling is a deeply collaborative activity, right?" but argues that this nature is particularly apparent in videogames:

> If regular storytelling wasn't collaborative enough already, game-storytelling kicks it up a whole new level…Maybe [players] make the hero die, instead of save the day…Every time you reloaded from a saved game. Every time you hit an ending you didn't like, and restarted…Aren't you already changing the story when you're dissatisfied with the direction it goes?

Felicia argues that this fact empowers us to escape the limitations of the narrative in which we find ourselves, to begin telling our own stories, free from the constraints of what was predetermined or what fits the consensus expectation. She urges the player to "Quit the game. Walk away. Write whatever ending you want for me in your head."

This is the only way a player can actually "win" in *Save the Date*. After Felicia imparts her wisdom on the player, she accepts her inevitable death concluding that "It feels braver, somehow, facing it head-on." Her last words are, "I hope you find what you are looking for." The game will not provide a "good" ending for you; you need to deliberately create it. In this way, Felicia not only rescues herself, she rescues the player from the constraints of teleological thinking and the narrative expectations such thinking imposes. She asks players to self-reflect on their actions, how they feel in the moment, and to embrace the moment, rather than see it only as a stepping stone to some predetermined future. In this way, the text encourages the player to adopt a hyper-present awareness in the moment of playing, to become aware of their own embodied experience, their position, and the ways their material conditions and narrative assumptions circumscribe their behavior.

The end of the game suggests how the hyper-present can result in valuable political insight and change. Felicia's ability to find an alternative to the sexist tropes and gameplay conventions that structure the player's actions in the first half of the game are made possible through her hyper-present existence. Felicia is the temporal foil to the player. Every time the player replays the game, he accumulates more memories about it; he can draw on his past experiences. For Felicia, every replay needs to be treated as if it is the first playthrough; she responds to the player's conversation choices as if they have been chosen for the first time. In other words, the player can contextualize their present with the past and future, while Felicia has a hyper-present existence, where the present is all there is. She is incapable of recontextualizing her experience. In the fiction, she is reloaded upon every playthrough, so she is incapable of knowing the player's past interactions. This hyper-present position is what makes her immune to the narrative expectations that limit the player. She does not recognize that she is in a

predetermined narrative and thus, can imagine ways out of it. In turn, she reminds players they do not need to be trapped by the narrative of the game either, and she encourages them to create their own way out. In these ways, *Save the Date* suggests that a hyper-present position can potentially allow for the recognition and creation of new possibilities of living.

The Value of Studying Digital Texts

The idea for *Save the Date* was the result of Cornell imagining what it would be like if a video game character was a real person. In interviews and in posts on a gaming forum, Cornell describes playing the game *Ninja Gaiden* (1988) for the original Nintendo Entertainment System. Although he expected to play through a story "where the ninja totally kicks everyone's ass," instead he found himself repeatedly playing through the story of a ninja "who totally hit a bird while jumping, and fell in a pit and died."[115] Loading up the game for another attempt he wondered whether this was supposed to be a new ninja, one who might be able to successfully jump over the bird, or the same ninja reborn again, living through the same moment as if it was entirely new. This train of thought led to the creation of Felicia, a videogame character who is given the opportunity to grapple with what it would mean to live as a videogame character. He says, "Part of what I wanted to do was explore exactly what it MEANT that she was part of the game (and so restarted every time the game did)," and ultimately he felt he had achieved his goal when "people were at least buying into the game's main conceit enough to treat Felicia as at least provisionally 'real.' [116] Attempting to think through the temporality of a videogame character, one perpetually stranded in the present, lead Cornell to new insights. This is one way that

[115] Tigsource forum

[116] Cornell describes players who "sometimes felt bad when they lied to Felicia, or winced every time she died." And many of players who posted in the same forums corroborate this experience.

videogames (and digital narratives more generally) can create new opportunities for rethinking our relationship to time.

I want to take this a step further and argue that digital narratives require both its writers and readers to adopt a different way of thinking about time and narrative. As a result, I argue that digital narratives should be a part of any serious discussions of both our contemporary experience of time and shifts in contemporary narrative structure. Since a digital text needs to be written so that it can be read in any order, writers need to treat any particular narrative moment as an isolated experience. In an interview Cornell describes designing the game to work no matter which restaurant players pick first, or whether they change restaurants after each death or fully explore each restaurant's options one at a time.[117] As a result, each portion needed to be written in narrative isolation, it needed to stand alone. This description matches the experience that Michael Joyce argues is fundamental in hypertext fiction for both readers and writers (327). The isolation of each moment to allow for it to occur at various points in a narrative pushes both writers and readers to think of narrative more hyper-presently, without any relation to past or future moments.

This flexibility in digital texts has led many games theorists to reject narrative almost entirely. Around the turn of the century, games scholarship erupted in a debate between "narratology" and "ludology."[118] This debate was primarily driven by the "ludologists" who

[117] Alec Meer, "IGF Factor 2014 – Save The Date." *Rockpapershotgun.com*. 18 March 2014. https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2014/03/18/free-dating-game/

[118] See Eskelinen, Markku "The gaming situation," in Game Studies Vol. 2 Issue 1, July 2001. http://www.gamestudies.org; Eskelinen, Markku "Towards computer game studies." First person: new media as story, performance, and game. Ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin & Pat Harrigan. Cambridge, Ma.: The MIT Press, 2004; Frasca, Gonzalo "Ludology meets narratology: similitude and differences between (video)games and narrative." Ludology.org: video game theory. www.ludology.org, 1999; Frasca, Gonzalo. 'Simulation versus narrative.' The video game theory reader. Ed. Mark Wolf & Bernard Perron. New York and London: Routledge, 2003; Aarseth, Espen 'Genre trouble: narrativism and the art of simulation." First person: new media as story, performance, and game. Ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin & Pat Harrigan. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004; and Juul, Jesper. 'Games telling stories? - A brief note on games and narratives,' in Game Studies, Vol. 1 Issue 1, July 2001. http://www.gamestudies.org

argued that games should not be reduced to narrative. They considered any analysis of games in terms of narrative to be the result of games studies having been "colonised from the fields of literary, theatre, drama and film studies."[119] Instead, games should be examined in terms of its rules systems and the players' interactions with those systems. One of the primary reasons these ludologists argued that games should not be analyzed in narrative terms is temporal. Jasper Juul describes the experience of playing the game DOOM (1994). In such a game, the computer program creates threats in real time which the player overcomes with synchronous input. In other words, players press a button to shoot the enemy before it shoots their character. As a result, Juul argues that

> It is hard to find a distance between story time, narrative time, and reading/viewing time…the events represented cannot be past or prior, since we as players can influence them…In this way, the game constructs the story time as synchronous with narrative time and reading/viewing time: the story time is now. Now, not just in the sense that the viewer witnesses events now, but in the sense that the events are happening now, and that what comes next is not yet determined.[120]

Juul's description here shares many qualities with what I've described as the hyper-present: the game creates immediate overwhelming stimuli (the impending attack accompanied by simultaneous visual, auditory, and tactile interactions) that emphasize the present moment at the expense of one's awareness of the past or future ("cannot be past or prior," "the story time is *now*"). Looked at in terms of the hyper-present, Juul argues that games by their nature provoke a hyper-present reaction in players; they create a hyper-present experience.

Save the Date seems to corroborate this claim. Even though the game does not create the real-time pressure that something like *DOOM* creates, I could not seem to avoid "story time, narrative time, and reading/viewing time" collapsing into one another. As already demonstrated,

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[119] Eskelinen "Towards computer game studies*." First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin & Pat Harrigan. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004.
[120]Juul, "Games Telling Stories? - A Brief Note on Games and Narratives." *Game Studies* 1.1 (July 2001).

my interpretations of *Save the Date* cannot help but fall back on my anecdotal experience of playing the game. The game is designed to encourage you to identify with the player character in the narrative. Its static images are presented from a first-person perspective and the player character is never seen or named. Furthermore, you always get to choose how the player character responds, and as the game continues many of these responses are not related to the fiction of the game, but the player's honest answers (e.g. "I reloaded from a saved game"). Finally, the game breaks the fourth wall and asks you to consider your actions in the moment. As a result, the narrative became synonymous with the actions of the player in the moment. I was forced to consider myself situated in real space and consider my actions and motivations.

Although I disagree with entirely rejecting narrative considerations of games,[121] I agree that games require us to rethink the temporality of narrative. Digital texts push us away from idealized, static narratives to variable, more personalized narratives shaped by the actions of readers in their present moment. As a result, digital texts encourage new engagements with time, particularly through the ways that they can create hyper-present experiences. For this reason, digital texts can offer new possibilities for rethinking conventional ways of thinking about time and must be grappled with in order to understand the implications of our increasingly digitally mediated lives.

In addition to helping us better understand our temporal relationship to digital technology, digital literature helps us better understand other challenges our digital enmeshment may create. *Save the Date's* suggestion that both Felicia and the player can escape the narrative that they seem to be trapped in is made more complicated by the fact that *Save the Date* is a

[121] I agree that games should not be treated simply as books or films, that we need to contend with readers' means of engaging with a text including its game systems, but humans tend to think of everything in terms of narratives, and games of all types have a long history of being narrativized (pervasive narrative tropes in sports such as the underdog or the nationalism of the Olympics demonstrate this fact.)

computer program. In the case of Felicia, even though by the end of the game she rejects her status as a damsel and she accepts her fate and faces it on her own terms, she must always react in this way. As a videogame character, she is programmed, and her responses are pre-determined. If the player picks an option he has chosen before, Felicia will always respond in the same way. Similarly, even though the game suggests that the player can navigate the game in their own way, selecting from numerous choices in each scene, it necessarily limits the player's choices. The game's metaleptic move in the latter half of the game, to shift focus from your choices as a character in the narrative to your choices as a player navigating the game, highlights these limits. Not only does the game ask the player to consider how their narrative expectations have limited the kinds of actions available to them, but the player is inevitably faced with the limits of the computer program itself. For example, the player might find himself in a conversation with Felicia wanting to tell her something that none of the available options allow, or he might reach the limit of available narrative paths available in the game. In this way, the game, by nature of being software, is always limiting. Players, or interactors as Murray describes them, can never have full agency: "Certainly interactors can create aspects of digital stories…But interactors can only act within the possibilities that have been established by the writing and programming" (152).

Such a perspective pushes the reader to consider the game's code in a similar way that *Only Revolutions* encourages its reader to examine the material object of the book itself. This shift in perspective is reinforced through Cornell's anticipation that some players may desire to reprogram the game after playing it. If players explore *Save the Date*'s game files, they will come across a text file titled "HOW_TO_BE_A_HACKER." This short document includes instructions for changing one of the game's files. If a player follows these instructions and

restarts the game, a new alternative to the restaurant options at the beginning of the game will become available: "Actually, I thought we could have an awesome dinner in my floating sky castle because I am a hacker!" This option actually leads to a "good" ending where Felicia lives. The two of you fly up to your sky castle "because you are a hacker and super awesome!" When you return, she "discovers that she has won like six different lotteries," and buys her own island. The final text changes to "~The End~ You are an awesome hacker!" The use of exclamation marks throughout this ending, the absurdity of the situation, and the childish diction ("super awesome!" and "*like* six different lotteries") give this ending a mocking tone. In a forum where players discussed the game, dissatisfaction or annoyance with this ending was a regular response.[122] None of the forum posters responded positively to the "hacker ending." Further hacking is much more difficult. If a player is still dissatisfied with the ending, he first would have to decompile the other game files if they wanted to try to reprogram anything, making the process for rewriting the game a particularly onerous task.

In this way, *Save the Date* severely limits a player's capacity to determine their actions in any digital space. The game's narrative is limited, its programming is limited, and the ability to manipulate its code is limited. Even as the game gestures in greater and greater metaleptic directions, it continually asks you to consider the ways in which your present actions are limited. This fact confirms the claims of a number of videogame critics that any critical reading of a game must not only be attentive to its narrative and the experience of playing it, but also the code that supports it. As Espen Aarseth explains in the introduction of *Cybertext*, digital text "breaks

[122] These responses include: "I hope I'm just missing the real ending, and the hacker 'choose your own ending' bs is a red herring;" "I think it would have been much cooler if the help file invited you to actually write out the ending on your own;" "the sarcastic hacker ending gives a lot of what the game says elsewhere a sort of cognitive dissonance;" "I played a few more times after getting the hacker ending just to see if I missed anything or if anything else changed;" "the I am the Haxor ending, while funny at first, became almost a joke on me after some thinking;" https://forums.tigsource.com/index.php?topic=33753.msg896094#msg896094

down concepts such as 'the text' itself into two independent technological levels: the interface and the storage medium" (10). As a result, reading only what is presented on the screen can never be a complete text. The programming language in which software is designed profoundly shapes the kinds of narratives that can be told and the ways in which they can be engaged.

This fact has led many critics of digital texts to conclude that software is fundamentally restrictive. Aside from early theorists that believed hypertext was radically liberating[123] most theorists in the field have taken a much more pessimistic view. For example, N. Katherine Hayles concludes that when compared to print media, "the looping structures of electronic hypertexts and the resulting repetition forced on the reader/user make these works by comparison more rather than less coercive" (32). Game theorists have come to similar conclusions. Alexander Galloway in *Gaming* claims that "The gamer is…learning, internalizing, and becoming intimate with a massive, multipart, global algorithm. To play the game means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system" (90-91). In other words, the algorithms underlying any game pre-determine a player's engagement with it. These algorithms limit the ways that we think.

Considering the algorithm to be the foundational building block of software reveals how predetermined causal links are unavoidably embedded in videogames such as *Save the Date*. Like narrative tropes, algorithms are based on a pre-determined sequence of cause and effect. An algorithm is "a formal set of sequential operations." These operations are similarly teleological. The order is rigid, and one must progress from beginning to end to function. As a result, "an algorithm necessarily translates a physical noncausal representation into a causal

[123] See Bolter, David Jay. *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* and Landow, George P. *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*

representation."[124] In this way, when looked at on the level of code, the liberatory temporality suggested by *Save the Date* appears illusory.

This fact is especially troublesome when considering how pervasive software and their algorithmic logics have become in contemporary society. Galloway builds upon the work of Deleuze in "Postscript on the Societies of Control." Deleuze argues that society no longer resembles what Foucault termed "disciplinary societies" which structured life into a series of "environments of enclosure" (3). Social control is now maintained through an illusion of openness and freedom. For example, "In making freeways…you don't enclose people but instead multiply the means of control.…People can drive infinitely and 'freely' without being at all confined yet while still being perfectly controlled."[125] In other words, control societies, like videogames, create the sense of agency as a means to create greater control.

For this reason, Galloway argues that real world lives now reflect the experiences of players in a videogame. He explains, "the social imaginary of the wired world and how the various structures of organization and regulation within it are repurposed into the formal grammar" of videogames (89). McKenzie Wark agrees with Galloway. He argues contemporary life "is experienced more as a gamespace…full of restrictions and hierarchies, firewalls and passwords. It is more like a bounded game than a free space of play."[126] For this reason, both theorists consider games to be "allegorithms," allegories for the algorithms that shape contemporary existence, "allegories for our contemporary life under the protocological network of continuous informatic control."[127]

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[124] Luciani, Annie. "Algorithm." *Enaction and enactive interfaces : a handbook of terms*, Enactive Systems Books, pp.11-13, 2007.
[125] Gilles Deleuze, "Having an Idea in Cinema," in *Deleuze and Guattari: New Mappings in Politics, Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Eleanor Kaufman and Kevin Jon Heller (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 18
[126] Wark, *Gamer Theory*, 48.
[127] Galloway, 106.

For this reason, studying games proves to be particularly valuable, especially when they draw our attention to systems as *Save the Date* does. The game initially promises us freedom within the programmed system, through our ability to save moments and return to them with new knowledge. It ultimately shows us how limited this freedom is, that the only way to escape is to leave the digital space and imagine a new narrative for ourselves. But, *Save the Date* also shows us that it's not that simple. The problem is not simply digital versus analog space. The game's emphasis on narrative tropes and expectations reveal the ways that our non-digital lives are just as limited and controlled. The prevalence of digitality can actually help us to see that fact, and digital texts such as *Save the Date* can allow us to return to the real world and imagine new temporal possibilities. The digital hyper-present does not only distract and obfuscate; it also disrupts and forces us to consider more radical new possibilities.

Digital Dialectics

The various considerations of *Save the Date* in this chapter all follow the same pattern: the digital enables a new possibility only to push us back to analog strategies and concerns that have been considered for centuries. In the case of rereading, *Save the Date* allows for an entirely new experience, one only made possible in a digital text. But, after playing the game over and over, opening more and more narrative paths, more conventional rereadings returned, surprising me all the more. Upon first encountering Felicia's references to Harry Potter, I found myself returning to portions of the text, rereading for what I had missed. Similarly, one of the most powerful moments for me was the redefinition of "creepy" over the course of the game. In this way, later moments in the text recast earlier moments with new insights, changing those moments' meaning on subsequent rereadings. Both of these effects are regular occurrences in

any kind of rereading, digital or not, but their surprising return after experiencing the new digital possibilities for rereading made them all the more significant. Experiencing the new possibilities of digital rereading makes the return of more traditional rereading newly revelatory. These moments became all the more surprising and powerful.

Similarly, the game offers new ways to explore and experience a narrative not possible in a traditional print text. Only in a digital text can a reader be presented with such hidden levels of narrative variability and reader control. The number of ways to experience this story, the number of narrative paths would be impossible to recreate in an analog medium. Even if one could offer this many narrative possibilities in an analog medium, it could never be hidden from the reader like they are in *Save the Date*. A reader holding a "Choose Your Own Adventure" book is always aware of how many pages it contains, and they can never be surprised by the sudden addition of new options where previously none existed. But, even as *Save the Date* offers a reading experience unique to digital texts, it ends by emphasizing the role of reader participation found in all narratives. Felicia's musings at the end of the game highlight the reader's role in storytelling in general, not just storytelling in videogames. Her encouragement that the player embrace their role in the creation of any story echoes similar arguments that critics have made in regard to reader response theory for years.[128] But this argument is revitalized and made all the more relevant after exploring the new potential for reader involvement in digital texts.

Finally, *Save the Date* pushes us to consider the hidden algorithms structuring the code that necessarily underlies all digital media, code that always limits, constrains, and controls the user. As before, this concern is most apparent in digital texts, but *Save the Date's* emphasis on

[128] Similarly, the arguments between "ludologists" and "narratologists" can be understood as a recreation of debates between those for and against the value of readers' responses.

the coercive nature of narrative conventions asks us to recognize the ways that analog structures of thinking have always had the same effect.

In each of these cases, *Save the Date* demonstrates digital texts' potential for creating radical new possibilities, but each foray into the digital also requires us to return to pre-digital considerations. As a result, I argue that texts such as *Save the Date* demonstrate why it is so important for literary studies to contend with digital texts, even videogames. In many ways, these kinds of texts offer new possibilities, challenges, and questions, but they also demonstrate a renewed relevance and need for skills and ways of thinking already developed within more traditional literary studies. Digitality reinforces the value of considering these traditional reading practices within these new digital contexts. It makes them valuable and necessary in new ways. It is in the productive back and forth relationship between the digital and the analog that proves most valuable and allows for new possibilities to be imagined.

IV

The Queerness of the Hyper-Present in *Queers in Love at the End of the World*

Every text examined in this dissertation challenges traditional reading strategies. *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013) by Anna Anthropy is perhaps the most resistant to those strategies. Anthropy's game only allows readers ten real-world seconds before it ends. As a result, playing the game means coming to terms with one's reading limits. Reading this text is always an exercise in failure. I argue that *Queers in Love* demonstrates the ways in which the hyper-present can function as a queer temporality, one that not only undermines traditional ways of thinking about time but reveals how failure serves as a source of useful knowledge. In particular, Anthropy's game demonstrates how the hyper-present's various sites of failure draw our attention to the pitfalls of reproductive futurity, the presence of affectivity, and the impact of digital mediation.

"You Have Ten Seconds…"

Queers in Love at the End of the World is a hyperlink game created with the program Twine.[129] The game centers around the players' final moments with their lover, ten seconds before the world ends. It consists of a number of short paragraphs connected together by hyperlinks. For example, the first passage reads: "In the end, like you always said, it's just the two of you together. You have ten seconds, but there's so much you want to do: / [kiss her], [hold

[129] Twine is a free open-source tool for creating interactive fiction created by Chris Klimas. The first version of the tool was originally released in 2009 and Twine 2 was released in 2017. *Queers in Love at the End of the World* was originally created with Twine 1, but Anthropy remade the game in Twine 2 in 2017 and that version has almost entirely replaced the original version wherever the game is available. The games are identical in content, but the new version cannot be loaded into Twine as easily by users other than Anthropy.

her], [take her hand], [tell her]."[130] The words "kiss," "hold," "take," and "tell" are all hyperlinks. Each link leads to different passages, each of which contains more hyperlinks branching out to even more passages. The challenge in reading this text is that the ten seconds described in the opening passage are literal. Whenever the player begins the game, a ten second timer begins to count down in the upper left corner. Once this timer reaches zero, the game immediately ends, leaving the player with a single sentence: "Everything is wiped away." At this point the player is given the choice to restart the game from the beginning.

The ten-second timer, forever ticking away in the top left corner, creates severe constraints on players' ability to read the text. Ten seconds is an impossibly short time to make any progress in the game. Reading the first paragraph alone takes me about seven seconds. In other words, reading the first passage leaves me little time to consider what choice to make, let alone read the next passage. The lack of time is especially severe considering the size of the game. *Queers in Love* consists of 4,657 words spread across 185 different passages connected together by 202 different hyperlinks. Most paths through the game consist of four to nine passages before coming to an ending passage with no further links. Simply clicking the links to reach the final passage in the longer branches can take up to almost ten seconds. In other words, even if the player reads absolutely nothing at all, it can still be difficult to reach the end of some branches before "everything is wiped away."

In this way, playing *Queers in Love* thrusts players into an intensified present. They are made aware of the limited time available to them and the multitude of options in front of them. As such, playing the game can feel overwhelming, as you have no time to think about which

[130] In order to convey the game's structure in my quotations I have adopted a few different notation strategies. Paragraph breaks in particular passages will be separated by a forward slash, "/," hyperlinks will be placed within square brackets "[…]," and links from one passage to another will be identified by an arrow from a hyperlink to the connecting passage, "→."

choice to make or to process the information on screen. As Mattie Brice explains, "The timer and loops make your concentration on your queer lover total; all you have is each other."[131] In other words, the timer inhibits players' ability to focus on anything but what is happening in the moment.

Additionally, the time limit decontextualizes each passage from those that are linked to them. It is impossible to fully read passages in sequence. To continue reading from where you were when the timer last ran out, you must skim preceding passages as quickly as possible to reconstruct the path back to where you were. For the longer passages, this process can take long enough to leave you with only a couple seconds to read more. Because of the severe limitations on players' ability to effectively read any part of the game, connecting each ten-second portion into a cohesive whole is impossible. Attempting to do so quickly becomes overwhelming and frustrating. Essentially, the player's present reading experience is all there is.

In addition to creating a hyper-present reading experience for the reader, the content of *Queers in Love* describes a hyper-present experience. In other words, even if a player disables the timer (as I did in order to read it for this project[132]), the game still describes a hyper-present existence. The game describes an encounter between two lovers, but the context for that encounter is completely absent. None of the game's passages describe where or when this encounter occurs. Beyond the game's title, there is also no reference to the end of the world. All that is clear is that you and your partner have only ten seconds to be together; the game never

[131] Brice, Mattie. "Countdown: Thinking of Time in Text Games." http://www.mattiebrice.com/tag/queers-in-love-at-the-end-of-the-world/

[132]In order to be able to fully read the game, I downloaded an early version of the game compiled in Twine 1. This allowed me to open it in the Twine editor (version 1.4.2) and disable the timer so that I could read fully read the game without the challenges the ten-second timer presents. Since that time, Anthropy seems to have removed all versions of the game made with Twine 1 from her personal sites, leaving the version recreated in Twine 2 on her itch.io page as the only available version of the game on the web. This version cannot be so easily edited or reverse-engineered.

explains why that is the case. Instead, passages are most concerned with describing you or your lover's bodies and what you are doing or feeling in the moment. For example, if you choose to kiss her slowly:

> You kiss like you have all the time in the world, which you do, when you're in her mouth. You draw your tongue slowly into her mouth and she receives it with a soft exhalation of air, letting it roll against hers, a mutual, wet exchange of touch. You moan into her mouth. Her teeth catch your bottom lip as you finally disengage and you make a short, sharp noise with a hard edge. You lick your lips, looking at her.

The moment of this kiss is stretched out similar to the expanded moments in *The Mezzanine*. The kiss becomes a complicated intermingling of body parts and actions and almost every sense is described. Four sentences are devoted to describing this kiss, while only one sentence gestures to anything beyond this particular moment. And even that gesture is dismissive. You kiss as though "you have all the time in the world," but you do not. In other words, the text does not care at all how much time these lovers really have, it only cares what it feels like to kiss and be kissed by your lover.

Most passages are vividly descriptive in this same way, focused on the physical interaction between you and your lover. Four of the five initial choices are tactile, and even if you choose to "tell her," you can immediately return to physical interaction by telling her to "fuck me now." Even the few more philosophical passages are dismissive of anything other than this moment with your lover. Multiple passages include statements like "Her fingers pull your hair while dollars turn to dust and laws that were too small to hold you blow away like old newspaper," "[How much capital does it take to change a light bulb?]→Who gives a shit?" and "So many people and institutions tried to pull you two apart. / They all failed." References to the world outside you and your lover are always marked by destruction, irrelevance, or failure.

Even the use of figurative language frequently gives way to the sensual experience in the moment. Periodically, the game's detailed descriptions include a metaphor or simile, but those gestures to larger world are similarly dismissed. If you choose to tell your lover that you love her, "You repeat it over and over, "I love you," till the words lose meaning, and all that's left is the feeling, your bodies together, your fingers interwoven, your voices in each other's ears, a steady noise. / [Like the sea.]" Following this link ends in a passage that simply reads: "sssssssssssss." The transition from one passage to the other reduces the image of the sea to a simple sound. Furthermore, even language more generally ceases to have value. Your "words lose meaning" and the game literally stops using words any more. All that matters is the feeling of each other's body and the indeterminate sound of each other's presence. By almost exclusively describing the lovers' actions and feelings in great detail and by rejecting and dismissing the world apart from the lovers, even language itself, the game seems to argue that all that matters is what is done and felt in the present moment.

In addition to the constraints created by the timer and the content of the passages, the game regularly requires the reader to stay attentive to their present moment by constantly changing the form of passages. After replaying *Queers in Love* a number of times, it can become easy to fall into a routine for reading. Many passages follow a similar structure to the first passage, a descriptive paragraph followed by a list of hyperlinks. As a result, one can become less attentive to how they are navigating the text and start to feel like they are learning how to better navigate the text. But as players progress down various narrative paths that structure changes: links begin to appear in the body of the passages, paragraphs become so long that you need to scroll to the bottom to find the links, or the number of options more than double. Any of these minor variations require additional time and attention to process. They prevent readers

from reading automatically and force them to be more attentive to their reading process, the actions they are taking. In these ways, *Queers in Love at the End of the World* recreates the experience of the hyper-present, describes a hyper-present world, and forces readers to consider their present moment as readers.

Queer Temporality in *Queers in Love*

Despite the prominence of the word "queers" in its title, very little of the game is explicitly queer. In fact, whenever the game is discussed as a "queer game," writers almost exclusively discuss Anthropy and her identity as a queer transgender woman, rather than the queerness of the game itself.[133] This may be because most of the work within queer game studies has focused on issues of representation, but the game also does little to mark your relationship in the game as queer. Although your partner is presented as female using the pronouns she, her, and hers, the player-character is exclusively addressed in the second person. As a result "we may assume that the player-controlled character is queer, or that their relationship to their partner is queer in some way, but there are few ways of knowing for certain."[134] Additionally, Sam Booth argues that the pressure of the game's timer "causes the player not to think about the sexual orientation aspect of the game as much, and focus most of their attention on the fact that what they truly desire in this last ten seconds is to love and be loved." In other words, the passages in *Queers in Love* could be read as describing a more "universal" love, rather than one that is distinctly queer. In fact, without the title, a straight male player could easily interpret the

[133] Keogh, Brendan. "JUST MAKING THINGS AND BEING ALIVE ABOUT IT: THE QUEER GAMES SCENE." *Polygon. https://www.polygon.com/features/2013/5/24/4341042/the-queer-games-scene;* Booth, Sam. "Queers in Love at the End of the World." *21st Century Digital Art*. http://www.digiart21.org/art/queers-in-love-at-the-end-of-the-world

[134] Lo, Claudia. "Everything Is Wiped Away: Queer Temporality in *Queers in Love at the End of the World*." *Camera Obscura* 32(2), 2017.

relationship in the game as heterosexual. I argue that what makes *Queers in Love* a queer game is not the sexual identities of either Anthropy or the characters in the game. Instead, it is its relationship to time. The temporality of *Queers in Love at the End of the World* is not only hyper-present but is queer.

One of the most prevalent ways in which *Queers in Love* intersects with work on queer temporalities is by embracing the end of the world. In this way, *Queers in Love* echoes Edelman's *No Future*. In addition to having similarly apocalyptic titles, Anthropy's game rejects what Edelman terms reproductive futurity. Edelman argues that reproductive futurity is one of the temporalities most privileged in society, marked by a perpetual investment in and protection of the future. As a result, the past and present are considered useless unless they predict and become material for a future. The figure that best embodies this temporality is the "Child," an imaginary figure of a perpetually deferred future who gives the present meaning but must also be protected from the dangers of the present. In other words, many individuals justify the sacrifices they make in the present in the expectation that their suffering now will benefit the "children" of the future. But this future never actually arrives. These children grow up to continue to make sacrifices for the same imagined "Child."

In order to suggest the possibility for an alternative to reproductive futurity, Edelman turns to queerness. He argues that "Those queered by the social order…are no doubt positioned to recognize the structuring fantasy that so defines them. But they're positioned as well to recognize the irreducibility of that fantasy and the cost of construing it" (30). Queerness offers a useful site for critiquing reproductive futurity, a site from which we can recognize the false, untenable fantasy upon which it is predicated, a future perpetually deferred, and a site from which we can recognize the costs for maintaining that fantasy. Edelman argues that queerness

should embrace its association with the rejection of the future in the social imaginary. Queerness testifies to the fact that reproductive futurity is a lie. Queerness "is unaware of the passing generations as stages on the road to better living. It knows nothing about 'sacrifice now for the sake of future generations'" (31).

Queers in Love likewise rejects investment in the future. The end of the world is inevitable, and you can do nothing to stop it. Nothing the player does can change the fact that the end of the game comes or when it comes. You can furiously click through links or sit passively for ten seconds, but no matter what, after ten seconds, "Everything is wiped away." You are not even given any choices to try to resist the end of the world. Even though the game offers you numerous options, none of them suggest a particular outcome. The links between passages do not follow a logic of cause and effect, and the various links within most passages are variations on the same action. For example, in one passage the player can "[Kiss her eyelids] [Kiss her forehead] [Kiss her lips again.]" None of these options suggest a particular response or effect on the world outside the lovers. Furthermore, their similarity fails to give the player a sense of what kind of passage each link leads to. For example, kissing her eyelids simply leads to the word "Smooch," and her forehead to the similar "Smooch, Smooch." But choosing to "kiss her lips again" leads to a much more substantive passage: "It's like [coming home,] the way your mouth joins hers. You slide your arms around her hips and she slides hers around your back." There's no way to know which of these links will lead to more content. As a result, *Queers in Love* resists the logic of reproductive futurity, because the player cannot even try to produce anything in particular. Your effect on subsequent passages is unknowable.

Even if players set their own goals, the game often undermines them. For example, if the player is determined to reach the end of a particular thread, that might not even be possible. A

number of the passages' links loop endlessly. For example, one passage ends with options to "touch her [thighs,] her [hips,] her [legs.]" The passage for [thighs] links to [hips] which links to [legs] which links back to [thighs]. In other words, this narrative sequence ends in an endless cycle as you explore your lover's lower body.

The game also punishes players trying to comprehensively explore each possible option. The games' possible narrative threads quickly multiply. The first passage offers four choices and each of those choices leads to at least four more choices, sometimes five. Even if players become comfortable with this rate of narrative options, a couple strands resist players' ability to play the game comprehensively. One narrative strand leads to two different passages each containing eight different choices. Another passage is a single paragraph in which every word is part of a hyperlink. Even though there are only four different links on this passage, every word is blue, so it becomes unclear where one link begins and another ends. In other words, this passage hinders a completionist player because they need to click on every one of these words to really determine where one link begins and another ends.

Even if a player picks a single narrative strand to explore, when passages do end, the final passages are often no different than the other passages along the way. The only difference between a final passage and any others is that final passages simply do not offer any new links. Furthermore, many of these passages end anticlimactically. The passage ending in a sequence of s's previously described is one example of this. This narrative strand is the result of choosing to tell your lover "I love you," an action many readers would likely assume would produce a response: your lover reciprocating the phrase or appreciating your profession of love. Instead, "You repeat it over and over, 'I love you,' till the words lose meaning." There's no effect, and

this sequence ends not only with this phrase becoming meaningless, but the total failure of language. Similarly, another sequence ends with an entirely blank page.

In addition to the content of these passages being anticlimactic, there is also no incentive to reach an "end." There are no "good" or "bad" endings and no rewards for making it to the end of a narrative strand before the timer is up. Instead, reaching an end usually results in the player wasting their time. Quickly finding the last passage in a sequence leaves the reader with nothing to do as the timer counts down. As Claudia Lo describes, "In Queers, wasting time is the only course of action. If the player decides to sacrifice understanding in favor of action, they will eventually end up in a dead end with no way out; if the player decides to read, they will be unable to progress very far at all."[135] In other words, if players try to "win" in *Queers in Love*, they will always be confronted by the futility of doing so; they will find themselves staring at a line of the letter "s," waiting for a timer to finish counting down.

Additionally, as Lo highlights, reaching the end also requires "sacrificing understanding." In other words, to reach the end, players cannot read much along the way. In this way, the structure of *Queers in Love* only gives the player access to subsequent passages at the expense of present ones. Many of these passages that will be skipped in a rush to the end acknowledge the suffering of the characters in the face of society and its norms. For example, one passage reads, "Let the houses burn, the cities, and all the countries, and all the governments. They never sheltered you," another reads, "So many people and institutions tried to pull you two apart," and another "These arms are not bullet-proof, they're not going to weather the truncheons of cops.

[135] Lo, "Everything Is Wiped Away: Queer Temporality in *Queers in Love at the End of the World*," 149. Lo is the only other scholar to have written about the connections between *Queers in Love* and queer temporality, but she focuses almost exclusively on the similarities between Anthropy's game and slow cinema, making parallels between the game and Karl Schoonover's arguments for the queerness of slow cinema in his article "Wastrels of Time: Slow Cinema's Laboring Body, the Political Spectator, and the Queer," Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media 53, no. 1 (2012): 65 – 78.

They can't muffle the words of people who want to hurt you, and they can't block the silences of people who hurt you that way either." Throughout the game, institutions and society are placed in opposition to you and your lover. They offer you no protection, actively fight against your desires, and threaten you with violence. But players who only want to reach the next passage will not have time to read these passages; they must ignore them. As a result, the game not only resists the logic of reproductive futurity, but it shows how such an investment in the future is at the expense of the lived experience of queer people. It requires making their lives invisible.

As a result, rather than fearing the end of the world, *Queers in Love* embraces it. Even those options that seem like they might lead to some sadness about the end of the world resist such expectations. For example, as you "make out in the ashes of everything" you are given a number of different possible responses. Three of the four options are dismissive of the destruction of the world around you: "You're: [laughing],…[biting her neck], [Horny.]" But one of the options, "You're:…[Crying]," initially seems to suggest sorrow about the end of the world. This option leads to three more options: "You're crying because: [It's finally over.] [You're terrified.] [You love her so much.]" The first option, "It's finally over," reframes the tears as tears of joy: "It's the biggest relief you can imagine. You used to hike out to the landfill, sit on a cliff looking over the formless sea, and let yourself imagine that civilization was finally over." In addition to finding relief in the end of the world, this ending suggests that its end has long been something you imagined; you have always seriously considered the end as inevitable.

The second option, "You're terrified," likewise emphasizes how frequently you have felt the end of the world. "It's mind-stopping, the end. But so often it felt like the end, so often, terrified, you took solace in her arms…Now that it's actually the end, it almost feels like a relief." This response seems to confirm Edelman's claims that to be queer means to not only be

figured as a threat to the future but also to be threatened by reproductive futurity. At the end of this narrative path, *Queers in Love* once again reframes the real end of the world as a relief. The true terror is to live the end of the world perpetually deferred. Truly facing the end can be liberating.

But the queer temporality of *Queers in Love at the End of the World* is not simply a critique of reproductive futurism. It also has value in and of itself. Another queer theorist invested in queer endings is Jack Halberstam. In *The Queer Art of Failure* they write "to live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint and ultimately to die; rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment, the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite…Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures."[136] Halberstam reframes failure as something to be celebrated, as something that can prove to be pleasurable and rewarding. They believe that emphasizing failure not only resists heteronormative logics like reproductive futurism; it is also radically validating. If "to live is to fail," embracing failure means "no one gets left behind" (25).

Queers in Love demonstrates how failure can be pleasurable. The simple fact that after ten seconds, "everything is wiped away," recasts everything the player does. The severe time limit means that any little interaction with the game feels like a victory. Reading a new sentence or finding a new link becomes exciting; every word feels more significant. The intense experience of playing the game even makes "failing" a relief. Reaching the end screen provides the reader a chance to catch their breath. In this way, the end of the world can become relieving for the reader in the same way as it is described as relieving for the player-character.

[136] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Duke University Press, 2011. Pp. 186-187.

Furthermore, the intensified present offered by the game is eroticizing. Although much of the text in the game is descriptions of the two main characters' bodies and interactions, those descriptions can actually be pretty tame. Sex organs and sexual acts are never described. Even when you do choose a more explicit option, the game often becomes philosophical. For example, telling your lover to "[Fuck me, now!]" leads to a number of sequences considering the nature of language, pain, pleasure, history, and reality. The most explicit description in the game is "her hand is up your skirt, and she's touching you." Despite the tameness of the game's descriptions, though, it is sexy. The game's ephemerality charges every fleeting word and moment of recognition with excitement and libidinal energy. The threat of the timer makes even mundane interactions between the player character and her lover erotic. Briefly reaching a moment later in a narrative thread where "Your hand slides onto hers," "Her nose is in your hair" or you feel "her hand on your back," and knowing that in a second "everything is wiped away," knowing you may not be able to trace your way back, it makes those moments satisfying.

In addition to emphasizing the ways in which failure might be rewarding, the ten-second time limit and the absence of a win-state also means that to play *Queers in Love at the End of the World* always leads to failure. No matter what a player does (whether that is skipping around and reading random portions, rushing to the end, slowly reading a single passage, refusing to do anything at all, or hacking the game and disabling the timer as I've done) that interaction seems like failure. In this way, the game validates all forms of engagement. Because there is no "right" way to play the game, there also is no "wrong" way.

This position is also played out in the game's structure. The game never challenges or questions the choices you pick as you explore a narrative thread. This is most clear from what follows the passage, "She pushes you down, putting a hand under your skirt. You [guide her.]

You [move against her hand.]" "Guide her" leads to a clear response from your lover: "She looks into your eyes while you guide her hand under your skirt. You hold onto her arm while she touches you, not so you can pull her hand away, but so you can keep it there. / Consent is the only place we are free." On the other hand, "move against her hand" presents a more ambiguous result. To "move against her hand" could either mean to press her hand against your body or to push her hand away. The passage to which this link leads maintains that ambiguity: "She loves you the way you want to be loved. Here in the end, you are able to experience your body not the ways they insist you do, but as you really are." No matter your interpretation, you are loved "the way you want to be loved." No matter the choice the player makes or how they interpret that choice, the game always validates and celebrates that choice. The game always allows you to play the way that you want to play it.

By emphasizing the hyper-present, *Queers in Love at the End of the World* encourages a queer orientation to time. Its intensification of the present forces you to acknowledge your actions and feelings in the moment. Your present experience is all that is available. Since the end cannot change, your choices in the present is all that matters. Queer temporality emphasizes the value of such an experience. It shows the ways that a hyper-present perspective can offer an alternative to temporal logics that invest in reproductive futurity. *Queers in Love* shows that we do not need to look to the future to create meaning and value for the present. The value of experiences and choices is not determined by what those experiences or choices produce. While in your lover's arms you can consider how safe you feel:

> These arms are not bullet-proof, they're not going to weather the truncheons of cops. They can't muffle the words of people who want to hurt you, and they can't block the silences of people who hurt you that way either. They can't stand in the way of a fire or a tidal wave. They won't stop the end of the world.
>
> [And yet you are protected.]

This passage recognizes that nothing in this moment will change the future. Your lover's arms cannot protect you from bad things that might come. But despite that, in the moment, you are protected. Following this link leads to a sequence of one sentence passages all emphasizing the value of the present: "And yet you are safe. → And yet you are loved. → And yet you are fine. → And yet everything is right." Just because what you are doing is not productive, even if it cannot protect you, or prevent you from failing, it matters. Feelings of safety and love, even if momentary, are valuable, especially when you are otherwise threatened. Especially in the face of an inescapable apocalypse.

Affective Intensity within the Hyper-Present

By giving players only ten seconds to play *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, players do not have time to think through what the words on the screen mean. Instead, all they can grab on to is the feeling of their experience. The fact that I needed to hack the game and disable the timer in order to be able to analyze the text and actually consider its words and structure demonstrates how difficult it is to think about this game beyond one's immediate affective response. Brian Massumi argues that such an experience is typical of contemporary life in his book *Parables of the Virtual*.[137] Massumi argues that "affect is central to an understanding of our information- and image-based late capitalist culture…Belief has waned for many, but not affect. If anything, our condition is characterized by a surfeit of it" (27). As our culture has become more information-based, more digitally mediated, we have become flooded by affect. Massumi considers affect, as many other affect theorists do, in contrast to emotion. He defines emotion as "the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience…[into] semantically and

[137] Massumi, Brian. *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning." Emotions are the result of naming experienced feelings, giving them meaning by placing them in the context of a sequence or narrative. Affect on the other hand, is "irreducibly bodily and autonomic." It is "a suspension of action-reaction circuits and linear temporality." Affects are the bodily responses in the moment without regard for its context. While emotions convey value on our experiences by contextualizing them, affect considers "its expression as and for itself" (27-28). In other words, the distinction between emotion and affect is a temporal distinction. Emotion is experienced over time, but affect is a hyper-present experience. Affect can only be experienced in the moment, in the body, and it is resistant to attempts to name it or narrativize it. Trying to put it in an historical context transforms it into emotion. In this way, our condition being characterized by a surfeit of affect seems to be a symptom of our culture becoming increasingly hyper-present.

The increased experience both of the hyper-present and of affect can be tied to the increased prevalence of digital communications technology. Massumi gestures to information technology with his reference to an "information-based culture," but other scholars have directly tied the surfeit of affect he describes to new digital communications and media technologies. Steven Shaviro, in his book *Post-Cinematic Affect*, describes how the development of digital video and the internet have reshaped the form of film resulting in an increased emphasis on affective experiences that resist attempts to understand them in terms of emotion.[138] He argues that "digital technologies have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience" (2). He describes our contemporary media landscape as fractured and layered. Shaviro points to the film *Southland Tales* as being emblematic of this new media

[138] Shaviro, Steven. *Post-Cinematic Affect.* Zero Books: 2010.

experience.[139] This film fills the screen with multiple different multimedia feeds: "sequences are intermixed with a sensory-overload barrage of lo-fi video footage, Internet and cable-TV news feeds, commercials and simulated CGI environments. These often appear in windows within windows, so that the movie screen itself comes to resemble a video or computer screen" (68). The simultaneous presence of multiple different forms of media occurring at different speeds and on different timescales prevents us from making any clear connections between elements. These different elements "are too dispersed, and too indefinite and arbitrary, to work in a focused and organised way. Rather, these links are weak ties, such as we are accustomed to find on the Internet (69)." As a result, the film can produce a hallucinatory affective experience that does not cohere into a narrative. This experience is described in hyper-present terms. Shaviro argues that this chaotic heterogenous digital space "can only be apprehended – bit by bit, 'fragment by fragment,' and from moment to moment," and "it is also overwhelmingly proximate, and hyperbolically present" (37). I argue that affect and hyper-presentism need to be considered hand in hand. To understand what it means to experience the world in a hyper-present fashion as mediated by digital communications also requires exploring what it means to experience the world in an intensely affective mode.

This emphasis on affect poses a particular challenge for literature. Fredric Jameson highlights this challenge in his book *The Antinomies of Realism*.[140] Jameson describes the challenges that affect creates for literary realism in particular, but his arguments could be extended to any primarily language-based media. Jameson follows in the tradition of Massumi distinguishing emotion from affect.[141] He agrees that while emotion requires a narrative, affect

[139] Kelly, Richard. *Southland Tales*. 2007.
[140] Jameson, Frederic. *The Antinomies of Realism*. New York City: Verso, 2015.
[141] This is especially interesting as Massumi positions his argument that our condition is one of a surfeit of affect as a critique of Jameson in *Postmodernism*. I omitted this when I originally quoted Massumi, but the full quote reads,

resists narration, but he goes one step further and argues that affect resists language. He argues that emotions are named but affects cannot be; they can only be experienced in the body. As a result, "the new implication is that affect (or its plural) somehow eludes language and its naming of things (and feelings)" (29). The inability to name affects means that they cannot be described or represented in language, thus posing a significant hurdle to authors' ability to "somehow seize [affect's] fleeting essence and to force its recognition" (31). Although Jameson examines this challenge in light of the nineteenth century novel, I believe this challenge has become even more pronounced, in light of the increased hyper-present nature of contemporary experience. How can contemporary literature contend with our contemporary experience if the surfeit of affect that characterizes it cannot be represented through language?

Queers in Love at the End of the World suggests two ways to rise to this challenge, both facilitated through the text's embodiment of hyper-present experience and its nature as digital literature. The first way that *Queers in Love* emphasizes and depicts affective experience is through the ways it undermines the efficacy of language. The game most explicitly depicts this in the moments described previously where language fails: the sequence where the phrase "I love you" is repeated until it is reduced to a line of s's and the link that connects to a passage that is empty. In each of these moments, the game is able to represent non-linguistic experiences by removing language.

Any literature, regardless of whether it is digital or creates a hyper-present experience, can challenge language in this way, but *Queers in Love* also challenges the efficacy of language in ways unique to digital literature, ways that are uniquely hyper-present. Language is

"Fredric Jameson notwithstanding, belief has waned for many, but not affect. If anything, our condition is characterized by a surfeit of it" (27). Most other scholars read this as a rejection of Jameson's claim that there is "a waning of affect in postmodern culture" (*Postmodernism*, 10).

undermined in *Queers in Love* as a result of its ten second timer. Because readers only have ten-seconds to read, they cannot read effectively. The timer forces you to read as quickly as possible, giving each word little attention. Sentences cannot be read fully, ideas cannot be linked together, and readers have to resort to skimming to even get past the first paragraph. As a result, readers are left only with their experience of reading. By giving you little time to read, *Queers in Love* provides no framework to make sense of your feelings. You cannot contextualize what you are reading, forcing you to experience these last ten seconds before the end of the world as the characters in the game do: in the moment, in intense affectivity.

The second way that *Queers in Love* stresses affectivity is through its emphasis on the body. The most common content in the game's various passages is bodily descriptions. Most of these passages simply describe players' interactions with their lover, but many of them also consider many of the game's more philosophical moments in bodily terms. This happens most frequently when discussing history. For example, one passage reads:

> The last history of the world will be written on your bodies, not on anything so crude as paper, not in anything as abstract as words. It will not be a history of empires, of borders, of kings and killers. It will be a history of your struggle to reclaim your bodies, your lives, your desires, yourselves.

This passage emphasizes the ways that bodies register both the passage of time, but also the effects of power. Our bodies are placed on the same level as "empires, borders, kings, and killers." In other words, the game suggests that what happens to our bodies can be just as significant as what happens on the geopolitical scale. This passage also suggests bodies are more effective at recording history than paper or words. It suggests bodies are not as crude as paper, nor as abstract as words. In other words, our bodies can testify to changes over time in ways that traditional forms of communication cannot.

Whenever the game considers the idea of history it also considers bodies. This move asks readers to consider the relationship between time and the body. It suggests that whenever we consider the passage of time, we also need to consider the role of bodies. Following this logic, if *Queers in Love* demands that we confront our relationship to time through its ten-second timer, it also suggests that if we consider time seriously, we must also pay more attention to our bodies.

Another way that *Queers in Love* draws readers' attention to their bodies is by complicating the boundaries of bodies. The game both challenges the notion of a body as a unified whole and suggests that our bodies extend beyond our physical selves. The game's emphasis on detailed bodily descriptions breaks up the body into its component parts in the same way that Howie's detailed descriptions in *The Mezzanine* broke objects down into their component parts. Anthropy describes the mechanics of a kiss in the same way that Baker describes the mechanics of a stapler: "You draw your tongue slowly into her mouth and she receives it with a soft exhalation of air, letting it roll against hers, a mutual, wet exchange of touch…Her teeth catch your bottom lip as you finally disengage and you make a short, sharp noise with a hard edge." Similarly, many of the choices given to players are about what part of the body they want to focus on next. Finally, a couple passages explicitly emphasize how you or your lover's body is made up of component parts. After considering the smell of your lover, you can choose what that smell means for you. The choice "The reminder that she's made of skin, and hair, and muscle" leads to a passage that confirms the reality of both you and your lover. The game sees value in challenging the notion of a simple unified person. Instead it emphasizes the ways bodies are made up of interconnected parts, rather than as a single homogenous entity.

Finally, the game points to the potentially arbitrary nature of where we define the boundaries of our selves. One passage ends by imagining "alien archaeologists five million years

from now finding two queer bodies pressed against each other mid-fuck, putting them on display in a museum as the only remaining specimens of humanity." With only the petrified remains of you and your lover, "will they reconstruct you as some new being, joined at the thighs?"

By both undermining the efficacy of language and by drawing our attention to the importance of bodies, *Queers in Love* emphasizes affect rather than emotion. By limiting our ability to process or make sense of what we read, the game represents the affective experience of sharing a moment with a lover during the last ten-seconds of the world. It does so not by describing that experience in language, but by recreating that experience for the reader in his or her own body. Playing *Queers in Love* enacts the kind of experience it describes. This experience is made possible through opportunities created by digital literature, but also only because the game creates a hyper-present experience.

Thus, by emphasizing the body and complicating our understanding of the body, *Queers in Love* encourages readers to consider their own body and its interactions with the text. This emphasis does not initially seem as dependent on the game embodying hyper-present experience; any text could also describe bodies in the same way that *Queers in Love* does. But, the hyper-present nature of the game greatly facilitates that recognition. Every one of the hyper-present texts that I have considered in this dissertation pushes readers to consider their own present in the act of reading. *Queers in Love at the End of the World* is no different. So, if affect can be accessed only by experiencing it in one's body in the moment, hyper-present literature encourages the self-awareness necessary to make that recognition possible.

Revealing the Influence of Digital Structures through Hyper-Present Literature

Queers in Love at the End of the World not only queers readers' experience of time, it also queers digitality. *Queers in Love* defamiliarizes interactions and interfaces that are commonplace in digital environments, suggesting alternative forms of engagement with digitality and revealing the digital apparatus that most digital media seeks to make invisible. In this way, *Queers in Love* draws our attention to aspects of digital communication that have the potential to control and coerce us without our awareness. It reveals the pervasive influence of digital structures in our lives allowing us to take greater control of those structures for ourselves.

The ten-second timer in *Queers in Love* initially only seems to highlight the limits of our bodies, but it also begins to highlight the limitations of the hardware upon which the game relies. As I play the game, I am not only made painfully aware of my inability to process the words onscreen fast enough, but I also cannot help but notice the time I lose simply navigating the mouse from one link to the next. This recognition defamiliarizes and draws my attention to the mouse, a device I use so frequently and intuitively that I don't even acknowledge its role in mediating my digital experiences. But the mouse profoundly shapes how we engage with digital media and what kinds of digital media are created.

Technologies mediating between users and digital environments strive for this level of invisibility. This is especially true in regard to gaming. Immersion has long been the goal and promise of computer-based games. As Janet Murray describes, immersion is "the sensation of being surrounded by a completely different reality."[142] Claims for increased immersion continue to appear at every development of new gaming technologies: the development of 3d graphics,[143]

[142] Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, MIT Press, 1997, pp. 98-99

[143] Alison McMahan, "Immersion, Engagement, and Presence." *The Video Game Theory Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Pp. 68-86.

motion controls,[144] and virtual reality headsets.[145] One significant factor for creating this immersion is what Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton call "the perceptual illusion of nonmediation." This occurs when "a person fails to perceive or acknowledge the existence of a medium in his/her communication environment."[146] As a result, in order to increase immersion, digital communication requires its mediating technology to become as invisible as possible.

This invisibility carries a number of potentially negative implications. If users are blind to these technologies, they are likely to also be more blind to the ways that they structure what kinds of media, modes of engagement, and people are privileged and limited by them. In his essay "Queer(ing) Gaming Technologies: Thinking on Constructions of Normativity in Digital Gaming Hardware," Gregory Bagnall argues that the homogenous design of video game controllers creates generic game experiences that cater to a male, heterosexual audience. Since every controller has had roughly the same structure, they encourage designers to recreate the same kinds of games over and over. Bagnall reads a logic of heteronormativity into these games and their controllers, one where the player uses their phallic joystick to explore the world of the game in order to extract his pleasure from it. Bagnall ends his essay wondering what a queer game controller might look like.

Anthropy makes a similar argument in her book "Rise of the Video Game Zinesters."[147] In her book, written a year before she made *Queers in Love*, she pushes back against the male dominated video game industry saying, "the problem with videogames is that they're created by

[144] Leyvand, T, Meekhof, C, Yi-Chen Wei, Jian Sun, and Baining Guo, "Kinect Identity: Technology and Experience." *Computer*, April 2011, Vol.44(4), pp.94-96.
[145] HTC Corporation, "The New VIVE Pro," *vive.com*, 2019, https://www.vive.com/us/pro-eye/. Variations on the word immersion appear 5 times in this description of the new VIVE Pro virtural reality headset.
[146] Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton, "At the Heart of It All: The Concept of Presence," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 3, Iss. 2, 1997, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1997.tb00072.x
[147] Anna Anthropy, "Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form," Seven Stories Press, 2012

a small, insular group of people" (5). She argues that without the introduction of different kinds of voices, video games will present a very limited range of stories and experiences. She highlights a number of ways that the industry enforces its exclusivity, and video game controllers are one of those ways. Like Bagnall, she emphasizes how little controllers have changed over time but also points to the ways each successive generation of controller has become more complicated with more and more buttons. As a result, new generations of controllers implicitly privilege those who are already a part of the gaming community. Jumping into the hobby now presents a much steeper learning curve than it did at its inception. As a result, video game controllers facilitate gatekeeping. Like Bagnall she is excited by the alternative modes of control that might be created if a more diverse group of people start designing games.

But *Queers in Love at the End of the World* takes a different approach. It does not create a new mode of control. It operates with the most common computer controller (the mouse) performing one of its most common functions (clicking a hyperlink). Rather than creating a queer controller, it queers the controller. The game's extreme time restraint transforms the mouse into a site of resistance rather than mastery. It highlights the mouse as a site of complicated, tangled interactions, one where bodily movements are picked up by analog sensors that produce digital responses. It makes the mouse a potential site of both failure and affect: after navigating the game countless times, I increasingly found operating the mouse tedious and frustrating. In this way, the hyper-present experience created by the ten-second timer once again pushes the reader to acknowledge and come to terms with the material forms making the text possible. It encourages the reader to become aware of the hidden structures that make the text possible in the first place.

Queers in Love at the End of the World draws readers' attention to a number of other ignored systems that structure digital media. The game defamiliarizes another computer function so common that it is likely second-nature: your browser's "back" button. Like any other webpage, the game is played in a browser window and navigated through the use of hyperlinks. At some point players will likely click the wrong link and do exactly what I did: click the back button, hoping to go back to the previous page and click the intended link. In my case, I did this almost instinctually. I was in a browser window; this is how browsing the internet works. Clicking the back button in *Queers in Love* does return the player to the previous page, but it also has unforeseen consequences: it creates a new timer. This new timer does not replace the original but appears below it. Pushing the back button multiple times creates a cascade of timers down the left side of the screen and as each one reaches zero "everything is wiped away." In other words, even though clicking the back button returns you to the previous page, it does not give you any more time. You still only have the first ten seconds. In fact, I found the multiplying clocks made the time pressure even more apparent. Attempting to exert control over the game with the back button only multiplies your failure. I clicked the back button because I felt as though I made a mistake and my attempt to fix that mistake only created new problems. The back button did not behave in the way I had been trained to think it would.

This behavior is not programmed into the game. Looking at the code of *Queers in Love at the End of the World* reveals the cascading clocks to simply be a bug. In other words, they are simply a product of the way an internet browser's back button works. This fact emphasizes another formal element structuring the game: the browser software. *Queers in Love* is not a standalone game. Like most software it depends on multiple layers of other software to function. The game is coded in a program called Twine, accessed through an internet browser, and each of

these programs requires operating system software. Most users rarely think about these various tiers of software even though each level structures and limits what is possible at every subsequent level.

In addition to drawing my attention to the other software surrounding *Queers in Love*, the cascading clock bug also revealed how the back button does not actually perform the function I assumed it did. It is not a rewind button but instead reloads the previous page as if you are visiting it anew. Even though the back button seems so intuitive, it is actually very complicated. The highest rated answer to the seemingly simple question "How does the back button in a browser work?" on stackoverflow.com is nearly 700 words long, and the responses to this answer introduce even more complicating factors.[148] In this way, a bug in the game, a moment where software fails to function, proves to be valuable in the ways that it gestures to larger, more complicated software structures.

One final way that *Queers in Love* draws attention to the hidden structures of digital media is by encouraging readers to consider the code of the game. It does this in multiple ways. The first is by being created in Twine. Since its inception, Twine has been designed to be a free open-source tool for creating stories. Learning to program a story in Twine requires very little time. A big part of this is the intuitive graphical interface it uses. Writers simply create chunks of story that appear like post-it notes that they can freely move around and arrange on the screen however they like. To create a link to another chunk of story, the writer simply puts brackets around the name of the linked chunk. The program in turn draws a line from one post-it to another. In this way, programming the game is almost as simple as writing a flow chart. This

[148] Stackoverflow.com is a question and answer site for programmers. These complicating factors include whether webpages are cached or not and whether a POST function happened or not: https://stackoverflow.com/questions/1313788/how-does-the-back-button-in-a-web-browser-work

ease of use is the primary feature that writers mention when they write about Twine.[149] The simple appearance of games like *Queers in Love*, the simplicity of the Twine program, and the ease of publishing a game online encourages readers to think, "I could do this," inviting them to dip a toe into programming.

Queers in Love at the End of the World encourages readers to look at its code more than other Twine games. The experience of reading *Queers in Love* is similar to seeing the tip of an iceberg, knowing that the majority of its content is hidden beneath the surface. This knowledge, combined with the frustration of the ten-second timer, leaves readers who want to read the entire text with no other choice but to load the game up in the Twine program.[150] Additionally, the text of the game reminds the player of its nature as a Twine game. In three different places the word "twine" appears in the text. Each of these instances is a link that leads to a passage that reads "What a powerful mode of expression." This is one of the few links that appears in multiple different places in the text, drawing more attention to this word. Finally, the game includes one passage that includes two broken links. After biting your lover's neck, you are given the options "She [cries out]/[moans]/[screams]/[cries 'yes!']/[says harder]." "Screams" and "says harder" are highlighted in red because the passages they link to do not exist. Clicking them results in the error message, "This passage does not exist." These mistakes are likely not accidental. The red highlight makes them immediately noticeable, the Twine program alerts you to the broken links when you try to upload the game, and Anthropy did not fix these broken links in the course of

[149] For example, Carolyn Petit writes for *Gamespot* that Twine "empowers just about anyone to create a game… It's extremely easy to use;" Laura Hudson writes for *The New York Times Magazine* that Twine transforms "video games into something that is not only consumed by the masses but also created by them;" and Cara Ellison writes for *The Guardian* that Twine is "really not programming at all – if you can write a story, you can make a Twine game." Additionally, I know of at least two of my colleagues who have taught students how to write in Twine in a single class session.

[150] And, until the game was rewritten in Twine 2.0 in 2018, opening the game to see its entire construction was easy to do.

rewriting the game for Twine 2.0. Instead, these seem to be a deliberate breakdown of the game, another moment where frustration and failure encourages readers to look beyond the text itself to its underlying digital structures.

The game's emphasis on drawing attention to the structures that most digital media tries to make invisible has significant political ramifications. The more these material structures are hidden, the greater their capacity to coerce, exploit or hurt users. Although *Save the Date* offers some alternatives outside the algorithmic control that Galloway fears, neither it nor *Queers in Love* suggests that his fears are unfounded. And when we do not recognize the ways that code and its algorithmic nature structure our world, the more likely those fears are to be realized.

Conclusion

In the spirit of the hyper-present, I am tempted to refuse to connect these chapters together into a unified whole, to resist finding an overarching narrative for this dissertation. I did not initially select these texts because I thought they would show similar things. Instead, I was intrigued by how each created a hyper-present experience in such different ways. *The Mezzanine* expands a moment into what feels like an eternity while *Only Revolutions* collapses two centuries into a simultaneous present; *Save the Date* gives the reader more to read each time it is replayed while *Queers in Love at the End of the World* always limits the reader's ability to read. But I am struck by the themes that have repeatedly appeared in these chapters. Despite such different approaches to the hyper-present, what I have learned about it from each text has seemed surprisingly consistent.

I am most surprised by the way the insights about the hyper-present from *The Mezzanine* reappeared throughout my considerations of the other texts. I had assumed Baker's novel would serve as a useful foil to the rest of the texts. His text is the product of a much different moment in time; it is the only text not deeply informed by digital communications technologies. Instead, Howie's intense appreciation for the seemingly inconsequential material objects around him became a guiding principle for navigating the hyper-present experiences the other novels caused. Each of these texts forces its readers to contend with the technologies that mediate them. In the case *The Mezzanine* and *Only Revolutions,* their unconventional structure makes the technology of the book unfamiliar. In the case of *Save the Date* and *Queers in Love*, their failure to fulfill our expectations for software encourages readers to look at the code for themselves. As a result, I found myself regularly thinking like Howie, ignoring the conventional elements of each narrative

and looking at the material elements around them instead. In this way, Howie's attitude toward the world offers a valuable approach for making sense of one's hyper-present experience.

Only Revolutions highlighted how the greatest dangers posed by a hyper-present experience are most likely when we fall into it unconsciously, without intention. Problems most often arise when we are trapped in the perpetual present rather than choose to actively take part in it, as is the case with Nowotny's extended present. This was borne out in each of the twenty-first century texts I examined. When the hyper-present was treated as an obstacle that needed to be overcome in order to fulfill more conventional narrative expectations, each text fell apart. Resisting the hyper-present to focus on the love story of Sam and Hailey in *Only Revolutions* proves baffling and disappointing, pursuing temporal mastery in *Save the Date* reinforces sexist tropes, and attempting to read *Queers in Love* in its entirety is an exercise in futility. But each text opens new opportunities when its reader deliberately adopts a hyper-present approach to reading. Ignoring Hailey and Sam reveals the urgency of ecological destruction, ceding control of the story to Felicia reveals the productive relationship between new media and traditional literary studies, and giving in to the ten-second timer reveals the significance of both affectivity and digitality.

Queers in Love demonstrates how failure can produce valuable knowledge. The failure enforced by the ten-second timer draws our attention to the pitfalls of reproductive futurity, the presence of affectivity, and the impact of digital mediation. This emphasis on knowledge produced through failure recasts the other texts in a new light. It reveals the significant role failure plays in each text's embodiment of the hyper-present. In *The Mezzanine,* Howie's failure to create meaningful human connection enables him to recognize his connection to the material world around him. Our failure to assemble Howie's scattershot thoughts into a unified plot

reveals the complex temporal interactions latent in any particular moment and the value of close attention to the most inconsequential items. In *Only Revolutions,* Sam and Hailey's failure to recognize the world around them mirrors our failure to recognize the information we ignore in the novel's margins. By resisting our ability to assemble the information into a sequence of cause and effect, the novel emphasizes the urgency of problems such as ecological disaster whose timescales make them difficult to notice or address. In *Save the Date,* our failed attempts to rescue Felicia from death highlight the limiting and potentially sexist nature of narrative expectations. In each case, finding value in the hyper-present has meant finding value in failure.

Furthermore, each of these narratives creates a hyper-present experience by resisting readers' ability to read them. By making us fail as readers, each text draws our attention to our act of reading in the present moment. As a result, each text in this dissertation embodies the hyper-present, not simply by overwhelming us or severing the present from past or future, but by making us recognize ourselves in the present. They encourage you to think in the moment: what exactly are you doing? How are you doing it? Why do you do it that way? What do you expect from your experience? And, how do you feel?

In this way, these texts show how the hyper-present resists conventional ways of thinking and conventional ways of reading. Living in the hyper-present makes so many of the typical ways of living in the world impossible. But these texts also show how the hyper-present can enable new ways of thinking and reading. It asks us to reexamine conventional temporalities, draws our attention to things previously ignored, and can create new ways of making sense of our relationship to time. To do so, we need to develop new reading strategies attuned to the hyper-present. We need to come to terms with not being able to assemble a text into a cohesive whole and to become more attentive to materiality, mediating surfaces, affectivity, and our

experience as readers. If we cannot, we may be doomed to fall into the trap of the perpetual present. If we can, we may just find new possibilities for living, perhaps even for our past and future.

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Education

UNIVERSTIY OF WISCONSIN – MILWAUKEE, Milwaukee, WI

- PhD, English: Literature and Cultural Theory, December 2019
  Dissertation: "The Time is Now: Embodiments of the Hyper-Present in Contemporary Literature"

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY, Milwaukee, WI

- MA, English, May 2013

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN COLLEGE, Milwaukee, WI

- BS, English, May 2009

Teaching Experience

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2013-2019): Instructor

- English 310: Writing/Speaking and Technoscience in the 21st Century
  --Junior and Senior level course fulfilling general education requirements in both writing and the humanities and tailored to students in STEM fields.

- English 101: Introduction to College Writing
  --First-year composition course with emphasis on rhetoric. Both traditional and online formats.

- English 102: College Writing and Research
  --First-year composition course with emphasis on research. Both traditional and accelerated summer format.

- English 215: Introduction to English Studies
  --Sophomore level literary survey that serves as gateway to the English major.

- English 192: Zombies in Pop Culture
  --Freshmen seminar designed to encourage retention. Academic analyses of zombies in fiction, film, tv, and video games.

- English 100: Introduction to College Reading and Writing
  --First-year composition course for basic writers.

Marquette University (2011-2013): Instructor

- English 1001: Rhetoric and Composition 1
  --First-Year composition course with emphasis on academic writing.

- English 1002: Rhetoric and Composition 2
  --First-Year composition course with emphasis on professional and public writing.

Other Academic Service (Selected)

UWM, Project Assistant for the English Department	**2019**
UWM, Research Assistant for Distinguished Professor Jane Gallop	**2017-2019**
UWM, Writing Tutor for Dissertation Boot Camp	**2017-2019**
UWM, Accessibility Working Group	**2017-2019**
UWM, Writing Center Tutor	**2016-2019**
UWM, Writing Program Administration	**2015-2017**
UWM, ENG 101 Mentor	**2015-2017**
UWM, MIGC Abstract Review Committee	**2014, 2015, 2017**
UWM, ENG 100 Curriculum Pilot Committee	**2015**
UWM, Composition Reader Committee	**2015**
MARQUETTE, New TA Mentor	**2012-2013**
MARQUETTE, Writing Center Tutor	**2012-2013**

Awards and Fellowships

Sappenfield Dissertator Teaching Fellowship	**2018**
English Department Teaching Excellence Award	**2017**

Hoffman Award for Best Graduate Student Essay **2016**
Essay: "Does a Snap Have a Punctum: Snapchat and Barthes' Theory of Photography"

Presentations

Conference on College Composition & Communication – "Teaching and Learning Access Advocacy" (Forthcoming) **2020**

UWM New TA Orientation – Accessibility Workshop **2019**

Women & Gender Studies Brown Bag – "The Potential for Queer Game Mechanics in *Queers in Love at the End of the World*" **2019**

Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference – Panel Respondent, "Hidden Narratives" **2019**