

Melinh Lai
Professor Brook Stanton
Time Travel in Science Fiction: What Time Travel Reveals About the Present

Abstract

Time travel is one of the most recognizable devices used in science fiction, and the time travel narrative itself has actually existed for centuries before the advent of the science fiction genre. Yet humans have so far never been able to travel through time, and many believe the act to be impossible. Why, then, has time travel existed for so long in science fiction? The act of being able to reinsert oneself into another time period must appeal to some hidden desires that we feel in the present. Moreover, the “direction” that a time traveler takes speaks to different sets of desires, as do the potential consequences that result from a time traveler’s actions. This essay analyzes a variety of time travel narratives in order to pinpoint what desires or anxieties they appeal to and what these desires say about the present (or the present that the works originate from) overall.

Time is one of the most prominent driving forces within the structure of daily life. In her article, “Time,” Barbara Adam writes that “the relationship to time is at the very root of what makes us human.” Virtually every community, in every culture of the world, is somehow aware of and dependent on our continuous, forward movement through time. For all the ways that humans have managed to turn this reliance on time to our advantage, whether through clocks, time zones, or the various forms of instantaneous communication, however, we have somewhat ironically still failed to take any steps towards actually being able to change our current “positions” within time itself. We continue to exist solely in the present, with our memories being the only means to access the past and with no glimpse into the future beyond our imaginations. “Time travel,” which is, in this paper, the ability for a person to reinsert his/her body into another time period as he or she so chooses, has so far never been done. Although the debate is ongoing amongst physicists, there has so far been no *actual* evidence or indication of any sort that time travel is even possible (Burling 9). Perhaps to fill the void created by our failure, our imaginations have worked tirelessly in the realm of fiction, especially in science

fiction, where time travel has become one of the most popular and powerful devices to drive both plot and theory.

But *why* does time travel maintain such a firm grasp on the science fiction genre? In the 1980s alone, over a hundred films and television shows were released that included the theme of time travel (Manui 1-3). What is it about being able to remove oneself from the present and then be reinserted into virtually any other time period that is so fascinating to both readers and writers alike? There have been numerous theories developed in an attempt to answer this question.

Jefferson M. Peters suggests in “The Desire to Control Time in *Doraemon* and Japanese Culture,” that in many ways, time travel stories allow people to escape the temporal constraints in modern-day life. While his analysis mainly focuses on contemporary Japanese culture, many of the pressures that time exerts on their society are also applicable to ours. This is, however, in contrast to Angela Dimitrakaki and Miltos Tsiantis who write in their article “Terminators, Monkeys and Mass Culture: The Carnival of Time in Science Fiction Films,” that time travel is much more than a means to escape everyday life; it can also act as a subversive challenge to temporal norms. Likewise, William J. Burling’s concept of the *temporal contrast* form opens the possibility of using time travel narratives as methods of social criticism. Although the concept of time travel has existed in literature that dates as far back as ancient Hindu mythology, my interests lie in more recent popular works, such as the *Back to the Future* series of films; two components of the *Star Trek* franchise, an episode from the original 1969 television series, as well as J.J. Abrams’ 2009 film of the same name; another film, Disney’s *Meet the Robinsons* (2007); and an animated television series, *Futurama* (1999-2003, 2008-present). This intense popularity might also be indicative of certain underlying wishes or desires that even the vicarious experience of time travel in a fictional setting helps to achieve. Past research has shown that an

individual's personal, mental time travel can influence perception, judgments, and behavior (Epstude and Peetz 270). Perhaps the instances of mental time travel that are projected into works of science fiction reveal even more about people. While it's true that a single set of latent desires might very possibly be what has made time travel such a celebrated concept in science fiction for so long a time, I am also interested in what certain works from the last thirty years or so say about what we desire of the *present* (or at least what was desired of the times in which these works were produced.) From there, I am further intrigued by the "direction" and results of the time travel experience and their indirect indications of present desires. Time travelers, whom I occasionally called "chrononauts" in this paper, often travel to the past in the hopes of rectifying some problem in their present (Manui 3). However, the time traveler's actions in the past may often result in a paradox; I believe the popularity of paradoxes in science fiction most likely allows us a means of confronting, and then accepting, the conflicts between our desires and our inability to fulfill them. In the final section, I approach the topic of traveling through time in the opposite direction and theorize that the act of traveling to the future is a representation of our desires and anxieties of how the present will ultimately affect what is to come. My overall goal is to show that the sense of displacement felt by the time traveler in whatever time period he/she travels to helps to unveil our latent desires in the present, such as a desire to exert a greater influence over time, or perhaps a desire to maintain the illusion that we have any power over time at all.

Instances of time travel to the past generally occur for very similar reasons in fiction. Often, there is a fundamental problem with the "present" that the characters of the narrative hope to resolve by going back in time to ensure that certain events do or do not occur. In the 1985 hit film, *Back to the Future*, for instance, protagonist Marty McFly needs to flee not only from the

thugs who try to kill him just as the DeLorean takes him back to 1955, but also from his dysfunctional family and his fears of inheriting their tendencies for failure. It is thus fairly easy to understand how the act of traveling backwards through time could represent a desire to escape one's own present; the element of control that a time traveler exerts upon time itself becomes very enticing to a person who is otherwise dominated by it (Peters 108). Especially in heavily industrialized countries, where virtually all daily activities are managed by the time of day or the amount of time required to complete them (Adam 124), simply witnessing a fictional character bend the rules of time to his or her advantage seems to provide some sense of enjoyment or even relief. Unfortunately, the results of time travel may end up being far more disastrous than the original problem, and more often than not, the issue is resolved either from the manipulation of past events or the lessons learned from failing to properly do so. For the readers and viewers of these works of science fiction, however, the significance of time travel can be very different, since the *actual* present, known as reality, ultimately remains unchanged. As the audience or readers encounter each of these situations along with the chrononaut, they also experience a reflection of some points of discontent or dissatisfaction found in the present.

Take, for instance, Marty's encounters with his parents in 1955 and the chaotic romantic tensions that ensue, which reek of Freudian psychology. Whereas Obey suggests that time-travel romances can help break down gender roles by adding new elements of adventure to the romance stories, the time-travel romance in *Back to the Future* flips the traditional romance story on its head, and has the audience wanting the romantic relationship to *dissolve*, rather than be consummated. The movie opens up a conversation on the topic of incest, and the comedy that is interwoven into the narrative helps to undo any reservations about approaching the subject (Gordon 372). Although Marty is put in the extremely uncomfortable position of dealing with his

mother's romantic and sexual advances, it is precisely this discomfort that stops the relationship from turning oedipal. The absurdity of the situation, partially reinforced by the ironic tales of chastity that Marty's mother frequently told him in his own "present" time, is similar to Dimitrakaki's and Tsiantis' application of the Bakhtinian concept of the *carnavalesque*, in which the chaotic consequences of certain actions help to expose social norms and their faults. In this situation, the comedy of the scenario doesn't underscore any particular incestuous urge. Rather, it unveils the common fears within the audience (and by extension, the general populace) *towards* incest and the state of the world in which such a taboo would potentially occur, which Gordon describes as "dehumanized, diseased, out of control, and perhaps doomed" (Gordon 373). Although it may seem a little far-fetched to argue that an innocent story about time travel might help to alleviate fears about the state of the world, consider the violent crime (which is defined in the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics as murder and non-negligent manslaughter, robbery, aggravated assault, and/or forcible rape) between 1980 and 1989. National crime rates rose a whopping 128.1 points between 1983 and 1989 – the equivalent of about 400,000 crimes nationwide. Forcible rape rates alone rose from their lowest point of 33.8 to 38.3 by 1989. The film's release in 1985 placed it right in the middle of an age in American history when crime rates threatened to never stop climbing, and many people had to question the moral state of the nation. It would be difficult *not* to worry about the state of the world in this time. Time travel narratives such as *Back to the Future* not only helped people escape the terror of the present with the nostalgia of the past, they also provided a means of alleviating some of this terror. Thus, it is not that *Back to the Future* demonstrates our sexual desires for our parents or our siblings, but rather our fears of what would happen if we *had* these desires. Luckily for

Marty, the romantic relationship between his mother and father is sufficiently restored, and simultaneously altered, and the audience's own anxieties about moral decline are assuaged.

Time travel to the past is thus easily used for the purposes of temporarily escaping from the present and revel in nostalgia. Trips to the past can also often end up unveiling even more concerns about the present, with concerns about moral degradation being just one of many potential examples, all of which cannot be fully examined in this limited allotment of time. Although these trips back in time can sometimes help to assuage these fears, we cannot forget that time travel narratives in science fiction also involve some serious consequences for tampering with the timeline. Changes to the past do not always result in a better future, as they did for Marty. Very often, they create even more trouble than what the protagonist began with, with the most serious consequences taking on the form of a paradox.

One of the most frequent applications of the concept of a "time paradox" involves the time traveler's realization that his or her actions in the past could ultimately determine whether or not he or she will be born. A common paradox in science fiction is the grandfather paradox, in which a time traveler goes to the past and kills an ancestor. The ancestor's death means that any offspring or offspring's offspring, including the time traveler, will never be born (Nahin 47). How is it possible, then, that the time traveler was able to kill the ancestor in the first place, if doing so would result in his/her erasure from the timeline? The answer to this question usually varies from author to author. For instance, Ian Stewart proposes a solution of sorts to the grandfather paradox in "Grandfather Paradox: A Question of Time." In this short story the narrator resolves the conflict of whether or not the paradox can occur by killing his grandfather but then leaving the body in the time machine, "where no time passes and logic is suspended" (Stewart 1). I am particularly interested in the potential solution proposed by the "Possible

Worlds” model of narrative theory, in which actions that alter the timeline can be completed without worry for paradoxes, because the actions themselves create entire new timelines in entirely new universes that remain identical to the original universe up until the point of the ancestral murder (Ryan 644). J.J. Abrams expertly used this narrative model in his 2009 *Star Trek* film, in which a vengeful Romulan travels through a black hole back in time and enacts major alterations to the established *Star Trek* timeline, the most prominent being the destruction of Spock’s home planet, Vulcan.

With the *Star Trek* franchise’s incredibly large and loyal fan-base as his most important critics, one might expect Abrams’ film to have been utterly rejected by the community after he enacted such drastic changes to the established history. In fact, this incredibly distinguishing aspect of Abrams’ *Star Trek* actually ended up being one of its most popular features, because of how Abrams explains the discrepancies by emphasizing the film’s setting in an alternate timeline. Not only did the alternate realities model allow Abrams a wider degree of artistic license, it also gave the audience and long-time fans of the franchise the opportunity to explore the characters in a different light, though from a so-called “safe distance”. In a review of the film by *The New York Times*, Manohla Dargis writes, “Mr. Abrams doesn’t treat ‘Star Trek’ as a sacred text, which would be deadly for everyone save the fanatics. But neither does he skewer a pop cultural classic ...” Still, it was not just his presentation that made the decision so ultimately well-received; perhaps it was a desire, even a secret and begrudging one from the most die-hard of fans, that may have helped to generate enough curiosity to at least see the results of such tampering with time. This can be translated into a desire shared by more than just the *Star Trek* fan-base, but also perhaps to the vast majority of society: the desire to not only revisit the past but also to potentially change it and then see what outcomes arise (Ryan 1). As I stated in the

previous section, many time travel narratives involve a chrononaut going back in time in order to enact some alteration of the past to hopefully affect the present for the better (Manui 3). While this course of action can occasionally work out, as it does for Marty McFly, the unfortunate reminder that time travel itself is most likely impossible (Burling 9) means that the option isn't even available for those of us who live in the real world. Yet despite the impossibility of being able to travel through time, the desire to do so, perhaps in order to correct a blunder or relive a precious memory, remains (Peters 104). In this way, the resolution of a paradox by means of an alternate reality allow readers and audiences the opportunity to witness a "what if" scenario without dealing with the constraints of maintaining one timeline or, more importantly, the much more difficult acknowledgement that our pasts are forever sealed and unchangeable.

Despite all of these different approaches to paradoxes resulting from time travel, the fact remains that paradoxes themselves are an extremely important aspect of the time travel narrative. Why *are* paradoxes so fascinating? If time travel is supposedly impossible, why do people care so much about the equally impossible consequences of a chrononaut's tampering with the past? One of the most celebrated episodes from the original *Star Trek* series, entitled "The City on the Edge of Forever," involves Captain Kirk and Spock traveling back to the American 1930s, the era of the Great Depression in an attempt to retrieve a delirious Dr. McCoy, in order to avoid a paradoxical timeline in which neither Starfleet, the franchise's peacekeeping military service, nor the *Enterprise* exist. During their stay in this time period, Kirk falls in love with an open-minded and generous young woman, only to learn that her death is instrumental in order for certain historical events to not occur, including a Nazi takeover of the United States, and for the timeline in which Starfleet exists to be created. Kirk thus has to witness his love be killed by a truck, and he bitterly forces himself to accept that, even with the technology to travel back in time available

to him, his actions must remain unchanged. In this way, the paradox allows the audience to be confronted with the reality of their own situations of being unable to change their pasts (Ryan 649), but instead of emphasizing feelings of regret or nostalgia that might fuel the desire to do so in the first place, the paradox works to alleviate these anxieties by having the audience accept the present as it is. With the television run airing from 1966 to 1969, the memories of both the Great Depression as well as World War II would still have been heavily carried in the minds of many audience members. While people must surely have felt a desire to go back in time in order to fix certain mistakes or prevent certain events, the reality was that people simply had to accept that the past occurred the way it did and then move on with the present. The audience also witnesses Kirk experience a similar sentiment, when, at the end of the episode, as his companions await their orders, he bitterly replies “Let’s get the hell out of here,” seemingly accepting the nature of the unchangeable past.

In this respect, time travel in science fiction can sometimes depressingly remind us of our utter inability to do anything to change the past. The future, on the other hand, is by definition yet to be seen, and yet to be fully decided. Thus, time travel to the future differs greatly from travelling to the past, and it also carries a different set of desires that make it a prominent component of time travel narratives in their own right.

Although works of science do not include nearly as many instances of time travel to the future as much as the narratives that involve time travel in the opposite direction (Manui 7), personal moments of mental time travel are still incredibly common. Young adults today might spend as much as 38% of their time thinking about the future (Epstude and Peetz 271). While many of these thoughts may very well consist of fears or anxieties about the far-distant future, the statistic also includes projections about certain goals, or even fantasies about their outcomes.

In these latter cases, it appears that there may be some latent and simple pleasure in imagining the future, especially if the future holds positive events (Epstude and Peetz 272). This being said, the less-frequently occurring works of science fiction that travel to the future often depict this future as being either very ideal, almost to the point of being a utopia, or incredibly flawed and dystopian. Two examples of each are, respectively, the 2007 Disney animated film, *Meet the Robinsons*, and the popular television series, *Futurama*. Both include a young individual from the late 20th/early 21st century being consumed by a sense of “lostness,” or a lack of belonging in the era from which he originates. Both protagonists then find their own means of traveling to the future, with *Meet the Robinsons*’s Wilbur encountering a time machine being piloted by a boy who claims to be from the future, while Fry manages to accidentally get himself cryogenically frozen for a thousand years in *Futurama*. The futures that the chrononauts encounter are incredibly different: Wilbur’s is full of fantastic improvements in technology and quality of life, whereas Fry awakens in the city of New New York, which is essentially an intensified and exaggerated version of “old” New York, complete with the crowdedness, crime, and filth.

Clearly there are components in both of these futures that many of us would like to happen in real life. Newer, faster modes of transport, for instance, like flying cars or the more amusing “bubble transit” in *Meet the Robinsons*, have been a particularly popular expectation of the future. In this way, traveling to the future in science fiction allows the author to project his or her own desires and expectations of the future to the reader or audience. For the audience, however, the appeal of these fictional explorations of what is to come lies not only in experiencing someone else’s predictions, but also, and more importantly, in fuelling their own feelings of both hope and doubt within the present. The contrast in the moods of the future settings from *Meet the Robinsons* and *Futurama* speak to each of these sentiments, and the

moods themselves are heavily represented in the different environments of each film or television show (Boxell 25). In the former, the future that Wilbur travels to is bright, lively, and colorful. The notion of utter utopia is cemented with his realization that the eponymous Robinson family is in fact *his* future family, thus giving him the motivation at the end of the movie to return to his time in order to live the life that leads to this future. It is this optimism that may be what makes the narrative so appealing: the hope of the future holding the resolution to the hardships of the present often gives people a reason to persevere.

Futurama, by contrast, presents a future that is at first promising, but is then found to be filled with disappointment and cynicism. Compared to the bright, clean world from *Meet the Robinsons*, New New York's color palette consists of lots of greys, browns, and blacks. While the show's outrageous characters add a greater diversity of colors to emphasize the sheer bizarreness of this future, the drab environment still instills a much less optimistic outlook for the viewer (Boxell 26). Considering that David X. Cohen, one of *Futurama*'s producers, has stated on a DVD commentary that the setting of the television show was "purposely crafted to parody science fiction and modern issues," it becomes a logical assertion that this depiction of the future also appeals to our present doubts about what is to come. Whereas hope is often the force that urges people to carry on despite their struggles, doubt is the factor that continues to try and restrain us. The parodies of modern issues that take the form of marginalized alien and robot species, comically complicated bureaucracies, and extreme global warming are just hints at the potential catastrophes that might actually arise from ignoring the problems of today (Adam 125). This dreary, though still comedic, depiction is the flipside to what idealistic futures like *Meet the Robinsons* appeal to. Compared to the bright, clean world from *Meet the Robinsons*, New New York's color palette consists of lots of greys, browns, and blacks. While the show's outrageous

characters add a greater diversity of colors to emphasize the sheer bizarreness of this future, the drab environment still instills a much less optimistic outlook for the viewer (Boxell 26). Rather than presenting the audience with a message of hope, it instead appeals to their doubts and anxieties about what may come to pass, should they fail to resolve the issues of the present.

Time travel has become such a familiar and well-recognized trope within science fiction that many people hardly even recognize the elements of utter fantasy that it entails. Considering how deeply time plays into the workings of modern day societies, such as wages, schedules, harvests, and any number of activities, it is no surprise that people have also developed a fascination with being able to change where they stand in time. For decades, centuries even, time travel narratives have provided us with a means to at least imagine the possibilities that would arise if we had such ability. Despite the numerous arguments that have been presented in recent years towards the impossibility of the act, time travel continues to remain one of the most widely-used devices in science fiction today. This stubborn survivability suggests this popularity is not reliant on any degree of truth but rather appeals to some aspect of readers and viewers that allows the idea of time travel to survive.

Yet time travel narratives do not exist in a single form. Traveling to the past, the paradoxes that arise from doing so, and traveling to the future are just three of many different forms of the time travel narrative, with each form representing a different desire from the present. While a trip to the past may summon feelings of nostalgia, readers or audience members are also given the opportunity to address anxieties about the present in a new context. Meanwhile, their witnessing of paradoxes allows them to accept certain aspects of the present as it is, considering that the past cannot be changed anyway. Finally, time traveling to the future in science fiction gives us a firmer grasp on our hopes and fears about what has yet to happen. With

an understanding of how and why time travel narratives remain so popular, we create the opportunity to gain new insight and create a new harmony within our lives in the present.

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