

(Coming Unstuck In) TimeTracks

What time is it?

Right now. What time is it?

Right then. What kind of clock did you view to check the time? Your watch? Your phone?

A wall clock? Analog? Digital? Sundial?

Did you guess the time before checking for a definite answer? Why, or why not?

What is the date? Which calendar did you reference? Gregorian, Assyrian, Ptolemaic,

Zoroastrian? Do you even know? *Does it even matter?*

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How far back into your own past (and the pasts of others) must you (or anyone) reach to find relevance in this moment?

Will that moment we just shared (in an asynchronous author-reader sense, anyway) be relevant in the future? *Is relevance relevant to you in this moment?*

While it would be great to delve into multiple scales and perspectives of time right now, we just do not have time. There is too much else about time relevant to this concept of TimeTracks, including its own history and future, as well as that of its creator, your friendly author.

Listen: there is just enough time (and space) to give homage to what are typically considered the two primary contrasting viewpoints of time: the arrow of time (entropy, etc.) and the experience of time. Maybe there will be more time further along this collection of words to dig in a bit deeper, depending on how (un)stuck this essay becomes.

Where to begin with TimeTracks?

Recently, I spent most of a year on the technology startup scene in the piedmont region of North Carolina, both in the Charlotte metro area and in the Piedmont Triad, including Greensboro and Winston-Salem. On this scene I burned a big chunk of the severance I got from my previous employer, hashing out my idea for an interactive data visualization platform for better decision making and complex problem solving with the primary goal of continued individual and collective human behavior change—as we ride the decline of peak oil and enter into an era of scarcity and overpopulation. I thought it was a great idea that

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made a lot of sense (and still does), but when I tried to explain this concept to the MBA cheerleaders, corporate eunuchs, and outmoded academic administrators in charge of the incubators and accelerators, they gave me the same vacant glassy-eyed stare that used to appear when I would ask any Starbucks barista for a “small” instead of a “tall.” Apparently complexity and longitudinal behavior change just cannot be commodified to fit any profit-driven economic model. Go figure.

Luckily, I saw the light ages ago and have long since disassociated myself with the burnt Barstrucks backwater. Similarly, I pulled the ripcord on the startup scene sometime in the second half of 2017. Compounding upon previous experiences within all-too-close proximity to the global management consulting scene, I saw clearly that *somebody* is winning the startup game, and it is *not* the startups. There is a huge glut of unpaid labor rapidly churning out mediocre ideas for their friendly mentors and advisors and angels to discuss and discover. It seems as though most of the good ideas that go unfunded by trusted angels still end up being produced anyway, once the ambitious slaves who started the inchoate idea-incorporations have been politely declined and convinced to focus on different sectors where their efforts may have more likelihood of success.

Picture one thousand replica 1970s-era muscle cars lined up one hundred feet from a concrete wall. All of them rev their engines and drop the clutch (assuming these millennial slaves actually know how to drive an automobile with a manual transmission), accelerating immediately into a death trajectory. Nine hundred and ninety-nine of these candy-coated fossil fuel fossils slam into the wall, and those slaves are dragged from the wreckage by the

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accelerated incubating mentors and pulled to the safety of a different car pointed at a different wall, just a bit further down the way. There is that one car, however, that one polished velociraptor, which avoids the concrete collision—yet it runs out of gas within two hundred yards. The angels are there to put more gas in the raptor, but only if the millennial slave will saw off his left leg in exchange. Additional tanks of gas call for additional body parts. If this millennial slave is lucky enough to be a minority (and, better yet, a double minority), this negotiation ratio changes in favor of more gasoline for less frequent amputation. These unidirectional demolition derbies are occurring wherever the angels can convince enough millennial slaves to gather themselves together and hover with laptops and whiteboards around the oasis mirage.

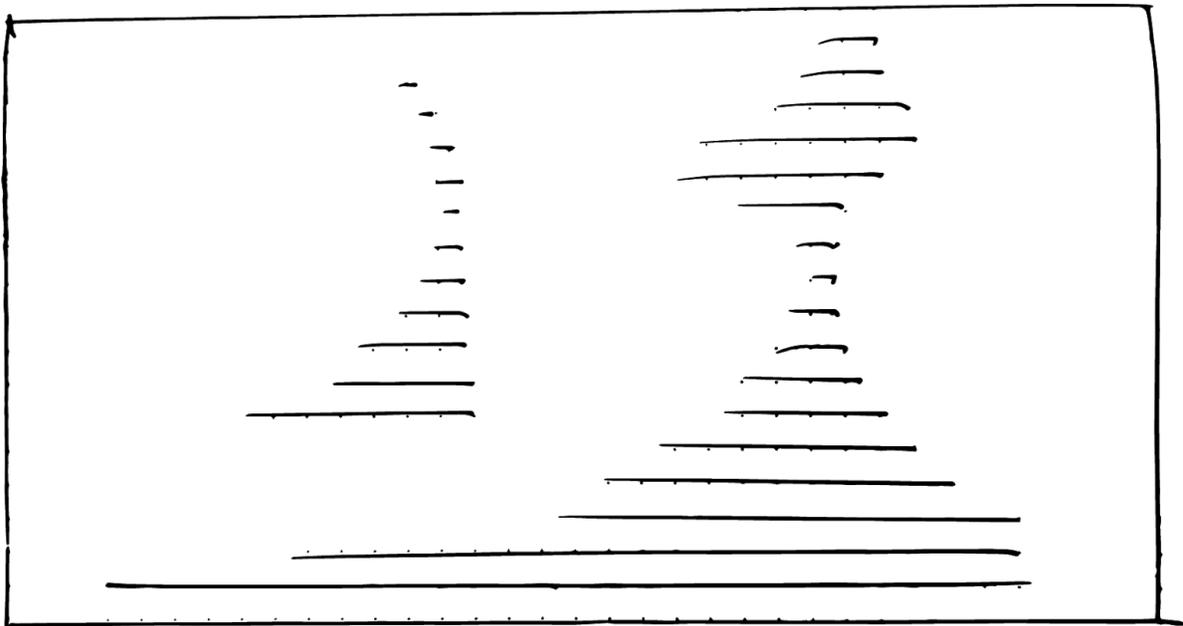
Anyway, by now I imagine you get the picture. In any case, there is not enough time to dive any deeper into the metaphor. I left the startup scene because I would not dumb down my idea, and I could not stomach the slavery charade. I had plenty better things to do with the minor remainder of my severance (dwindling resources, anyone?). I also remembered how many app, system, platform, and tool ideas I had conceptualized in parallel to the various academic and professional pathways I had taken. Luckily, I have been in the habit of writing most of these concepts down as they occur, with some level of organization. In due time, we shall see if this level of detail and frequency in documentation is sufficient.

One of these concepts, indeed, was (and is): TimeTracks.

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Here is one preliminary sketch of what one instantiation of TimeTracks might look like when viewed (in preparation for interaction) on a surface-based display of any type:



For future reference, I used my smartphone to scan this hand sketch on May 17, 2018 at 4:38:48 pm. I uploaded it to my cloud storage roughly two minutes later. I believe I sketched it the day or two before, so, let us estimate the original hand drawing behavior to have occurred sometime on the afternoon of May 15, 2018. (Of course, who knows if any of these time data will ever be relevant in the future, but it is better to have the data and not need them than to need the data and not have them...)

Here is the basic idea: TimeTracks is *time-based contextualization*. Initially I considered it as a mobile app and web-based system for timeline and network generation to contextualize books a user has read, is reading, and perhaps would like to read (fiction and

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nonfiction). Something like LibraryThing™ or GoodReads™, just a bit less social and more focused on a larger variety of contents relationships.

What is contextualized for the user of TimeTracks? For each published entity (book, essay, poem, news article, etc.) previously or currently consumed by the user, the content and subject areas of that entity (down to the paragraph or line, perhaps?) are cross referenced with other entities in those subjects. Also contextualized are the time and space of authorship and publication: *what was happening locally and globally while the author was completing the entity?* For each text (to be) consumed, the user identifies herself and the text, then tracks her own progress through it, always having the option to explore time-based context(s) of content creation surrounding particular events and topics associated with the text, visualized along one or more spectrums of (non)linear order.

Have we come unstuck yet? Let us consider an example that will assure we do: Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

I first read *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the mid 1990s while attending Elkin High School. This novel was on the list of books we could choose as the subject of the term paper we had to write for American Literature. While reading this novel, I fell in love with Vonnegut, knowing I had to read each of the rest of his works. Following high school, I soon read through the rest of his works in chronological order, beginning with *Player Piano*. I have read most of his novels (and short story collections) multiple times since, and I have received my copies of *We Are What We Pretend To Be: The First and Last Works* and *Sucker's Portfolio* in the mail, to be devoured accordingly. Recently, I referenced certain passages of

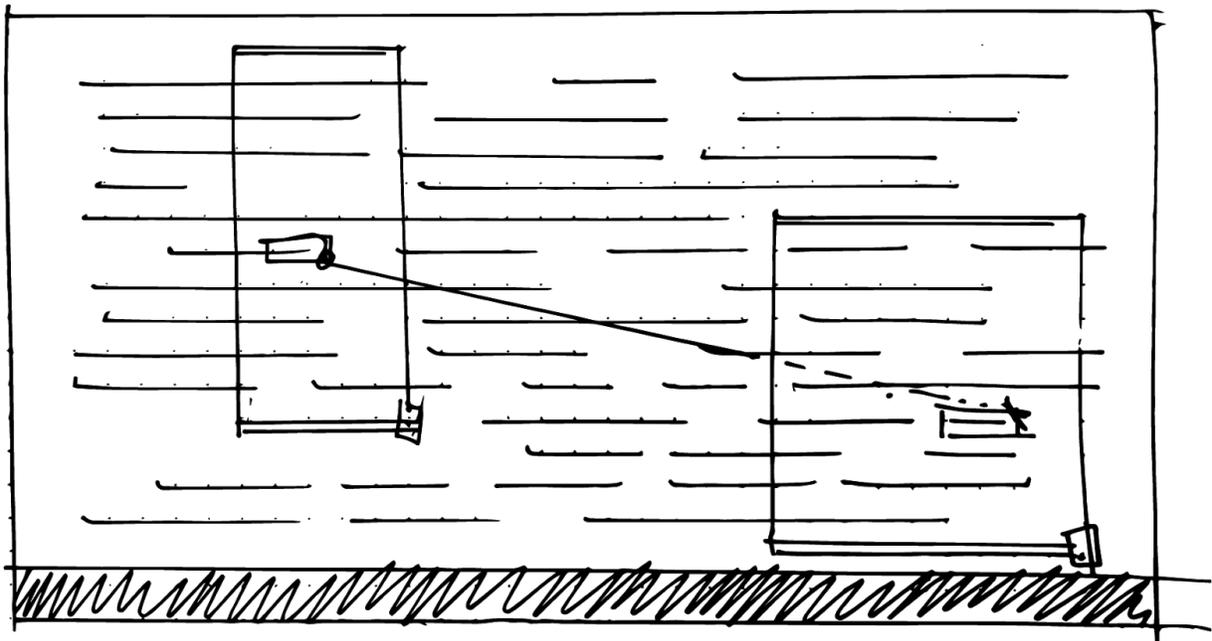
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Slaughterhouse-Five once again to complete a readers theater piece—about my own experiences growing up in Elkin, North Carolina—which I titled *You Can't Be A Wimp And Be A Christian In The Bible Belt*. Yes, a sarcastic piece, if you have been paying attention to what has been written between the lines in this essay.

And how might the attention between the lines be conveyed in TimeTracks?

Here is another sketch showing what a user might see and do when actively (and passively) making (and interpreting) connections, and thus contextualizing, between and across timelines.



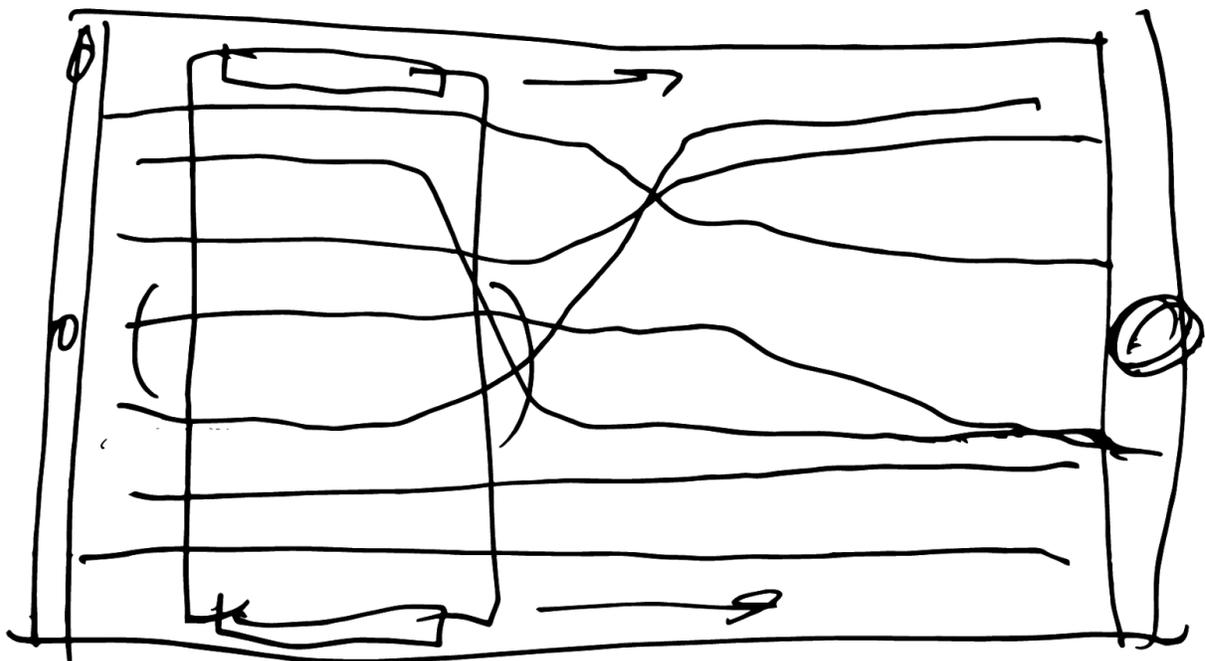
Having once again revisited *Slaughterhouse-Five* through a critical lens to complete this readers theatre piece, I have a renewed interest in which aspects (literary, philosophical, etc.) of the novel might fit into the TimeTracks contextualization diagramming, in linear or

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nonlinear fashion: perhaps irony, including its Greek origins and its use throughout literature? Maybe didacticism, including the relationship between Vonnegut's choice to name the main character Billy Pilgrim, assumed to be partly in homage to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*? What about postmodern literature and metafiction? Where do Vonnegut's works fit along these timelines, and, better yet, *how do they fit in*, and *how well*? And what does that goodness of fit look like when diagrammed within or across a linear or nonlinear context?

Here is another rather rough hand sketch I made showing how a user might engage with a dynamic "fitness frame" slider/filter over several overlapping timelines, as displayed on a smartphone or tablet.



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Considering goodness of fit across subject matter, which of this (arguably incomplete) list of major events of Vonnegut's personal and professional life are relevant for interpreting his experience writing and publishing his sixth(!) novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and which of these interpretations may be most relevant to any user's experience understanding the novel as he or she (re)reads it for the second or tenth time?

1922 Vonnegut born (11/11) - Indianapolis

1940 Graduates from Shortridge High School, enrolls at Cornell University

1943 Enlists in US Army

1944 Vonnegut's mother commits suicide on Mother's Day weekend

1944 Vonnegut captured in Battle of the Bulge (12/22)

1945 Dresden Firebombing (2/13-15)

1945 Returns to US

1945 Marries Jane Cox

1945 Enrolls at University of Chicago

1945 - 1946 Police reporter at Chicago City News Bureau

1947 Son Mark born

1947 Employed by General Electric

1949 Daughter Edith born

1950 First essay "*Report on the Barnhouse Effect*" published in *Colliers* (2/11)

1951 Quits General Electric and moves to Cape Cod

1951-1952 several magazine publications, advertising copy, English teacher, and first American Saab dealership

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1952 First novel *Player Piano* published

1954 Daughter Nanette born

1958 Sister Alice dies (cancer) just days after her husband killed in train accident - Vonnegut adopts Alice's three sons

1959 Second novel *Sirens of Titan* published

1961 Third novel *Mother Night* published

1963 Fourth novel *Cat's Cradle* published

1964 Fifth novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* published

1965-1967 Teacher at Iowa Writers Workshop

1967 Guggenheim Fellowship - travel to Eastern Europe, including Dresden

1969 Sixth novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* published

How might a perusal of context of the rest of Vonnegut's ensuing publications and life (death) events provide additional reflection on what he was getting at when writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*? Such as: an understanding of the continuation of themes across his body of work for better sensemaking when interpreting the meaning of the nonlinear structure for which *Slaughterhouse-Five* is critically acclaimed.

What might be the relevance of this (clearly incomplete) post-publication timeline of this novel, including its political ramifications and derivative works?

1969 *Slaughterhouse-Five* Published

1969 Sixteen weeks on NY Times bestseller list

1970 Nominated for Nebula and Hugo awards - lost both to Le Guin's *The Left Hand*

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of Darkness

1972 Banned from Rochester Community Schools in Oakland County, MI

1972 Film adaptation released - won Prix du Jury at Cannes 1972, also won Hugo Award and Saturn Award

1989 Theatrical adaptation premiered at Everyman Theatre in Liverpool

1996 Another theatrical adaptation premiered at Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago

1996 Operatic adaptation premiered at Bavarian State Opera in Munich

2009 Feature-length radio drama adaptation aired on BBC Radio 3

2011 Banned from Republic High School in MO

2015 Adaptation of book performed at Book-It Repertory Theatre in Seattle

What does the TimeTracks user do to verify the accuracy of these timelines? What does the user do to add additional external and internal experiences to these timelines as relevant to his or her interpretational needs? What else might any user want to contextualize about *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and how are these contextualization choices relevant to any other texts he or she may have already consumed or plans to consume in the future? What sorts of algorithms are necessary to imbue the necessary intelligence into TimeTracks to allow for appropriate tracking and delivery of references and scaffolded supports for these contextualization relevances experienced along the continuous consumption and reflection habits of any user?

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Listen: how smart does TimeTracks need to be to help any user come unstuck in time anytime she wants to, only to deliver her back to the present, just in time?

Will (and should) TimeTracks monitor users' contextualization decisions (as inferred through patterns of actions) and connect together users who make similar (and opposite?) comparison explorations, specifically for the intention of fostering critical engagement and conversation? Examples to be tracked might include users' comparisons between elements of Slaughterhouse-Five with the WWII-Dresden firebombing timeline, the general history of Dresden, the Battle of the Bulge, the Axis, the Allies, or the history of the study of time perception, or the (im)possibility of time travel, or...

Perhaps we should consider another (meta?)example use case of TimeTracks: a future look back to contextualize my own conceptual work on TimeTracks, combined with its current (or past) manifestation of explanation and contextualization within this very essay you are reading, plus my existing nonfiction publications—such as the textbook *Design For Learning In Virtual Worlds* or the journal article *Collaboration Modality, Cognitive Load, and Science Inquiry Learning in Virtual Inquiry Environments* in Educational Technology Research and Development—along with several fictional and nonfictional works at various stages of completion toward publication.

Side note (yes, more time/relevance data bullshit): *Collaboration Modality* was finally accepted for publication in 2010, subsequently published in December 2010 (Volume 58, Issue 6), having been written and edited and revised-rinsed-repeated starting in 2008, based on an experimental study designed, developed, and conducted in the fall of 2007.

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Since publication, this work has been cited 57 times by researchers across the globe. Those 57 publications have been cited a total of 275 (as of May 23, 2018). Will any of this current citation impact have any relevance upon any future critical analysis of TimeTracks or any of my other (non)fiction works?

Anyway, considering the aforementioned future look back: how might that play out, based on what we now know, and what might come to be, whether we are exploring Vonnegut's chosen themes of fate and free will (and the particular context of determinism in twentieth century literature) or the passivity of Tralfamadorian experience as it can be connected back to the Stoics?

Let us come unstuck in time again, looking forty years ahead, when I am nearly eighty years old, with (hopefully) an extended track record of publication, including a three to six part series of novels about an asshole that loses his mind, thinks he can sing with the mountains, and ends up saving some future form of civilization, in what seems to be a parallel universe nestled inside a remote mountain valley, without even realizing what he is actually doing. This is a story originally conceptualized as a trilogy of screenplays when I was a student at Emerson College in Boston from 2001 to 2003: *Deliver Us From Evil*, *Lead Us Not Into Temptation*, and *For Thine Is The Kingdom*. Side note: my first semester of classes at Emerson happened to begin around September 11, 2001. *What a day*. Should this rendition of time play out the way I hope it does, several other dark stories about the ways we destroy each other and the world around us will also crop up in some form or another

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over the next four decades. Some of these, I already know about; some of these, I will discover in the next couple decades.

This reflective track record timeline might also show the establishment of Postropolis, which is the next instantiation of that interactive data visualization platform for better decision making and complex problem solving—with the primary goal of continued individual and collective human behavior change as we ride the decline of peak oil and enter into an era of scarcity and overpopulation (yes yes, that damned human behavior change we are all so excited about). By that point in 2058, Postropolis may have manifested across a variety of modalities as an interactive platform, a planning process, and several iterations (and derivatives?) of a nonfiction (text)book. I wonder what sort of relevance the initial academic roundtable discussion of the Postropolis concept (to be) held in late June at iLRN 2018 in Missoula, Montana will have when this reflection occurs in 2058?

Since I am no Tralfamadorian, I certainly cannot tell you exactly what 2058 will look like, but hopefully we will be well on our way along an optimistic decline from the glut of conspicuous consumption toward collective peace in frugality, ideally paired with an intentional decrease in the human population, along with substantial progress toward setting aside at least half the surface of the earth for uninhibited use by all the other species with which we share the planet. Come to think of it: what relationship does my recent consumption of E. O. Wilson's *Half-Earth* and John Michael Greer's *The Long Descent* have upon my decision to include these previous statements in this very essay? And is there any

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relevance to the fact that I did not include the immediately preceding sentence (and this current sentence you are reading) until the third draft? Would I have made this many draft rounds had I had less time before the deadline for submission to the open call? What was I thinking about between drafts two and three that triggered the inclusion of the referenced sentences? How might this relationship be conveyed in TimeTracks, either actively or passively, as you are reading this essay, or perhaps days, weeks, months, or years later when you have another thought that connects back to any of these ideas—*and your own experiences reading this essay?*

Listen: I also cannot tell you if publication will still be a thing that happens in 2058. However, if two or more humans are still in physical proximity at that point in time, regardless of available technical systems, communication will certainly still exist in some form or another—which gives us hope that people will still want to contextualize all the things that we are currently blathering about. So it goes.

How might my experience of writing this very essay about TimeTracks be contextualized in this 2058 timeline? How does my experience of becoming aware of the Slice Magazine call fit in?

Slice announces a general theme of “time” for its annual open submission period, and this helps me realize that I should finally get around to taking the time to coalesce some of my ongoing ideas about the experience of time and the temporal relevance of how we consume and contextualize and communicate information and experiences. If Slice had not taken the time to decide that *time* was the theme of its open submission period this year, then how

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much longer might I have waited to take the time to write this essay? Assuming the Slice team rejects or accepts this essay, what relevance will this temporal impetus have for the way that you are interpreting this essay as you read it now—or as it is read in 2058? What about 2158?

Will the fact that I am thirty-eight years old while initially drafting this essay have any relevance on such a reflection? Which major personal and professional events from my own past (and future) will prove relevant to this essay and all previous and future works produced by this temporary instantiation of sensory inputs, cognitive processes, and productive faculties known to most other humans as Dr. Benjamin Erlandson?

Considering the conceptual elements and multi-modal nature of the Postropolis platform and process, several alternative applications of TimeTracks beyond the written word come to mind. Music appreciation, including intra- and inter-genre exploration. Music composition. The visual arts. General historical literacy. Systems wisdom. As Dana (Donella) Meadows so fervently insisted during her all-too-short instantiation on this planet: *we need to expand our time horizons*. Essentially, whatever has existed or may yet ever exist can be contextualized in TimeTracks—especially if one or more data points can be assigned or associated with the thing in question, whenever it is/was/will be.

When did TimeTracks first get outside of my head? For much of the first two years of my doctoral work in Educational Technology at Arizona State University (from 2005 to 2007) I shared an office in the Division of Psychology in Education with Maurice. Maurice and I became classmates, colleagues, and friends, taking regular breaks throughout any day to

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back our rolling chairs toward each other and tell terrible jokes or run harebrained ideas by each other. Concerning the terrible jokes: have you ever heard the one about the two Canadians playing twenty questions in a dive bar?

One of these harebrained ideas was SoLinDRA, a Soft-Linking Digital Research Assistant, which nowadays might be considered some souped-up rendition of note-taking software. As is typical, we were looking for a way to make our own jobs easier through technology, only we were taking things a step further, geeking out over the cognitive factors that would also make this a great platform/tool for teaching and learning. Pragmatically, I purchased solindra.com, .net, and .org for not a lot of money. We figured we were going to hit it big with this one.

Maurice got distracted enough by land rights issues back in his home state of Kentucky that he soon left the program. During this period of distraction and work and classes and bicycle racing and girl chasing (just me, not Maurice), our work on SoLinDRA quickly took a back burner. When a guy from an upstart California solar company called Solyndra sent me a nice friendly MBA-cheerleader-style email asking to buy these domains from me, I confirmed with Maurice that our idea was dead enough to change the name, and then I took the money and ran. So it goes.

Across the completion of my dissertation by 2010 and my four years in California, I cycled through several iterations of any number of platform/app ideas—mainly as a method of relaxation during my downtime from any of the actual jobs that I had. Perhaps walking for miles out and back along the desolate cliff dunes of Monterey Bay on any given Saturday

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morning in 2011 would have generated the lines in the sand that led me to think again about contextualization of time and space. Maybe I was just killing time. Maybe I just took a lot of pictures.

I know that I thought quite a lot about TimeTracks during my most recent road trip move from California back to North Carolina in early 2014. Elements of other app systems made appearances in *Winter South 02014*, the self-published travel book I wrote about that particular journey. What an experience (and waste?) the self-publication process seemed to be at the time.

What relevance might any of this conceptualization of TimeTracks have on the way people use TimeTracks in 2024, if the app ever even exists at all? Does the development history of *any* app or platform have *any* relevance to its use on a day-to-day basis? Can TimeTracks establish such relevance? *Should* it?

OK, how about one more meta-example before we finish this particular installment of an asynchronous relationship: How long did it take you to read this essay?

Did you finish it in one sitting?

Did you read it on your mobile device, a laptop, on paper—or perhaps some combination?

Did you take notes while you read it? If so, what are your notes about? Which aspects of context and timing did you take into consideration? *How far back, and how broad in scope?*

Did you (explicitly or implicitly) question the notetaking and contextualization toolset

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available to you during the process of reading this essay, regardless of how many sittings and locations were required for completion? Why would you question this toolset?

Will you read this essay again? How many more times will you read it? Will you take (more) notes? Will you share this essay with friends or coworkers or enemies? Will you share your notes? Only with your friends? Will you attempt to contact the author? How long might it take you to make any of these decisions and take action upon them? Why?

Listen: I will tell you why you should question this TimeTracks toolset. Across my academic and professional experiences, I have discovered that, regardless of mode or narrative, I am a Learning Systems Designer. I do not care if the TimeTracks platform app idea is marketable or profitable. I believe TimeTracks needs to exist as a tool for critical thinking in support of individual and collective human progress, and I hope that the 2058 contextual reflection will demonstrate the correctness of my belief.

I am happy to work with anyone willing to infuse time, effort, and/or money into the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of TimeTracks. Money would be fabulous, but time and effort are preferable.

Get in touch!

Why? I don't really know. I guess it is just about time.

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