**Future Perfect: Crowdfunding Nostalgia**

Draft

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In November, 2012, Ryan North launched a Kickstarter campaign for a book project called *To Be or Not to Be: A Chooseable-Path Adventure*.[[1]](#footnote-1) The campaign promised a unique rendition of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* – “one BASICALLY AMAZING BOOK full of JOKES and also SWORDFIGHTS and GHOSTS and AWESOME AS A MASS NOUN.” Backers would be able to play through the plot as Ophelia, as Hamlet, or as Hamlet Sr. – who dies on the first page and promptly becomes a ghost. North came to the internet with the 80,000 word book already completed; he only needed the $20,000 he was asking for in order to pay for professional editing, typesetting, and design, and for illustrations from other internet-based artists. North is well-known on certain corners of the internet for various creative projects including *Dinosaur Comics*, *The Machine of Death*, Project Wonderful, and a literary analysis of the (terrible) novelization of the first *Back to the Future* movie, and he was able to draw on that popularity both to attract these artists and to spread the word about the book. The Kickstarter campaign was astonishingly successful: North met his initial target in a little over three hours, and then raced to add additional reward tiers as backers flooded in, pledging between $15 (for a pre-order of a digital copy of the book) and $5001. In total, *To Be or Not to Be* pulled in $580,905 from 15,352 backers, making it the most successful Kickstarter publishing project to date.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*To Be or Not to Be* was a runaway success, but in some ways it was not that different from other recent successful crowdfunding projects. It succeeded on the basis of North’s popularity, the brilliance of the conceit, and the media buzz that surrounded the campaign, to be sure, but it also succeeded on the basis of its nostalgic appeal. In explicitly avoiding the trademarked choose-your-own-adventure label during the campaign, North nevertheless gestured at a format that much of his audience must have remembered from their childhood. The CYOA books were originally released between 1979 and 1998; by the time of North’s Kickstarter campaign, the 10- to 14-year-olds who would have read that original series would have been between 24 and 47 – old enough both to remember CYOA with fondness, and to have the disposable income to pledge to a cleverly pitched project.

The nostalgia for CYOA books, however, and the nostalgia that underlies the success of a range of other well-known Kickstarter campaigns, is not bound so straightforwardly to this singular cultural object. In this paper, I will advance a speculative, phenomenological reading of nostalgic crowdfunded projects like *To Be or Not to Be* in order to examine the complicated temporality and sociality of funding the future and the political ontology that it requires. Following Brad Bryan’s reading of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, I suggest that we can move from the analysis of a particular nostalgic cultural object – one possibly laden with reactionary political implications – to the thinking of a more fundamental nostalgic relationship to Being as such that would involve a non-reactionary politics. I am concerned here with the connection between ontology and politics. I further argue that certain temporal features of modern technology – and of social media in particular – can preclude a move to this sort of thinking, or at least twist the path to it. Crowdfunding holds time in abeyance and situates its subject ec-statically, in the future perfect tense.

While I will ultimately turn my attention to these broader political and ontological questions, I want to begin by further examining the affect produced by this first cultural object. I suggested that the nostalgic appeal of North’s campaign might not be tied to the CYOA books in particular; this was certainly true for me. I remember ordering CYOA books from Scholastic during my elementary school days (alongside Bill Watterson and Susan Cooper), but I don’t remember anything about the books themselves. Nevertheless, the Kickstarter campaign triggered a recollection of a general sort of fondness for that period in my life – an affective association with a sort of innocence and wonderment. The sensation wasn’t much different from what I experienced backing other campaigns that promised to resuscitate older media objects, particularly the sort of point-and-click adventure and RPG games that fell out of favour in the early 2000s – “a lost art form,” as renowned game designer Tim Schafer puts it, that “exists in our dreams and our memories, and in… Germany.”[[3]](#footnote-3) These sorts of projects are self-consciously nostalgic; they deliberately invoke memory and past success in their marketing. Before describing the “classic” features of the spiritual successor to Planescape: Torment, for instance,[[4]](#footnote-4) the video in Obsidian Entertainment’s campaign begins by referencing the past successes of its “legendary game designers,” including the critically-acclaimed Fallout 1 and 2, Icewind Dale 1 and 2, and Planescape itself. Even the codename for the game – Project Eternity – makes mention of a curious sort of time. (Planescape’s protagonist, the Nameless One, could certainly be read as a nostalgic trying to set time aright.) I’ve backed these projects out of my own desire to relive certain aspects of my childhood, but I’ve noticed a similar sort of nostalgic appeal in other Kickstarter projects, too.

The nostalgic appeal of the games or books themselves doesn’t go far enough in explaining these campaigns’ success, however, and fixating on it alone won’t allow me to say much that’s novel about this particular technological incarnation of nostalgia. It’s true that backers’ eagerness to fund a return to childhood memorizes symptomatizes the classical definition of *nostos algia/algein/algos* as a longing to return home – an impossibility that nevertheless structures action and shapes affect. In Svetlana Boym’s meditations on nostalgia, she notes that the mood indicates a refusal “to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition,”[[5]](#footnote-5) or that it works collectively insofar as we moderns[[6]](#footnote-6) all partake in it but divisively insofar as the “home” that “we” imagine differs radically from the homes of others.[[7]](#footnote-7) These claims are true of nostalgia in general, and they highlight some of the particular social and temporal features of the mood, but they fail to identify the idiosyncratic and interconnected sociality and temporality of crowdfunding as such. One might reasonably argue that the desire to repeat a prior experience – the videogame of time gone by – indicates an unwillingness to embrace the new. Or one might suggest that the continual return to the personally familiar pulls backers out of the Arendtian public sphere in which properly political action, which requires a meeting of human beings rather than a siloing off into closed realms, can take place. The technology intrudes, however, and demands a modification of these claims.

While much might be made of the sociality of crowdfunding – participation in the campaign itself, communication with the creator, a sense of community with one’s fellow backers, and so on – I want to focus here on the phenomenon’s temporality. At first, crowdfunding seems to pertain purely to the past or purely to the future. In addition to the nostalgic mode, there is a clear sense in which crowdfunding inculcates a capitalist mode of acquisition: when I back a project, I am acquiring some future good – and at a sharp discount. Crowdfunding, in this mode, is about nothing more than exchange. But exchange is often subordinate to another dynamic. Ian Bogost reflects on this in a discussion of a fancy pen the receiving of which was the result of a project that he had backed on Kickstarter 10 months earlier: “It’s five inches of machined metal with a pen in it. It’s nice, I guess, but I’m still using a $2 roller-ball to sketch notes in my Moleskine. Yet the Pen Type-A is more than a $100 metal pen that never gets used, it’s a memento of the excitement I felt after first seeing the product.”[[8]](#footnote-8) For Bogost, this sort of crowdfunding is less about the purchase of a product than the recollection of an experience: “We don’t really want the stuff. We’re paying for the sensation of a hypothetical idea, not the experience of a realized product. For the pleasure of desiring it. For the experience of watching it succeed beyond expectations or to fail dramatically.” But the recollection isn’t of an experience that has happened already, or even of an experience that will have happened at some point in the near future, after the act of clicking “Back This Project” or the successful conclusion of the campaign; rather, the recollection is of an experience that will have been, or, better, an experience that will precisely never have been. The (projected) recollection aims at the future feeling of nostalgia. This would be a future perfect both grammatical and fantastical.

The proper tense of crowdfunding, then, is im-proper – non-linear, non-actual, im-possible. It recalls aspects of Heidegger’s ecstatic temporality, Nietzsche’s eternal return, and Derrida’s *l’à-venir*, but perhaps only in its impropriety – not necessarily in its affective or politico-ethical orientation, where Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Derrida certainly differ. Insofar as there is a technologically-enabled nostalgia here, curious though it may be, the future perfect of crowdfunding seems to have more in common with inauthenticity, the terror of the eternal return of the same, and the *mal d’archive*. In a longer paper, I would like to work through these three curious temporal features in the context of crowdfunding; here, however, I will restrict myself to comments on *ressentiment* and nostalgia, taking my point of departure from Bryan’s observations on the relationship between the two.

Nostalgia, Bryan argues, “works revenge on the present”:[[9]](#footnote-9) it valorizes a past that never was and to which we can never return, and in so doing it devalues the present and all possible futures. The nostalgic, because of this vengeful function, is a nihilist – “a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist.”[[10]](#footnote-10) In most manifestations of what Bryan terms “false” nostalgia, there is an insistence on the return to propriety – to the right ordering of things – futile though it will prove to be. Bryan points to two particular examples where this insistence becomes politically mobilized in problematic ways. In the first, the white settler expresses outrage in response to the Makah hunting a single gray whale with whaling boats and guns instead of the traditional equipment that would better mark their essential connection with nature. In the second, “organic” foods are established as an institution in response to the loss of an authentic connection with the land made manifest by the overabundance of processed foods. In both of these cases, there is a false object to which the nostalgic wishes to return (the cedar boat, or a traditional harmony with nature; the locally grown apple, or sustainability and deference to our place in the great chain of being), and the political programs that set about effecting that return prove to be problematic at best (the whale hunt is banned over the protests of the Makah themselves; the label “organic” is established as a guilt-effacing, mythological symbol that enables consumers to consume by bundling their exculpation from consumption with the act of consumption itself).[[11]](#footnote-11)

Two questions arise. The first concerns the possibility of a nostalgia free from *ressentiment*, and the second concerns the comparative temporalities of “false” nostalgia and the nostalgia associated with crowdfunding. The first question is Bryan’s: is nostalgia necessarily nihilistic? Does it inevitably issue in the valuation of the non-existent and devaluation of that which is? The answers to these questions depends on the questioner’s frame of reference – on the distinction between ontic and ontological. It seems peculiar that Heidegger, such a committed reader of Nietzsche, apparently falls prey to nihilistic, nostalgic thinking in his obsession with fundamental ontology, the essence of technology, the home in which Being dwells, and so on. This peculiarity can be explained by distinguishing ontic from ontological nostalgia and demonstrating the connection between the two. In ontic, “actual” nostalgia, Bryan argues, “we must experience a particular loss of something from the past,” like the loss of tradition or a connection to the land; however, what this loss points to is ultimately something more foundational – “home.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The loss of a particular thing indexes the loss of a way of being. In this understanding, nostalgia becomes not just an epiphenomenal aspect of modern existence, but the very ground of the thoughtful existence of *Dasein*: “nostalgia is the condition of the possibility of the thinking being.”[[13]](#footnote-13) *Dasein*, at any given time, exists in one way and one way only; the human is constitutively, essentially incapable of exceeding a certain ontological boundary (e.g. the essence of modern technology), and it is this incapacity or existential circumscription that constitutes homelessness. That boundary cannot be discerned directly – it is the horizon of thought – but “we *can* see that *we cannot* see.”[[14]](#footnote-14) There might be “no return to the way that it was,” no matter the specific content of the “it,” but “*by giving thought to this, we can recognize that there is no return, and can experience sorrow in its wake*.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Ontic nostalgia can prompt *Dasein* to reflect on the ontological conditions of its existence – its radical finitudes – in “a witnessing and memorializing.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Vitally, Bryan insists that this reflecting, witnessing, and memorializing of the non-existent home from which we are constitutively separated (because *Da-sein* is-*there* and not somewhere else, or because there is no escaping metaphysics) is significant for ethics and politics: “[t]o think through what it is to be human, to be a thinking being, is to think through how we are called forth to belong together and with others, and how far and foreign such belonging seems.”[[17]](#footnote-17) A being-with founded on the recognition of the radical finitudes of *Dasein*, Bryan implies, will be different from a being-with founded on the limitless atomism of Descartes; it will entail an ethical and political order that differs inherently from the various liberal humanisms that, Heidegger argues, are founded on the *subiectum*. Like Heidegger, Bryan provides no prescription for the particular ethical and political actions that must follow from this perspective (which would, in any case, by definition be indescribable in advance – Derrida’s *l’à-venir*, Heidegger’s *l’avenant*),[[18]](#footnote-18) instead choosing to highlight the dangers that are entailed in ignoring it – arguing, for instance, that the unreflective, colonialist politics of banning a technologized whale hunt follows from a merely ontic nostalgia. Breaking free from this constraint, or at least acknowledging the radical hold that it has on *Dasein*’s existence, is the possibility that ontological nostalgia affords.

The answer to the first question, then, is affirmative: we *can* locate a nostalgia free from *ressentiment*, even though we might only be able to do so by considering the ontological conditions of possibility of the mood. As Boym puts is, “longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The answer to the second question might be different. To what extent does the future tense of crowdfunding differ from the temporality of everyday nostalgia? Does its retro-futural structure, its seeming impropriety, help it to align with the reflective nostalgia that Bryan thinks is a necessary condition for a non-vengeful politics, or does it fall back into an ontic preoccupation with returning to a past that never was? The ontic nostalgia on display in Bryan’s examples seems to differ from the nostalgia of crowdfunding in terms of its relationship to time: where “false” nostalgia insists on and mobilizes a return to the past (even though that past may never have been), the future perfect of Kickstarter anticipates a moment when we can look back on the present and recall it with fondness. This seems, at first, to align with Zarathustra’s “yes-saying” rather than the naysaying of nihilism. In backing a project, the campaign contributor is affirming his or her action now and in the future: the moment will return a second time, and it will be greeted no differently. The backer welcomes the eternal return of the same – the “desire to experience it all once again, an eternity of times.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

But the act of backing should probably be read differently. The backer isn’t expressing a desire to experience it *all* again, but a desire to re-experience carefully selected moments – those moments, in particular, that are suffused with a comfortable glow. This contrasts drastically to the account of the eternal return from *The Gay Science*, where Nietzsche describes a demon that “[steals] after you in your loneliest loneliness and [says] to you: ‘This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more.’” How would you react to this statement, Nietzsche asks?

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth…? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.” If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, ‘Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?’ would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The eternal return presents a terrifying prospect. Indeed, the prospect is *existentially* terrifying, since the demon is confronting its answerer with a question not just about “this” – this or that particular thing – but about his or her existence itself. The question invites the answerer to consider the sort of world into which he or she has been cast, and to compare it to the sort of word that he or she has set up. For the real work of *ressentiment* is that of world-creation: “[t]he great act of revenge for Nietzsche is to set up a world – and that world is the world of the human. In setting up this world for the human, the human gives birth to itself in revolt against the suffering of time.”[[22]](#footnote-22) We are confronted with quotidian versions of the question of the eternal return all the time, but our answer to it is almost always negative: “No, I don’t desire that this particular thing happen once more and innumerable times more; in fact, this particular thing is unjust, and compares poorly to a past I once knew and a future I plan to establish.” The world, in this light, is something to be *redeemed* – wrenched from the unfair passage of time.

This is a more accurate description for the attitude and affect associated with crowdfunding. The backer wants the same to return again and again, but that same really does need to be *the same* – or “identical,” as Heidegger would have it, and therefore of no real danger.[[23]](#footnote-23) Uncertainty and change are rejected. John Walker argues that a subtle political economy explains this rejection, with backers more likely to support familiar ventures than wholly unknown ones: familiar ventures “promise [to be] like that thing you liked before.”[[24]](#footnote-24) This is true, and it helps to explain why nostalgic projects often enjoy crowdfunding success, but I am arguing that backers act nostalgically not only because it is a way of guaranteeing consumer satisfaction, but also because it guarantees a freedom from the existential quandary that might arise when faced with the new.

Crowdfunding, like other digital distractions, inculcates a curious relationship to time; it ducks the demon’s question on the eternal return, or it answers out of the corner of its mouth, giving lip service to a radically uncertain future. Nevertheless, its time remains nonlinear, with the future perfect tense loosely resembling the ecstatic spread of Heideggerian temporality. So what sort of time are we dealing with here? Crowdfunding, and digital technology in general, are in the business of creating an affective archive that neither drives time forward nor dwells in the past. Instead, we see here a time held in abeyance: a future made certain and a past rescued from forgetting. When Bogost suggests that Kickstarter is “QVC for the Net set”[[25]](#footnote-25) – a form of entertainment like any other – he’s not wrong. All entertainment does the work of suspending time, and there’s nothing particularly problematic about it. (Even Heidegger, that most nostalgic and proper of philosophers, doesn’t suggest that we should strive for authenticity and danger all the time.) What distinguishes crowdfunding, and social media in general, from being simply another form of entertainment is the way that it involves the user in the process. Crowdfunding involves an entire userbase, in fact, in the business of securitizing affect over time – using those users themselves as the (im)material basis that provides the product with its worth. It is an act of prosumption in the most biopolitical sense of the word. Since it involves its users, and their futures and their pasts, so centrally in the process of production (of a campaign, a sense of community, a sense of history and certainty…), crowdfunding may also preclude the sort of ethos for which Bryan is calling: it provides the illusion that things actually need *not* change, or that a homecoming *is* possible. This is a model of nostalgia that involves considerably less activity than before – a lingering in a state of readiness for return, but no movement towards return itself. In this nostalgia, *ressentiment* is lazy.

This may be too general a claim to make. Kickstarter raises hundreds of millions of dollars each year, and this money goes to a startling range of often brilliant, innovative projects – and there are hundreds of other crowdfunding platforms out there doing similar work, if on a smaller scale. While I’ve focused here on a few transparently nostalgic campaigns, I could just as easily have highlighted those brilliant artists and producers whose work might have languished in obscurity without the platform. I am not trying to suggest that crowdfunding in and of itself generates the sort of passively vengeful nostalgia I’ve characterized above, or that any particular Kickstarter campaign is founded on the future perfect tense. Rather, I am arguing that crowdfunding often takes the form of Bryan’s ontic nostalgia, and that it should raise the same sorts of questions about existential homelessness that it does for him. Additionally, I am suggesting that the temporal technologies involved in crowdfunding add a new twist on this old ontic phenomenon, enabling (without necessitating) the temporary (but always digitally renewed) withdrawal from the passage of time, and thus from the possibility of politics. If it ducks the question of the eternal return, crowdfunding makes it impossible for the future-to-come to come.

So, while the ontic politics of crowdfunding are familiar, its time is nevertheless improper. I began this paper by calling attention to my favourite Kickstarter campaign, Ryan North’s *To Be or Not to Be*. As a “chooseable-path” book, *To Be or Not to Be* is decidedly “out of joint”: there are innumerable ways to read through the plot, and no authoritative conclusion. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida makes much of Hamlet’s phrase at the end of the play’s first act: “The time is out of joint: O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!” Hamlet, having spoken to the ghost of his murdered father, is setting out to re-establish some sort of justice, but the justice that preoccupies deconstruction takes a different form: “If right or law stems from vengeance, as Hamlet seems to complain that it does – before Nietzsche, before Heidegger, before Benjamin – can one not yearn for a justice that one day, a day belonging no longer to history, a quasi-messianic day, would finally be removed from the fatality of vengeance? Better than removed: infinitely foreign, heterogeneous at its source?”[[26]](#footnote-26) To the juridical justice of linear time Derrida opposes the quasi-messianic justice of *l’à-venir* – an uncertain future-to-come. But he soon collapses this division and calls into question the propriety of temporality as such. What time is not “out of joint,” and what text cannot be read as a “chooseable-path”? And what ontic nostalgia cannot issue in the thoughtfulness of ek-sistence? Crowdfunding only gives the impression of linearity, security, and certainty, as well as the ontological, ethical, and political closures that accompany them. Ghosts run through the wires.

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1. Ryan North, *To Be or Not to Be: A Chooseable-Path Adventure* (Breadpig, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/breadpig/to-be-or-not-to-be-that-is-the-adventure>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/doublefine/double-fine-adventure>. Schafer’s Double Fine Adventure succeeded extraordinarily in 2012, raising $2.9 million more than originally requested. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/obsidian/project-eternity>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xv. She later notes that this particular conception of time is dependent on a linear conception of temporality possibly unique to modernity (13). Nevertheless, this argument could easily be extended into Heidegger’s language of an authentic confrontation with death that would pertain universally. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The word was only coined in the late 1600s in response to a seemingly medical condition. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <http://www.bogost.com/writing/kickstarter_crowdfunding_platf.shtml>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bradley Bryan, “Revenge and Nostalgia: Reconciling Nietzsche and Heidegger on the Question of Coming to Terms with the Past,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 38.1 (2012), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Random House, 1968), §585. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bryan, “Revenge and Nostalgia,” 25-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid, 35, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994); Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993). These terms – one ontological, one hauntological – are not identical, and indeed the distinction between them is vital for Derrida’s work to describe a spectral ethics that would avoid the pitfalls of Heidegger’s alleged obsession with presence. Nevertheless, both Derrida and Heidegger espouse an ethics that embraces a constitutively uncertain future. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Quoted in Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volume II* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), §341. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Bryan, “Revenge and Nostalgia,” 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. At the end of the “Letter on Humanism,” Heidegger writes that “[t]o flee into the identical is not dangerous. To risk discord in order to say the Same is the danger” (264). His particular brand of nostalgia is here in full view: he rejects the comfort of that which would not threaten *Dasein* (the identical), insisting that *Dasein* can only open itself to “the danger” of “what arrives” on the basis of an ontological piety – that *Dasein*, in other words, can only welcome the ontologically different (can only ek-sist) if it poses perennial questions that are, across all epochs, “the Same.” Even at this later date, Heidegger’s ontology retains a “fundamental” tenor. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. <http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2012/10/04/kicking-it-old-school-the-peril-of-kickstarter-nostalgia/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. <http://www.bogost.com/writing/kickstarter_crowdfunding_platf.shtml>. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)