





WHEN
EVERYTHING
HAPPENS
NOW

DOUGLAS
RUSHKOFF

CURRENT

CURRENT

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.



USA | Canada | UK | Ireland | Australia | New Zealand | India | South Africa | China
Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
For more information about the Penguin Group visit penguin.com

First published in 2013 by Current,
a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Copyright © Douglas Rushkoff, 2013.
All rights reserved.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Rushkoff, Douglas.

Present shock : when everything happens now / Douglas Rushkoff.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-101-60824-1

1. Technology—Social aspects. 2. Technology—Philosophy. I. Title.

T14.5.R86 2013

303.483—dc23 2012039915

While the author has made every effort to provide accurate telephone numbers and Internet addresses at the time of publication, neither the publisher nor the author assumes any responsibility for errors, or for changes that occur after publication. Further, publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party Web sites or their content.

No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

For my daughter, Mamie, my present

TITLE PAGE

COPYRIGHT

DEDICATION

PREFACE

CHAPTER 1

NARRATIVE COLLAPSE

CHAPTER 2

DIGIPHRENIA: BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO

CHAPTER 3

OVERWINDING: THE SHORT FOREVER

CHAPTER 4

FRACTALNOIA: FINDING PATTERNS IN THE
FEEDBACK

CHAPTER 5

APOCALYPTO

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

INDEX

PREFACE

He is one of the most prescient hedge fund managers on Wall Street, but his trades always seem to happen after the fact. That's because as soon as he executes an order, it is observed and preempted by traders at bigger firms with faster computers. The spread changes, and his buy order goes through just a few fractions of a penny higher than it should have. He is trading in the past, longing for the software and geeks he needs to get into his competitors' present. And his clients can no longer conceive of investing in a company's future, anyway; they want to win on the trade itself, as it actually happens.

She's at a bar on Manhattan's Upper East Side, but she seems oblivious to the boys and the music. Instead of engaging with those around her, she's scrolling through text messages on her phone, from friends at other parties across town. She needs to know if the event she's at is the event to be at, or whether something better is happening at that very moment, somewhere else. Sure enough, a blip on the tiny screen catches her interest, and in seconds her posse is in a cab headed for the East Village. She arrives at a seemingly identical party and decides it's "the place to be," yet instead of enjoying it, she turns her phone around, ac-

tivates the camera, and proceeds to take pictures of herself and her friends for the next hour—instantly uploading them for the world to see her in the moment.

He sees the signs all around him: the latest “natural” disaster on the evening news; the fluctuations in the prices at the gas pump; talk of a single world currency. Information overload might not have increased the rate at which disasters occur, but it has exponentially increased the rate at which they’re witnessed. As a result, prophecy no longer feels like a description of the future but, rather, a guide to the present. The ideas of quantum physicists and the Mayans have been twisted to indicate that time itself will soon be coming to an end, anyway. The messianic age is no longer something to prepare for; it is a current event. What would Jesus do?

This is the new “now.”

Our society has reoriented itself to the present moment. Everything is live, real time, and always-on. It’s not a mere speeding up, however much our lifestyles and technologies have accelerated the rate at which we attempt to do things. It’s more of a diminishment of anything that isn’t happening right now—and the onslaught of everything that supposedly is.

It’s why the world’s leading search engine is evolving into a live, customized, and predictive flow of data branded “Google Now”; why email is giving way to texting, and why blogs are being superseded by Twitter feeds. It’s why kids in

school can no longer follow linear arguments; why narrative structure collapsed into reality TV; and why we can’t engage in meaningful dialogue about last month’s books and music, much less long-term global issues. It’s why an economy once based on long-term investment and interest-bearing currency can no longer provide capital to those who plan to put it to work for future rewards. It’s why so many long for a “singularity” or a 2012 apocalypse to end linear time altogether and throw us into a posthistoric eternal present—no matter the cost to human agency or civilization itself.

But it’s also how we find out what’s happening on the streets of Iran before CNN can assemble a camera crew. It’s what enables an unsatisfied but upwardly mobile executive to quit his job and move with his family to Vermont to make kayaks—which he thought he’d get to do only once he retired. It’s how millions of young people can choose to embody a new activism based in patient consensus instead of contentious debate. It’s what enables companies like H&M or Zara to fabricate clothes in real time, based on the instantaneous data coming from scanned tags at checkout counters five thousand miles away. It’s how a president can run for office and win by breaking from the seeming tyranny of the past and its false hope, and tell voters that “we are the ones we have been waiting for.”

Well, the waiting is over. Here we are.

If the end of the twentieth century can be characterized by futurism, the twenty-first can be defined by presentism.

The looking forward so prevalent in the late 1990s was

bound to end once the new millennium began. Like some others of that era, I predicted a new focus on the moment, on real experience, and on what things are actually worth right now. Then 9/11 magnified this sensibility, forcing America as a nation to contend with its own impermanence. People had babies in droves,¹ and even filed for divorces,² in what was at least an unconscious awareness that none of us lives forever and an accompanying reluctance to postpone things indefinitely. Add real-time technologies, from the iPhone to Twitter; a disposable consumer economy where 1-Click ordering is more important than the actual product being purchased; a multitasking brain actually incapable of storage or sustained argument; and an economy based on spending now what one may or may not earn in a lifetime, and you can't help but become temporally disoriented. It's akin to the onslaught of changing rules and circumstances that 1970s futurist Alvin Toffler dubbed "future shock."

Only, in our era it's more of a *present shock*. And while this phenomenon is clearly "of the moment," it's not quite as in the moment as we may have expected.

For while many of us were correct about the way all this presentism would affect investments and finance, even technology and media, we were utterly wrong about how living in the "now" would end up impacting us as people. Our focus on the present may have liberated us from the twentieth century's dangerously compelling ideological narratives. No one—well, hardly anyone—can still be convinced that brutal means are justified by mythological ends. And people are less

likely to believe employers' and corporations' false promises of future rewards for years of loyalty now. But it has not actually brought us into greater awareness of what is going on around us. We are not approaching some Zen state of an infinite moment, completely at one with our surroundings, connected to others, and aware of ourselves on any fundamental level.

Rather, we tend to exist in a distracted present, where forces on the periphery are magnified and those immediately before us are ignored. Our ability to create a plan—much less follow through on it—is undermined by our need to be able to improvise our way through any number of external impacts that stand to derail us at any moment. Instead of finding a stable foothold in the here and now, we end up reacting to the ever-present assault of simultaneous impulses and commands.

In some senses, this was the goal of those who developed the computers and networks on which we depend today. Mid-twentieth-century computing visionaries Vannevar Bush and J. C. R. Licklider dreamed of developing machines that could do our remembering for us. Computers would free us from the tyranny of the past—as well as the horrors of World War II—allowing us to forget everything and devote our minds to solving the problems of today. The information would still be there; it would simply be stored out of body, in a machine.

It's a tribute to both their designs on the future and their devotion to the past that they succeeded in their quest to free

up the present of the burden of memory. We have, in a sense, been allowed to dedicate much more of our cognitive resources to active RAM than to maintaining our cerebral-storage hard drives. But we are also in danger of squandering this cognitive surplus on the trivial pursuit of the immediately relevant over any continuance of the innovation that got us to this point.

Behavioral economists exploit the growing disparity between our understanding of the present and that of the future, helping us see future debts as less relevant than current costs and leading us to make financial decisions against our own better interests. As these ways of understanding debt and lending trickle up to those making decisions about banking and macrofinance—such as the Federal Reserve or the European Central Bank—our greater economies end up suffering from the same sorts of logical traps as those of individual mortgage holders and credit card users.

Neuroscientists, mostly at the service of corporations looking to develop more compliant employees and consumers, are homing in on the way people make choices. But no matter how many subjects they put in their MRI machines, the focus of this research is decision making in the moment, the impulsive choices made in the blink of an eye, rather than those made by the lobes responsible for rational thought or consideration. By implementing their wares solely on the impulsive—while diminishing or altogether disregarding the considered—they push us toward acting in what is thought of as an instinctual, reptilian fashion.

And this mode of behavior is then justified as somehow more connected to the organic, emotional, and immediately relevant moment in which human beings actually live. Of course, this depiction of consciousness may help sell the services of neurotechnicians to advertisers, but it does not accurately represent how the human brain relates to the moment in which the organism exists.

No matter how invasive the technologies at their disposal, marketers and pollsters never come to terms with the living process through which people choose products or candidates; they are looking at what people just bought or thought, and making calculations based on that after-the-fact data. The “now” they seek to understand tells them nothing about desire, reasons, or context. It is simply an effort to key off what we have just done in order to manipulate our decisions in the future. Their campaigns encourage the kinds of impulsive behavior that fool us into thinking we are living in the now while actually just making us better targets for their techniques.

That is because there is no *now*—not the one they’re talking about, anyway. It is necessarily and essentially trivial. The minute the “now” is apprehended, it has already passed. Like they used to say about getting one’s picture on a *Time* magazine cover: the moment something is realized, it is over. And like the diminishing beauty returns for a facially paralyzed Botox addict, the more forcefully we attempt to stop the passage of time, the less available we are to the very moment we seek to preserve.

As a result, our culture becomes an entropic, static hum of everybody trying to capture the slipping moment. Narrativity and goals are surrendered to a skewed notion of the real and the immediate; the Tweet; the status update. What we are doing at any given moment becomes all-important—which is behavioristically doomed. For this desperate approach to time is at once flawed and narcissistic. Which “now” is important: the now I just lived or the now I’m in right now?

In the following chapters, we will explore present shock as it manifests in a variety of ways, on a myriad of levels. We will look at how it changes the way we make and experience culture, run our businesses, invest our money, conduct our politics, understand science, and make sense of our world. In doing so, we will consider panic reactions to present shock right alongside more successful approaches to living outside what we have always thought of as time.

The book is divided into five sections, corresponding to the five main ways that present shock manifests for us. We begin with the collapse of narrative. How do we tell stories and convey values without the time required to tell a linear story? How does pop culture continue to function without traditional storylines, and how does politics communicate without grand narratives? We move on to “Digiphrenia”—the way our media and technologies encourage us to be in more than one place at the same time. We’ll see that our relationship to time has always been defined by the technologies we use to measure it, and that digital time presents particular

challenges we haven’t had to contend with before. In “Overwinding,” we look at the effort to squish really big timescales into much smaller ones. It’s the effort to make the passing moment responsible for the sorts of effects that actually take real time to occur. In particular, what does this do to business and finance, which are relying on increasingly derivative forms of investment? Next we look at what happens when we try to make sense of our world entirely in the present tense. Without a timeline through which to parse causes and effects, we instead attempt to draw connections from one thing to another in the frozen moment, even when such connections are forced or imaginary. It’s a desperate grasp for real-time pattern recognition I’ll call “Fractalnoia.” Finally, we face “Apocalypso”—the way a seemingly infinite present makes us long for endings, by almost any means necessary.

We will encounter drone pilots contending with the stress of dropping bombs on a distant war zone by remote control before driving home to the suburbs for supper an hour later. We will see the way the physical real estate of Manhattan is being optimized for the functioning of the ultrafast trading algorithms now running the stock market—as well as what this means for the human traders left in the wake. We will encounter doomsday “preppers” who stock up on silver coins and ready-to-eat meals while dismissing climate change as a conspiracy theory hatched by Al Gore and since exposed in an email scandal.³ We will consider the “singularity”—as well as our scientific community’s response to present shock—especially for the ways it mirrors the religious extremism

accompanying other great social shifts throughout history.

Most important, we will consider what we human beings can do to pace ourselves and our expectations when there's no temporal backdrop against which to measure our progress, no narrative through which to make sense of our actions, no future toward which we may strive, and seemingly no time to figure any of this out.

I suggest we intervene on our own behalf—and that we do it right now, in the present moment. When things begin accelerating wildly out of control, sometimes patience is the only answer. Press pause.

We have time for this.



NARRATIVE COLLAPSE

I had been looking forward to the twenty-first century.

That's what most of us were doing in the 1990s: looking forward. Everything seemed to be accelerating, from the speed of technology to the growth of markets. PowerPoint presentations everywhere used the same steep upward curve to describe the way business revenues, computer use, carbon dioxide emissions, and growth of every kind were accelerating exponentially.

Moore's Law, a rule of thumb for technological progress coined in 1965 by Intel cofounder Gordon E. Moore, told us

that our computer-processing speeds would double about every two years. Along with that, however, everything else seemed to be doubling as well—our stock indexes, medical bills, Internet speeds, cable-TV stations, and social networks. We were no longer adjusting to individual changes, we were told, but to the accelerating rate of change itself. We were in what futurist Alvin Toffler called “future shock.”

As a result, everything and everyone was leaning toward the future. We weren’t looking forward to anything in particular so much as we were simply looking forward. Trend casters and “cool hunters” became the highest-paid consultants around, promising exclusive peeks at what lie ahead. Optimistic books with titles like “The Future of This” or “The Future of That” filled the store shelves, eventually superseded by pessimistic ones titled “The End of This” or “The End of That.” The subjects themselves mattered less than the fact that they all either had a future or—almost more reassuringly—did not.

We were all futurists, energized by new technologies, new theories, new business models, and new approaches that promised not just more of the same, but something different: a shift of an uncertain nature, but certainly of unprecedented magnitude. With each passing year, we seemed to be closer to some sort of chaos attractor that was beckoning us toward itself. And the closer we got, the more time itself seemed to be speeding up. Remember, these were the last years of the last decade of the last century of the millennium. The roaring, net-amplified, long boom of the 1990s seemed defined

by this leaning forward, this ache toward conclusion, this push toward 2000 and the ultimate calendar flip into the next millennium.

Though technically still in the twentieth century, the year 2000 was a good enough marker to stand in for millennial transformation. So we anticipated the change like messianic cultists preparing for the second coming. For most of us, it took the less religious form of anticipating a Y2K computer bug where systems that had always registered years with just two digits would prove incapable of rolling over to 00. Elevators would stop, planes would fall out of the sky, nuclear plants would cease to cool their reactor cores, and the world as we know it would end.

Of course, if the changeover didn’t get us, the terrorists would. The events of 9/11 hadn’t even happened yet, but on the evening of December 31, 1999, Americans were already on alert for a violent disruption of the Times Square New Year’s Eve festivities. Seattle had canceled its celebration altogether, in anticipation of an attack. CNN’s coverage circled the globe from one time zone to another as each hit midnight and compared the fireworks spectacle over the Eiffel Tower to the one at the Statue of Liberty. But the more truly spectacular news reported at each stop along the way that night was that nothing spectacular happened at all. Not in Auckland, Hong Kong, Cairo, Vatican City, London, Buenos Aires, or Los Angeles. The planes stayed in the sky (all but three of KLM’s 125-plane fleet had been grounded just in case), and not a single terror incident was reported. It was the anticli-

max of the millennium.

But something did shift that night as we went from years with 19's to those with 20's. All the looking forward slowed down. The leaning into the future became more of standing up into the present. People stopped thinking about where things were going and started to consider where things were.

In the financial world, for example, an investment's future value began to matter less than its current value. Just ten weeks into the millennium, the major exchanges were peaking with the tech-heavy and future-focused NASDAQ reaching its all-time high, over 5,100 points. Then the markets started down—and have never quite recovered. Although this was blamed on the dot.com bubble, the market's softening had nothing to do with digital technologies actually working (or not) and everything to do with a larger societal shift away from future expectations and instead toward current value. When people stop looking to the future, they start looking at the present. Investments begin to matter less for what they might someday be worth, because people are no longer thinking so much about "someday" as they are about today. A stock's "story"—the rationale for why it is going to go up—begins to matter less than its actual value in *real* time. What are my stocks worth as of this moment? What do I really own? What is the value of my portfolio right *now*?

The stock market's infinite expansion was just one of many stories dependent on our being such a future-focused culture. All the great "isms" of the twentieth century—from capitalism to communism to Protestantism to republicanism

to utopianism to messianism—depended on big stories to keep them going. None of them were supposed to be so effective in the short term or the present. They all promised something better in the future for having suffered through something not so great today. (Or at least they offered something better today than whatever pain and suffering supposedly went on back in the day.) The ends justified the means. Today's war was tomorrow's liberation. Today's suffering was tomorrow's salvation. Today's work was tomorrow's reward.

These stories functioned for quite a while. In the United States, in particular, optimism and a focus on the future seemed to define our national character. Immigrants committed to a better tomorrow risked their lives to sail the ocean to settle a wilderness. The New World called for a new story to be written, and that story provided us with the forward momentum required to live for the future. The Protestant work ethic of striving now for a better tomorrow took hold in America more powerfully than elsewhere, in part because of the continent's ample untapped resources and sense of boundless horizon. While Europe maintained the museums and cultures of the past, America thought of itself as forging the new frontier.

By the end of World War II, this became quite true. Only, America's frontier was less about finding new territory to exploit than it was about inventing new technologies, new businesses, and new ideas to keep the economy expanding and the story unfolding. Just as Mormonism continued the ancient story of the Bible into the American present, technolo-

gies, from rocket ships to computer chips, would carry the story of America's manifest destiny into the future. The American Dream, varied though it may have been, was almost universally depending on the same greater shape, the same kind of story to carry us along. We were sustained economically, politically, and even spiritually, by stories.

Together these stories helped us construct a narrative experience of our lives, our nation, our culture, and our faith. We adopted an entirely storylike way of experiencing and talking about the world. Through the lens of narrative, America isn't just a place where we live but is a journey of a people through time. Apple isn't a smart phone manufacturer, but two guys in a garage who had a dream about how creative people may someday gain command over technology. Democracy is not a methodology for governing, but the force that will liberate humanity. Pollution is not an ongoing responsibility of industry, but the impending catastrophic climax of human civilization.

Storytelling became an acknowledged cultural value in itself. In front of millions of rapt television viewers, mythologist Joseph Campbell taught PBS's Bill Moyers how stories provide the fundamental architecture for human civilization. These broadcasts on *The Power of Myth* inspired filmmakers, admen, and management theorists alike to incorporate the tenets of good storytelling into their most basic frameworks. Even brain scientists came to agree that narrativity amounted to an essential component of cognitive organization. As Case Western Reserve University researcher Mark Turner conclud-

ed: "Narrative imagining—story—is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend upon it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining."¹ Or as science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin observed, "The story—from Rapunzel to *War and Peace*—is one of the basic tools invented by the human mind, for the purpose of gaining understanding. There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories."²

Experiencing the world as a series of stories helps create a sense of context. It is comforting and orienting. It helps smooth out obstacles and impediments by recasting them as bumps along the way to some better place—or at least an end to the journey. As long as there's enough momentum, enough forward pull, and enough dramatic tension, we can suspend our disbelief enough to stay in the story.

The end of the twentieth century certainly gave us enough momentum, pull, and tension. Maybe too much. Back in the quaint midcentury year of 1965, *Mary Poppins* was awarded five Oscars, the Grateful Dead played their first concert, and *I Dream of Jeannie* premiered on NBC. But it was also the year of the first spacewalk, the invention of hypertext, and the first successful use of the human respirator. These events and inventions, and others, were promising so much change, so fast, that Alvin Toffler was motivated to write his seminal essay "The Future as a Way of Life," in which he coined the term "future shock":

We can anticipate volcanic dislocations, twists and reversals, not merely in our social structure, but also in our hierarchy of values and in the way individuals perceive and conceive reality. Such massive changes, coming with increasing velocity, will disorient, bewilder, and crush many people. . . . Even the most educated people today operate on the assumption that society is relatively static. At best they attempt to plan by making simple straight-line projects of present-day trends. The result is unreadiness to meet the future when it arrives. In short, future shock.³

Toffler believed things were changing so fast that we would soon lose the ability to adapt. New drugs would make us live longer; new medical techniques would allow us to alter our bodies and genetic makeup; new technologies could make work obsolete and communication instantaneous. Like immigrants to a new country experiencing culture shock, we would soon be in a state of future shock, waking up in a world changing so rapidly as to be unrecognizable. Our disorientation would have less to do with any particular change than the rate of change itself.

So Toffler recommended we all become futurists. He wanted kids to be taught more science fiction in school, as well as for them to take special courses in "how to predict." The lack of basic predictive skills would for Toffler amount to "a form of functional illiteracy in the contemporary world."⁴

To a great extent this is what happened. We didn't get futurism classes in elementary school, but we did get an abject

lesson in futurism from our popular and business cultures. We all became futurists in one way or another, peering around the corner for the next big thing, and the next one after that. But then we actually got there. Here. Now. We arrived in the future. That's when the story really fell apart, and we began experiencing our first true symptoms of present shock.

NARRATIVE COLLAPSE

Toffler understood how our knowledge of history helps us put the present in perspective. We understand where we are, in part, because we have a story that explains how we got here. We do not have great skill in projecting that narrative ability into the future. As change accelerated, this inability would become a greater liability. The new inventions and phenomena that were popping up all around us just didn't fit into the stories we were using to understand our circumstances. How does the current story of career and retirement adjust to life spans increasing from the sixties to the one hundreds? How do fertility drugs change the timeline of motherhood, how does email change our conception of the workweek, and how do robots change the story of the relationship of labor to management? Or, in our current frame of reference, how does social networking change the goals of a revolution?

If we could only get better at imagining scenarios, modeling future realities, and anticipating new trends, thought Toffler, we may be less traumatized by all the change. We would be equipped to imagine new narrative pathways that accommodated all the disruptions.

Still, while *Star Trek* may have correctly predicted the advent of cell phones and iPads, there are problems inherent to using science fiction stories to imagine the future. First, sometimes reality moves even faster and less predictably than fiction. While stories must follow certain plot conventions in order to make sense to their audiences, reality is under no such obligation. Stuff just happens, and rarely on schedule. Second, and more significant, stories are usually much less about predicting the future than influencing it. As a medium, stories have proven themselves great as a way of storing information and values, and then passing them on to future generations. Our children demand we tell them stories before they go to bed, so we lace those narratives with the values we want them to take with them into their dreams and their adult lives. Likewise, the stories and myths of our religions and national histories preserve and promote certain values over time. That's one reason civilizations and their values can persist over centuries.

The craft of futurism—however well intentioned—almost always comes with an agenda. For those who were already familiar with the Internet, the first issues of *Wired* magazine seemed glaringly obvious in their underlying purpose to marry the values of the net with those of the free market. The

many futurists who emerged in the late 1990s simply couldn't help but predict futures in which the most important specialists to have around would be—you guessed it—futurists. The stories they came up with were tailor-made for corporations looking for visions of tomorrow that included the perpetuation of corporate power. Futurism became less about predicting the future than pandering to those who sought to maintain an expired past.

Meanwhile, all this focus on the future did not do much for our ability to contend with the present. As we obsessed over the future of this and the future of that, we ended up robbing the present of its ability to contribute value and meaning. Companies spent more money and energy on scenario planning than on basic competency. They hired consultants (sometimes media theorists, like me) to give them "mile-high views" on their industries. The higher up they could go, they imagined, the farther ahead they could see. One technology company I spoke with was using research and speculation on currency futures to decide where to locate offshore factories. The CFO of another was busy hedging supply costs by betting on commodities futures—with little regard to emerging technologies in his own company that would render the need for such commodities obsolete. Some companies lost millions, or even went out of business, making bets of this sort on the future while their core competencies and innovative capabilities withered.

As people, businesses, institutions, and nations, we could maintain our story of the future only by wearing increasingly

restrictive blinders to block out the present. Business became strategy, career became a route to retirement, and global collaboration became brinksmanship. This all worked as long as we could focus on those charts where everything pointed up. But then the millennium actually came. And then the stock market crashed. And then down came the World Trade Towers, and the story really and truly broke.

The discontinuity generated by the 9/11 attacks should not be underestimated. While I was writing this very chapter, I met with a recent college graduate who was developing a nonprofit company and website to help create relationships between “millennials” of her generation and more aged mentors of my own. She explained that her generation was idealistic enough to want to help fix the world, but that they had been “traumatized by 9/11 and now we’re incapable of accessing the greater human projects.” Somehow, she felt, the tragedy had disconnected her generation from a sense of history and purpose, and that they “needed to connect with people from before that break in the story in order to get back on track.”

This was also the generation who used their first access to the polls to vote for Obama. She and her friends had supported his campaign and responded to his explicitly postnarrative refrain, borrowed from Alice Walker’s book title: “We are the ones we have been waiting for. We are the change we seek.” What a call to presentism this was! Young people took Obama at his word, rising to the challenge to become change rather than wait for it. Of course, it turned out to be more of

a campaign slogan than an invitation to civic participation—just more rhetoric for a quite-storybook, ends-justify-the-means push to power. It would be left to the Occupy movement to attempt a genuinely presentist approach to social and political change. But Obama’s speechwriters had at least identified the shift under way, the failure of stories to create a greater sense of continuity, and the growing sense that something much more immediate and relevant needed to take their place.

BIG STORIES

Traditional stories, with traditional, linear arcs, have been around for a long time because they work. They seem to imitate the shape of real life, from birth to death. Like a breath or lovemaking, these sorts of stories have a rise and a satisfying fall; a beginning, a middle, and an end. While it seems quite natural to us today, this familiar shape didn’t become the default structure of stories until pretty late in human history, after the invention of text and scrolls, in literate cultures such as ancient Greece.

The Bible’s stories—at least the Old Testament’s—don’t work quite the same way. They were based more in the oral tradition, where the main object of the storyteller was simply to keep people involved in the moment. Information and morals were conveyed, but usually by contrasting two charac-

ters or nations with one another—one blessed, the other damned. Epic poems and, later, theater, followed the more linear progression we might better associate with a scroll or bound book. There's a beginning and there's an end. Wherever we are in the story, we are aware that there are pages preceding and pages to come. Our place in the scroll or book indicates how close we are to finishing, and our emotional experience is entirely bound up in time.

Aristotle was the first, but certainly not the last, to identify the main parts of this kind of story, and he analyzed them as if he were a hacker reverse-engineering the function of a computer program. The story mechanics he discovered are very important for us to understand, as they are still in use by governments, corporations, religions, and educators today as they attempt to teach us and influence our behaviors. They are all the more important for the way they have ceased to work on members of a society who have gained the ability to resist their spell. This has put the storytellers into present shock.

The traditional linear story works by creating a character we can identify with, putting that character in danger, and then allowing him or her to discover a way out. We meet Oedipus, Luke Skywalker, or Dora the Explorer. Something happens—an initiating event—that sends the character on a quest. Oedipus wants to find the truth of his origins; Luke wants to rescue Princess Leia; Dora wants to get the baby frog back into its tree. So then the character makes a series of choices that propel him or her into increasingly dangerous

situations. Oedipus decides to find and kill the murderer of King Laius; Luke becomes a Jedi to fight the Empire; Dora enlists her monkey pal, Boots, to help her bring the baby frog through the scary forest to its home. At each step along the way, the character proceeds further into peril and takes the audience further up the path into tension and suspense.

Just when the audience has reached its peak of anxiety—the place where we can't take any more without running out of the theater or throwing the book on the floor—we get our reversal. Oedipus learns that the murderer he seeks is himself; Luke learns that Darth Vader is his father; Dora learns she herself holds the answer to the ugly old troll's riddle. And with that, finally, comes full recognition and release of tension. Oedipus blinds himself, Luke brings his dying father back to the light side of the force, and Dora gets the baby frog to its family's tree. Most important, the audience gets catharsis and relief. The ride is over. The greater the tension we were made to tolerate, the higher up the slope we get, and the more we can enjoy the way down.

This way of organizing stories—Joseph Campbell's "heroic journey"⁵—is now our way of understanding the world. This may have happened because the linear structure is essentially true to life, or we may simply have gotten so accustomed to it that it now informs the way we look at events and problems that emerge. Whatever the case, this structure also worked perfectly for conveying values of almost any kind to the captivated audience. For if we have followed the protagonist into danger, followed him up the incline plane of

tension into a state of great suspense and anxiety, we will be willing to accept whatever solution he is offered to get out. Arnold Schwarzenegger finds a new weapon capable of killing the bad aliens, the interrogator on *Law & Order* uses psychology to leverage the serial killer's ego against himself, or the kids on *Glee* learn that their friendships matter more than winning a singing contest. The higher into tension we have gone, the more dependent we are on the storyteller for a way out. That's why he can plug in whatever value, idea, or moral he chooses.

Or product. The technique reaches its height, of course, in any typical television commercial. In just thirty seconds (or twenty-eight seconds, when you account for the fades to and from video blackness), a character finds himself in a situation, makes choices that put him in danger, and then finds a solution in the form of a purchase. For just one actual example: A girl is anticipating her high school prom when she notices a pimple on her cheek (initiating event). She tries hot compresses, popping it, and home remedies, which only make it worse (rising tension). Just when it looks as though there's no way to avoid being terribly embarrassed and humiliated at her prom, a friend sees the pimple and, instead of teasing her, tells her about the new fast-acting pimple cream (reversal). She puts on the cream (recognition) and goes to the prom, pimple free (catharsis).

If we have followed the character up the ramp of tension into danger, then we must swallow the pill, cream, gun, or moral the storyteller uses to solve the problem. For all this to

work, however, the storyteller is depending on a captive audience. The word "entertainment" literally means "to hold within," or to keep someone in a certain frame of mind. And at least until recently, entertainment did just this, and traditional media viewers could be depended on to sit through their programming and then accept their acne cream.

Even if television viewers sensed they were being drawn into an anxious state by a storytelling advertiser who simply wanted to push a product, what were the alternatives? Before the advent of interactive devices like the remote control, the television viewer would have had to get up off the couch, walk over to the television set, turn the dial, tune in the new station, and then adjust the rabbit ears. Or simply walk out of the room and possibly miss the first moments of the show when the commercial ended. Although television viewers weren't as coerced into submission as a churchgoer forced to stay in the pew and listen to the story as the minister related it, they were still pretty much stuck swallowing whatever pill the programmer inserted into the turning point of the narrative.

Then came interactivity. Perhaps more than any postmodern idea or media educator, the remote control changed the way we related to television, its commercials, and the story structure on which both depended. Previously, leaving the couch and walking up to the television to change the channel might cost more effort than merely enduring the awful advertisement and associated anxiety. But with a remote in hand, the viewer can click a button and move away effortlessly. Add

cable television and the ability to change channels without retuning the set (not to mention hundreds of channels to watch instead of just three), and the audience's orientation to the program has utterly changed. The child armed with the remote control is no longer watching a television program, but watching television—moving away from anxiety states and into more pleasurable ones.

Take note of yourself as you operate a remote control. You don't click the channel button because you are bored, but because you are mad: Someone you don't trust is attempting to make you anxious. You understand that it is an advertiser trying to make you feel bad about your hair (or lack of it), your relationship, or your current SSRI medication, and you click away in anger. Or you simply refuse to be dragged still further into a comedy or drama when the protagonist makes just too many poor decisions. Your tolerance for his complications goes down as your ability to escape becomes increasingly easy. And so today's television viewer moves from show to show, capturing important moments on the fly. Surf away from the science fiction show's long commercial break to catch the end of the basketball game's second quarter, make it over to the first important murder on the cop show, and then back to the science fiction show before the aliens show up.

Deconstructed in this fashion, television loses its ability to tell stories over time. It's as if the linear narrative structure had been so misused and abused by television's incompetent or manipulative storytellers that it simply stopped

working, particularly on younger people who were raised in the more interactive media environment and equipped with defensive technologies. And so the content of television, and the greater popular culture it leads, adapted to the new situation.

NOW-IST POP CULTURE IS BORN

Without the time or permission to tell a linear story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, television programmers had to work with what they had—the moment. To parents, educators, and concerned experts, the media that came out of this effort has looked like anything but progress. As Aristotle explained, "When the storytelling in a culture goes bad the result is decadence."⁶ At least on a surface level, the new storyless TV shows appeared to support Aristotle's maxim.

Animated shows masquerading as kids' programming, such as *Beavis and Butt-head* (1993) and *The Simpsons* (1989), were some of the first to speak directly to the channel surfer.⁷ MTV's animated hit *Beavis and Butt-head* consists of little more than two young teenagers sitting on a couch watching MTV rock videos. Though dangerously mindless in the view of most parents, the show artfully recapitulates the experience of kids watching MTV. As the two knuckleheads comment on the music videos, they keep audience members aware of their own relationship to MTV imagery. The show

takes the form of a screen-within-a-screen, within which typical MTV videos play. But where a rock video may normally entice the viewer with provocative or sexual imagery, now the viewer is denied or even punished for being drawn in. When the sexy girl comes into frame, Butt-head blurts out, "Nice set"; Beavis giggles along; and the viewer is alienated from the imagery. The two animated kids are delivering a simple object lesson in media manipulation. When they don't like something, one says, "This sucks, change it," and the other hits the remote. Beavis and Butt-head might not have singlehandedly rendered the rock video obsolete, but their satire provided a layer of distance and safety between viewers and the programming they no longer trusted.

The cult hit *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (first aired in 1988) turned this genre into something close to an art form. Set in the future, the show allows the audience to watch along as the sole captive inhabitant of a space station and his two robot companions are forced to view bad B movies and low-budget science fiction sagas. Our television screen shows us the movie, with the heads of the three audience members in silhouette, Looney Tunes-style, several rows ahead of us. The trio makes comments and wisecracks about the movie, much as we may do if we were watching with our own friends.

But we're not. For the most part, viewers of this late-night show are isolated in their apartments, using the images on their screens as surrogate companions. In a self-similar fashion, the character trapped in the futuristic space station

has fashioned his own robot friends out of spare projection parts—the ones that could have given him some control over when the movies are shown. He uses the technology at his disposal to provide himself with simulated human interaction but has given up a certain amount of freedom to do so. So, too, do the young viewers of the show simulate a social setting with their television sets, suffering through the long, awful sci-fi movies delivered on the network's schedule for the joy of simulated companionship. *MST3K*, as its fans call it, is both entertainment and mirror. If we can no longer follow a character through his story over time, we can instead be that character in the moment. Most of the film's dialogue is drowned out by the antics in the audience, and the plot is lost to the endless succession of jokes and mimicry. The linear progression of the film's story is sacrificed to the more pressing need for a framework that mirrors the viewing experience.

The individual jokes and asides of the characters also make up a new media education for the show's audience. Almost all of the humor is derived from references to other media. The robots make an Andrew Lloyd Webber grill to burn the composer's self-derivative scores and argue about the relative merits of the Windows and Macintosh operating systems. When they observe Bela Lugosi taking off his lab coat in a campy old sci-fi feature, the robots sing, "It's a beautiful day in the laboratory" to the tune of the *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* theme. The robots make sure to call attention to every cheesy special effect and structural flaw. As the noise of

guns and guard dogs pursue escaping convicts, a robot shouts, "Sounds like the foley artists are chasing us. Move it!" Toward the end of another film, one robot comments, "Isn't this a little late in act three for a plot twist?"

To appreciate the humor of the show, viewers need to understand the media as a self-reflexive universe of references, any of which can be used to elucidate any other. Each joke is a demonstration of the media's self-similarity. This is not a humor of random association but a comedy of connectivity where images and ideas from very disparate sources are revealed as somehow relevant to one another. To belong to the *MST3K* culture is to understand at least some of the literally hundreds of references per show and, more important, how they relate to one another. When this is not the object of the game, the characters instead keep their audience aware of their moment-to-moment relationship to the media, either by commenting on the technical quality of the film or by calling attention to themselves as recapitulated bracketing devices.

The Simpsons, now in its twenty-fourth season of self-referential antics, brings the same TV-within-a-TV sensibility to an even wider, mainstream audience. The opening theme still plays over animation of the entire family rushing home to the living room couch in time for their favorite show. Mirroring our increasingly ironic sensibility, the program's child protagonist, Bart Simpson, seems aware of his own role within the show and often comments on what his family must look like to the audience watching along.

Although *The Simpsons* episodes have stories, these never seem to be the point. There are no stakes: characters die, or do things that would kill them, yet reappear in later episodes. The fact that Homer (after the Greek hero) Simpson might have caused a nuclear spill does not create tension in the typical sense, and nobody watching particularly cares whether the town of Springfield is spared the resulting devastation. We are not in a state of suspense. Instead, the equivalents of recognition or reversal come from recognizing what other forms of media are being satirized in any given moment. When Homer picks up his daughter from child care, she is perched on a wall next to hundreds of other pacifier-sucking babies. The "a-ha" moment comes from recognizing it is a spoof of Hitchcock's *The Birds*—and that institutional child care has taken on the quality of a horror movie. Unlike his ancient Greek counterpart, Homer has no heroic journey. He remains in a suspended, infinite present, while his audience has all the recognitions.

Still on the air after all these years, *The Simpsons*, along with the many satirical, self-referential shows that followed its path (the creators of *Family Guy*, *South Park*, and even *The Office* all credit *The Simpsons* as a seminal influence), offers the narrative-wary viewer some of the satisfaction that traditional stories used to provide—but through nonnarrative means. *Family Guy* (1999), canceled by FOX in 2002 but revived in 2005 when its popularity online kept growing, seems tailor-made for the YouTube audience. The show's gags don't even relate to the story or throughline (such as they are), but

serve as detours that thwart or halt forward motion altogether. Rather than simply scripting pop culture references into the scenes, *Family Guy* uses these references more as wormholes through which to escape from the temporal reality of the show altogether—often for minutes at a time, which is an eternity on prime-time television. In one episode the mom asks her son to grab a carton of milk, “and be sure to take it from the back.” Apropos of nothing, a black-and-white sketch of a man’s hand pulls the child into an alternate universe of a-ha’s iconic 1984 “Take On Me” music video. The child runs through a paper labyrinth with the band’s front man for the better part of a minute before suddenly breaking through a wall and back into the *Family Guy* universe.

This reliance on what the show’s YouTube fans call “cutscreens” turns what would have been a cartoon sitcom into a sequence of infinite loops, each one just as at home on the decontextualized Internet as they are strung together into a half hour of TV. The only real advantage to watching them in their original form within the program is the opportunity to delight in the writers’ audacious disregard for narrative continuity (and for pop culture as a whole).

Finally, going so far out on this postnarrative journey that it comes full circle, NBC’s unlikely hit *Community* (2009) is ostensibly a plotted sitcom about a group of misfits at Greendale Community College—except for the fact that the characters continually refer to the fact that they are on a television sitcom. For example, as Greendale’s principal completes his standard PA announcements at the opening of one scene, the

character Abed—a pop-culture-obsessed voyeur with Asperger’s syndrome who is often a proxy for the audience—remarks that the announcement “makes every ten minutes feel like the beginning of a new scene of a TV show.” He continues, “Of course, the illusion only lasts until someone says something they’d never say on TV, like how much their life is like TV. There, it’s gone.”

Community assumes such extensive pop cultural literacy that even its narrative tropes—odd couple turned best friends; triumph of the underdog; will they or won’t they *do* it?—are executed with dripping irony. These are overwrenched plots, recognized as parody by an audience well versed in television’s all too familiar narrative arcs. They even do one of those highlights episodes stringing together scenes from previous episodes (the kind that normal sitcoms do to fill up an episode with old free footage), except none of the scenes are actually from previous episodes. It’s a series of fake flashbacks to scenes that never appeared in those episodes—a satire of the clip-show trope. “*Community*,” writes Hampton Stevens in the *Atlantic*, “isn’t actually a sitcom—any more than *The Onion* is an actual news-gathering organization. *Community*, instead, is a weekly satire of the sitcom genre, a spoof of pop culture in general.”⁸ While *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* disrupt narrative in order to make pop culture references, *Community*’s stories are themselves pop culture references. Narrative becomes a self-conscious wink.

Through whichever form of postmodern pyrotechnics

they practice, these programs attack the very institutions that have abused narrative to this point: advertisers, government, religions, pop culture sellouts, politicians, and even TV shows themselves. They don't work their magic through a linear plot, but instead create contrasts through association, by nesting screens within screens, and by giving viewers the tools to make connections between various forms of media. It's less like being walked along a pathway than it is like being taken up high and shown a map. The beginning, the middle, and the end have almost no meaning. The gist is experienced in each moment as new connections are made and false stories are exposed or reframed. In short, these sorts of shows teach pattern recognition, and they do it in real time.

Of course, this self-conscious parody was just one of many responses to a deconstructing mediascape. TV and movies, low culture and high culture, have all been contending with the collapse of narrative. Some resist and some actively contribute; some complain while others celebrate. We are just now finding a new equilibrium in a transition that has taken over twenty years—most visibly in the cinema. As if responding to the disruption of the remote control and other deconstructive tools and attitudes, many American films of the late 1990s seemed to be searching for ways to preserve the narrative structure on which their messages and box office receipts were depending.

Movies dedicated to preserving the stories we use to understand ourselves turned the cut-and-paste technologies against the digital era from which they emerged, as if to re-

store the seamless reality of yesterday. The mid-1990s blockbuster *Forrest Gump*, for just one example, attempted to counteract the emerging discontinuity of the Internet age by retelling the story of the twentieth century from the perspective of a simpleton. Filmmaker Robert Zemeckis was already most famous for the *Back to the Future* series in which his characters went back in time to rewrite history. *Forrest Gump* attempts this same revisionist magic through a series of flashbacks, in which the audience relives disjointed moments of the past century of televised history, all with Gump magically pasted into the frame. We see Gump protesting the Vietnam War, Gump with John Lennon, and even Gump meeting JFK and saying he needs to pee.

Gump's lack of awareness allows him to fall, by sheer luck, into good fortune at every turn. He becomes a war hero and multimillionaire by blindly stumbling through life with nothing more than the good morals his mom taught him, while the people around him who seem more aware of their circumstances drop like flies from war wounds, AIDS, and other disasters. In this story's traditionally narrative schema, Gump is saved and most everyone else is damned. The impending unpredictability of life beyond narrative is reinterpreted as a box of chocolates—"You never know what you're gonna get." But it's a box of chocolates! You can pretty well count on getting a chocolate as long as you don't reach outside of the box into the real world of sharp rocks and biting bugs. The opening sequence of the movie tells it all: in one continuous shot a feather floats on the wind, effortlessly

wandering over the rooftops of a small, perfect town, and lands at Gump's feet, either coincidentally or by divine will. Of course, it was neither luck nor God's guiding the feather's path, but the will of the movie's director, who used cinematic trickery to create the continuous sequence. Just like Gump, we, the audience, are kept ignorant of the special effects, edits, and superimpositions, as technology is exploited to make the facade look seamless and real. And what does Gump do with the feather? He puts it in an old box with his other collected trinkets—contained, like everything else, within his oversimplified narrative.

If *Forrest Gump* could be considered a defender of the narrative worldview, its mid-1990s contemporary, Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, may be thought of as its opposite. Where Gump offers us a linear, if rewritten, historical journey through the decades since World War II, *Pulp Fiction* compresses imagery from those same years into a stylistic pastiche. Every scene has elements from almost every decade—a 1940s-style suit, a 1950s car, a 1970s telephone, a 1990s retro nightclub—forcing the audience to give up its attachment to linear history and accept instead a vision of American culture as a compression of a multitude of eras, and those eras themselves being reducible to iconography as simple as a leather jacket or dance step. The narrative technique of the film also demands that its audience abandon the easy plot tracking offered by sequential storytelling. Scenes occur out of order and dead characters reappear. On one level we are confused; on another, we are made privy to new kinds of

information and meaning. The reordering of sequential events allows us to relate formerly nonadjacent moments of the story to one another in ways we couldn't if they had been ordered in linear fashion. If we watch someone commit a murder in one scene, our confusion about his motivations can be answered by going backward in time in the very next scene. The movie's final protagonist, Bruce Willis, comically risks his life to retrieve the single heirloom left to him by his father: his watch. *Pulp Fiction* delights in its ability to play with time, and in doing so shows us the benefits of succumbing to the chaos of a postnarrative world. The object of the game is to avoid getting freaked out by the resulting gaps, juxtapositions, and discontinuity.

Slowly but surely, dramatic television and cinema seemed to give up the fight, and instead embrace the timelessness, even the purposelessness, of living in the present. The classic situation comedy had been narrative in its construction. The "situation" usually consisted of a history so important to the show that it was retold during the opening theme song. A poor mountaineer was shooting at some food, accidentally struck oil, got rich, and brought his whole hillbilly family to Beverly Hills. A three-hour boat tour meets with a storm at sea, shipwrecking a group of unlikely castaways. Compared to these setups, modern sitcoms appear as timelessly ahistorical as *Waiting for Godot*. *Friends* chronicles the exploits of some people who happen to frequent the same coffee bar. *Seinfeld* is a show about nothing. The backstory of *Two and a Half Men* has more to do with Charlie Sheen's dismissal and

Twitter exploits than the divorces of the show's in-world characters. These shows are characterized by their frozenness in time, as well as by the utter lack of traditional narrative goals.

The new challenge for writers is to generate the sense of captivity, as well as the sensations and insights, of traditional narrative—but to do so without the luxury of a traditional storyline. So they come up with characters who simply wake up in a situation and have to figure out who they are or what the heck is going on around them. The characters are contending with the same present shock as their creators.

The movie *Memento* follows a man who loses his memory every few hours and must repiece together his existence (and a murder mystery) in essentially no time at all. He tattoos clues and insights to his body, turning himself into a mosaic of hints. If he is able to piece together the pattern, he will know who he is and what happened to him. Working with the same handicap as his screenwriter, the character is attempting to construct narrative sense without the luxury of narrative time. Somehow, the reality of his situation must come together for him in a single moment.

CSI, one of the most popular franchises on television, brings this presentist sensibility to the standard crime drama. Where *Law & Order* investigates, identifies, and prosecutes a murderer over a predictable sequence of discoveries, *CSI* uses freeze-frame and computer graphics to render and solve the murder as if it were a puzzle in space. It's not a crime, but a crime *scene*. Potential scenarios—even false ones—are ren-

dered in 3D video maps, as the detectives attempt to deconstruct a single sustained moment.

The TV hits *Lost* and *Heroes* take on this same quality. In *Lost*, characters find themselves on an island where the rules of linear time no longer apply. Successive seasons of the series bring progressively more convoluted permutations on time travel and fate. Solving the mystery of the island and their relationship to it is not the result of a journey through evidence but a "making sense" of the world in the moment. *Heroes* moves back and forth through time in a similar fashion, replacing linear storytelling with the immediacy of puzzle solving. While the various superheroes are indeed preparing to prevent an apocalyptic explosion from destroying New York City, the dramatic action is much more concerned with piecing together a coherent temporal map of the universe in which they are living. The shows are less about what will happen next, or how the story will end, than about figuring out what is actually going on right now—and enjoying the world of the fiction, itself.

True, there may have always been forms of storytelling less concerned with climax than they are with their own perpetuation. The picaresque adventures of Don Quixote gave way to the serialized adventures of Dickens's novels and eventually found new life in American soap operas. But the beauty and reassurance of these sorts of entertainments was that there was always a tomorrow. Somehow, the characters would continue on and never gain so much insight as to become wise. They were often children, or perpetually deluded,

or just plain simple. As time sped up and narrative fell apart, however, the soap opera form declined from a height of nineteen different shows in 1970 to just four today.

Taking their place are the soap-opera-like series of pay television, such as the acclaimed *The Wire* and *The Sopranos*. *The Wire*, which follows drug dealers, corrupt union bosses, and politicians through Baltimore, never doles out justice. A world in which no good deed goes unpunished, *The Wire* is as existential as TV gets—a static world that can't be altered by any hero or any plot point. It just is. (The characters may as well be on the series *Oz*, which takes place in the limbo of prison.) Characters experience their reality in terms of their relationship to the “game”—a way of life that is experienced more like a person playing an arcade shooter than going on an epic quest. Likewise, *The Sopranos* was a soap opera about survival in the midst of internecine battles. The characters long to be characters in *The Godfather* movies, who lived by a strict code of ethics and whose careers had more predictable, traditional arcs. The celebrated, controversial last episode of the series was one of TV's most explicit depictions of present shock: in a seemingly innocuous scene, the screen suddenly just goes black. Tony Soprano's existence could end at any moment, without his even being aware that it has ended. No drama, no insight. So, too, for the member of a society without narrative context—at least until he develops alternatives to the linear story.

Still other television creators have taken their cue instead from the epic narratives of Japanese manga comics, develop-

ing stories with multiple threads that take years to unfold. Individual episodes of *The X Files* (1993), *Babylon Five* (1994), *Battlestar Galactica* (2004), *Mad Men* (2007), or *Breaking Bad* (2008) may not be capable of conveying a nearly arced storyline, but the slowly moving “meta narrative” creates sustained tension—with little expectation of final resolution.

New incarnations of this approach, such as HBO's sprawling *Game of Thrones* (2011), use structures and tropes more common to player-derived fantasy role-playing games than television. The opening titles sequence of the show betrays this emphasis: the camera pans over an animated map of the entire world of the saga, showing the various divisions and clans within the empire. It is drawn in the style of a fantasy role-playing map used by participants as the game board for their battles and intrigues. And like a fantasy role-playing game, the show is not about creating satisfying resolutions, but rather about keeping the adventure alive and as many threads going as possible. There is plot—there are many plots—but there is no overarching story, no end. There are so many plots, in fact, that an ending tying everything up seems inconceivable, even beside the point.

This is no longer considered bad writing. In fact, presentist literature might even be considered a new genre in which writers are more concerned with the worlds they create than with the characters living within them. As Zadie Smith, author of *White Teeth*, explained in an interview, it is no longer the writer's job to “tell us how somebody felt about something, it is to tell us how the world works.”⁹ Like other con-

temporary authors, such as Don DeLillo, Jonathan Lethem, and David Foster Wallace, Smith is less concerned with character arcs than with what she calls “problem solving.” Just like the worlds of television’s *Lost* or *Heroes*, the worlds of DeLillo’s *White Noise* and Lethem’s *Chronic City* are like giant operating systems whose codes and intentions are unknown to the people living inside them. Characters must learn how their universes work. Narrativity is replaced by something more like putting together a puzzle by making connections and recognizing patterns.

REALITY BYTES

This same impulse lies at the heart of so-called reality TV—the unscripted, low-budget programs that have slowly replaced much of narrative television. Producers of these shows chose to embrace the collapse of linear narrative once they realized this meant that they were also relieved of the obligation to pay writers to tell a story or actors to perform it. Instead, the purveyors of reality TV simply roll camera in situations and locations that are most likely to generate drama or at least some conflict.

The first of these shows documented something close to reality. *Cops*, created by John Langley back in 1989 and still in production in dozens of countries, follows real police officers as they go on their patrols, chase drug addicts or drunk

spouse abusers, and make arrests. The show’s opening song lyric, “What you gonna do when they come for you?” reveals the presentist premise: this is instructional video for how to act when you get arrested. The self-satisfied closing monologues of the police assuring us that justice has simply been served replace the character-driven insights and clever reversals of traditional crime drama. The arresting of lowlifes is not a special event but what might be considered a “steady state”—a constant hum or a condition of the presentist universe.

Another reality-TV archetype was born with MTV’s *The Real World*, first broadcast in 1992 and still on the air, which represents itself as a slice of its viewing demographic’s real lives. The show was inspired by the 1970s documentary series *An American Family*, which set out to document the daily reality of a typical family’s experience but hit the jackpot when the parents waged an unexpected and spectacular divorce while the son also realized he was gay, all in prime time. In hopes of yielding similarly sensational effects, *The Real World* selects a group of good-looking eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds and puts them in an apartment together with dozens of cameras running twenty-four hours a day. Any moment is as potentially significant as any other. It’s up to the editors to construct something like narrative, after the fact. Of course, the participants are actually competing for attention, and hoping to get noticed and selected for careers on MTV or in a related industry. So they generate drama as best they can by having sex, fighting, engaging in dangerous be-