

Same Time Tomorrow?:
An Exploration of Character Growth in Time Loops

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As represented in media, to become trapped in a time loop is to eventually become a better person, whether you intended on it or not. The time loop exists in a unique position to create exact replicas of moments that have already happened in the film to contrast the evolution of a character arc as the same character is forced to approach the same problem multiple times from different perspectives. This thesis takes an extensive review of the plot as used in the four films *Groundhog Day*, *Happy Death Day*, *Happy Death Day 2U*, and *Palm Springs*, analyzing the changes to the protagonist's personal philosophies as they adapt to their environment. Many of these similarities in these movies present themselves in the isolation formed by the time loop, causing the protagonist to crave and understand the appeal of the community around them, making them realize what they were missing out on in the first place. While the specific genres and plot directions can flavor how this message gets across to the audience to varying degrees of effect, this focus on community remains a consistent throughline between all of these films and seems to be indicative of the entire Involuntary Time Loop genre as a whole.

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Introduction

While not the first time loop story, or even movie, *Groundhog Day* (1993) might just be the most famous, as audiences fell in love with Phil Connors's (Bill Murray) dry wit as he was faced with reliving February 2nd, 1993. Since the day endlessly resets around him, the only marker of change is to see how Phil interacts with the people in the world around him, for better or for worse. Director and co-author Harold Ramis never explained how Phil ended up in the time loop, but Phil was finally able to escape the loop upon having the "perfect day," where all of his actions maximized the amount of good possible in the Podunk town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, and along the way gained a different outlook on life.

This is the crux of the movie: a man's transformation from conceited and cynical to caring and kind, gaining a sense of empathy that wasn't apparent at the beginning of the movie. In Robert McKee's standout work *Story*, he defines this type of a plot as a redemption plot, which is when "the film arcs on a moral change within the protagonist from bad to good," (McKee 81). The entire time loop genre is a great reflection for the redemption plot, because the inherent structure of the story gains a level of measurement by separating the protagonist from volatile plot elements. For example, every character that Phil interacts with in the film will deliver the same dialogue in the same manner until Phil does something that impacts them (bringing to mind Newton's First Law that an object at rest will stay at rest unless acted upon by an outside object). Phil's impacts on other people can be directly seen in their response. This is not only seen in *Groundhog Day* but across the genre of time loops as a whole.

Research Questions

The use of time loops in film is worth studying because of the inherent creativity granted to the stories thanks to the structure. Most people have a passing familiarity with the general concept of a time loop as they have become engrained in film culture, the concept of being stuck repeating the same period of time. One of the most prominent questions to investigate is in what ways time loop narratives reflect changing ideas of moral development, and what these changes reflect about the society that created them. As stated above, the redemption plot is an important and prominent feature in the Involuntary Time Loop subgenre of science-fiction. Examining how these films manage to tell a story of a protagonist changing can help us track society's changes over the course of time to understand what existing perceptions make a character a "good person." This can be done by highlighting how these elements interact with the story, and what choices the characters make.

A secondary question is what parts of these stories are consistent across films, and why could that be? The purpose of this question is to add in some comparing and contrasting between films, highlighting changes and advances in cinema, and how these movies build upon each other for the genre. This can help academics trace the changes over time into the modern era of moviemaking, as well as the film's expected relationship with the spectator.

This paper is intended to take a close look at base elements of storytelling as well as exploring the specific moments that work well for this type of film. This will be accomplished through analyzing deeper meanings that provide more informational support as a litmus test for the general public's reactions, which would be useful for screenwriters or producers who wish to add depth to their stories and better understand the relationship between the story told and the one imparted to the audience. This work will also serve as a base text to refer to for science-fiction

film studies in general and be a resource for future academics discussing the overlap between different fields of study and science-fiction films. By examining the social, psychological, and philosophical realities presented in these films, this research may open a doorway for other fields to understand how they can be portrayed in the format of film and could potentially advance their interpretations of these ideas.

Literature Review

Involuntary Time Loops: A Working Definition

Before diving into the primary sources, it is important to understand limitations. Messing with time has become almost commonplace in the science-fiction genre, wherein which the Time Loop subgenre resides. The best way to describe what is encapsulated by the genre is to imagine the genre in general as a lake, and each subgenre leading off of it is a river, and then a creek, and then a tributary, but all still a part of the same collective body of water. Science-fiction is a vast genre, covering topics such as a technological takeover of the world, to spaceships traveling the galaxy, to leaps in biology to bring back the dinosaurs. Breaking down this subgenre even smaller leads us to stories fascinated with the control of time and how people interact with it, with notable examples of *Back to the Future* (1985), *In Time* (2011), and *Interstellar* (2014). From this selection, you encounter the time loop genre where the plot is generally related to navigating the same period of time over and over again. Finally, zooming in even further leads you to the Involuntary Time Loop, where the protagonist is trapped within a repetition without control over the situation. This distinction in the genre moves away from the technological side of science-fiction and instead more towards the fantastical properties of the universe that theoretical physicists call home, somewhere beyond the suspension of disbelief between the intersection of magic and science. While technology may be involved to varying degrees within the films, tracing core themes and ideas portrayed in the films will lead viewers back to the larger pool of science-fiction films. At the end of the day, genres as a whole are generally agreed upon by the masses but can always be debated on an individual film level, so this paper will be treating the four core films generally as part of the science-fiction genre.

Involuntary Time Loops, as coined by Wibke Schniedermann in her journal article, emphasize a more punitive, introspective journey, where from the writer's perspective, characters cannot escape the loop until they confront their flaws and re-evaluate their impact on others. The structure of these films have the unique ability to force the same interaction day after day, typically giving the audience multiple variations of this encounter, providing a benchmark to measure the improvement of the protagonist's character over the course of the film. In an Involuntary Time Loop, the experience of the person inside of the loop is of a greater significance than the creation of the loop itself. The most important question is not "How did this come to be?" but instead "What can I learn?"

While time loop films could have what some would call an unlikeable protagonist, Involuntary Time Loops seem to predominantly only happen to someone who deserves this level of introspection. There are arguments to be made about the exact criteria of what makes someone "bad" enough to be trapped in a time loop. For example, Phil Connors is an unpleasant and mean-spirited person to be around, but the protagonist Mark in *The Map of Tiny Perfect Things* (2021) begins his film already doing good deeds. These two characters seem to be on opposite ends of the spectrum in their relationships to other people. However, both of them eventually come to understand there is a deeper lesson to learn about how they interact with the world, growing into better people and fulfilling the idea of an Involuntary Time Loop. One author has jokingly referred to the plot structure as being "temporarily stuck in a (lousy) day" (Brutsch 88), since the forced introspection of the protagonist is typically at the hands of the unfortunate circumstances they are faced with every time the loop begins anew.

The decision to limit the scope to only Involuntary Time Loops was not made lightly but is necessary for this paper. This eliminates discussion from films like *About Time* (2013) or *When*

We First Met (2018), where the characters have some involvement making the choice to return to a singular day and cause different events to unfold, either through a device or some inherent property that these protagonists have control over. While one could argue these are redemption plots of their own, the events in which the protagonists develop as a character are rooted in their understanding of the power they hold, as opposed to the uncontrollable repetition seen in an Involuntary Time Loop. This brings down the total number of applicable films significantly, which eventually was narrowed down to the four films that will be discussed further: *Groundhog Day*, *Happy Death Day* (2017), *Happy Death Day 2U* (2019), and *Palm Springs* (2020). While these films have the versatility to belong to many genres, including romantic-comedy, horror, and action, they are united in their use of the science-fiction trope of playing with time, an element that is not possible in our world. These films were chosen based on their overall popularity in recent years, as well as the fact that the latter three have come out within a shortened period of time, bringing to light an emerging pattern in the film industry.

A Brief Genre History

These films do not exist in a vacuum, especially due to their popularity in culture, and unconventional plots that can leave audiences wondering what happened. You could fill a series of books on everything written on the topic of *Groundhog Day* alone. It is nearly impossible to find a paper written on the concept of time loops that doesn't make at least some passing reference to *Groundhog Day* due to the film's cultural prevalence. This is seen both in articles used to generate interest in other films (seen in Squire's articles surrounding the future of the *Happy Death Day* series), and other research informed writings such as Hazen and Schniedermann's theses.

Even the introduction to this thesis began by framing it with the context of *Groundhog Day*, because the film has become a cultural object that most people are at least aware of conceptually.

To give a little history to the genre of time loops, there have been stories and short stories written about someone being trapped in time for centuries, but movies surrounding this specific subgenre didn't appear until the late nineties. In earlier films like *Repeat Performance* (1947), the protagonist relives a single loop of the exact same year on New Year's Eve. The first true Involuntary Time Loop in movie making came out the same year as *Groundhog Day*, a film made for television called *12:01* (1993), based on a short story by the same name. However, since this was only released on the Fox cable channel, it did not reach the same audience as a traditional theatrical release that *Groundhog Day* had the same year. There's also the inherent star power associated with these films in contrast, with *12:01*'s biggest claim to fame as the star of *Weekend at Bernie's* (1989), Jonathan Silverman, compared with Saturday Night Live alumni Bill Murray paired with award-winning Andie MacDowell. So, while *Groundhog Day* might not win the award for the first film about a time loop in the history books, compared in popularity it is certainly the most recognized version of an Involuntary Time Loop.

This film sparked a new style of genre that sunk its teeth into television as well. Long-running television shows that were science-fiction or fantasy inclined began to incorporate the concept of an Involuntary Time Loop. This can be seen in such cases as *The X Files*'s season six episode "Monday" (1999), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s season six episode "Life Serial" (2001), and *Supernatural*'s season three episode "Mystery Spot" (2008). The concept lends itself well to a problem-of-the-week style show, because it provides an entertaining premise with a meaningful message that can be contained within an hour-long episode. The Involuntary Time Loop almost becomes expected to rear its head eventually the longer these shows go on, entering a similar level

of recognition as a musical episode or a single take episode, or any gimmick episode that appears across shows.

A television show also of note is Natasha Lyonne's *Russian Doll* (2019), a comedy/drama that takes place over the course of a time loop. With an overall runtime of approximately three and a half hours, the continuous story of the first season is one of the longest experiments of a singular time loop. The show ended up getting multiple Emmy nominations during the awards season, and was renewed for a second season, with a different plot device than a time loop. However, the general public and critical reception of this television show is an important note of how well Involuntary Time Loops are received by the viewers.

The 2010's is when time loops really exploded, with the plot popping up in countless movies and short films across the globe, such as *The Incident* (2014, Mexico), *The Edge of Tomorrow* (2014, USA), *Mrs. Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (2016, UK/USA), and *A Day* (2017, Korea). Each of these movies use time loops for different plot purposes, and it signifies a moment where the time loop has "escaped containment" as a niche science-fiction genre and entered popularity once again. It would be inaccurate to say that this is a resurgence in popularity, but instead a particular snapshot in time where time loops seem to have saturated the market as an acceptable plot device for a film.

Intertwined: Time Loops and Philosophy

Since science-fiction has existed as a genre, it has offered critiques or explorations of what society looks like, or what it could become if humanity continues this way. Prodigious comparative literature essayist M. Keith Booker has said that "the form [of science-fiction] is actually quite versatile and is able to evolve in a variety of directions in direct response to changing historical

contexts,” (Booker 17). And this is true, as no media exists independently, especially novel content such as science-fiction that usually deals with everyday people put in situations that resemble a version of the problems that audiences face in their own everyday life. Sometimes things are exaggerated to the extremes where the message behind a dystopia is no longer hidden, other times the themes may be more hidden in the subtext. A well-written science-fiction story offers an insight into the human condition, casting us in a distinct light.

Booker narrows in even more, saying that, “subgenres as time-travel narratives open up a space for the exploration of numerous important philosophical ideas from fresh, new perspectives,” (18). Philosophy is one of the ways that science-fiction can offer critiques, by putting characters who represent ideals in scenarios that challenge their perspectives. The typical example of this shown in time loop films is the concept of existentialism and nihilism, to the point that in *Palm Springs* one of the main characters is named Nyles (Andy Samberg) in a pun based on the concept of nihilism. His character embodies the principles of nihilism, which includes, “the shocking recognition that there is no overarching reason, order, or purpose to our existence, that it is all fundamentally meaningless and absurd,” (Aho 1). Having been trapped in a time loop for an extended length of time, Nyles is disillusioned by the purpose of his existence; what does life really mean to someone who is unable to move on from one day? This can be seen throughout most time loop films as the protagonists struggle to comprehend what to do with their (as far as they are aware of) infinite lives. Over the course of the films, protagonists are given the answer: to find the meaning in the people around them, offering a rebuttal to nihilism. This will be explored further in depth later on.

Another question that is constantly raised by time loop films is the question of agency and free will. From one perspective, it could be said that only the people stuck in the time loop have

free will, and that everyone else around them is forced to continue repeating their actions forever. The protagonists are then able to gain some semblance of omnipotence, as the repeated use of the loop allows for them to memorize the actions of everyone around them. Phil Connors even goes so far as to refer to himself as a god when trying to explain the concept to his romantic partner Rita (Andie MacDowell). There is a level of control that is to be expected to be gained in a time loop, due to the forced repetition of the same encounters. This premise can be subverted, as seen in the dual protagonist narrative found in *Palm Springs* where Nyles is challenged by the inclusion of another human reaching the same level of “power.” While these movies typically end with the protagonist escaping the time loop, it usually only shows the next few moments after the fact. A story that examines a protagonist's sudden lack of control and foresight into the behaviors of people around them is a story would be worth exploring on its own, grappling with the loss of comfortability in a time loop. As of right now there do not seem to be any popular versions of this story.

Methodology

In order to make sure that everyone is on the same page, this first portion is dedicated to reviewing some terminology. The film analysis this thesis is based off of will primarily revolve around the manner in which the story is portrayed, which will be looking at the structure and storytelling elements used to get this message across. The main highlight will be the climax of the movie, where the characters achieve a newly invented term called “the perfect loop,” where the protagonist gets everything right before they manage to escape the loop. Close readings break down the exact moments of what choices these characters made and offer thoughts into why they have made these choices. The redemption plot was defined earlier, but it is important to revisit that and understand the motivations behind it with the typical three act structure that is found in most Hollywood films, and specifically within Involuntary Time Loops. These three acts follow common tropes and stories, painting a general picture of expectations in a film. When films deviate from this expected structure, this where the point of the film can be made. Each of the chosen films has a moment where they break the norm, proving their worth as an interesting film to dissect.

A movie can typically be divided into thirds, which match the beats and changes with a character's life. The first act introduces the characters and the setting as well as the basic premise of the movie. The audience meets the protagonist and gets a glimpse at their character and how they interact with the world. In a redemption plot, they can adopt a cold or callous personality, but there must be room to transform into something good. The first act contains a negative value change, where something is going wrong in the life of the character, and then the time loop they find themselves caught in exacerbates that issue. A good use of a time loop is really a metaphor to explore the protagonist’s psyche. Typically, the first act lasts until the protagonist fully accepts that they are stuck within a time loop, and they embrace the repetitive nature.

This leads into the second act, which contains fun and games, changing the negative value into a positive one. Usually this section contains a montage, where the protagonist spends their time attempting crazy things without consequences, since they know there will be no repercussions for their behavior. Selfish tendencies are highlighted, and the audience is treated to see who the protagonist really is as they let their mask slip. Characters bond and grow closer together while discovering things about themselves and the world around them. The midpoint of the movie appears here, typically in a dramatic scene where something goes drastically wrong for the protagonist in a way that never has happened before. The stakes are elevated, and it seems like everything is done for. The value changes back to negative while the main character flounders, facing consequences they thought they could avoid or never once anticipated.

This brings us to the third and final act. The protagonist has recognized the error of their ways and is striving to make things better. They use their time loop for good, getting closure that they need with people in their lives, or developing into someone who cares for the community around them. While most other films involve a physical confrontation that works as the climax of the movie, instead in redemption plots the climax typically coincides with an emotional realization, where a character gets in touch with their inner self and learns something about themselves. The negative value changes into a positive one, and the movie usually resolves on a happy note, where characters get their desired outcome, drastically different from what they originally planned. They are no longer the same person they once were. This is generally how these films are structured, obviously with variations between retellings, but this is the pattern that audiences can expect to play out over the runtime, which is what makes the changes between patterns so compelling.

It's worthwhile to examine why these four specific films were chosen to be used as the noteworthy examples of Involuntary Time Loops. As previously mentioned, *Groundhog Day* is

familiar to the largest number of audiences. In addition, due to its prevalence as one of the first time loop movies, all of the other films chosen make specific references to it, since it paved the way for the other movies to follow. In one of the last scenes right before *Happy Death Day* ends, Carter (Israel Broussard) asks Tree Gelbman (Jessica Rothe), the one who had been trapped in a time loop, if she'd ever seen *Groundhog Day*. This is a throwaway line at the end of the movie, making it a tongue in cheek acknowledgment of the existence of time loop media. *Palm Springs* also plays with this when Sarah (Cristin Milioti) is originally trying to escape the loop. In an obvious reference to *Groundhog Day*, she believes that doing a good action will allow her to be freed. This is actually a moment of foreshadowing as her action of kindness stops the wedding, since she tells the bride that she slept with the groom last night, though the audience isn't privy to this yet. Of course, this action doesn't allow Sarah to escape the loop, which then pushes her closer to Nyles. So, there is a lot of precedent to include this film as a subject of study in this paper.

As for *Palm Springs*, this film could be considered a spiritual successor to *Groundhog Day*. It's also classified as a romantic-comedy as it follows the blossoming relationship between Nyles and Sarah, similar to Phil and Rita. But the interesting twist on the film is that both of the protagonists are stuck inside of a time loop, so their relationship progresses in a similar manner to a standard romantic-comedy. This also allows for a different kind of time loop to unfold, since the fact that someone else is able to remember their actions after the reset influences the risks they're each willing to take. It also is one of the more recent time loop movies, coming out in 2020. This is a newer take on the genre of Involuntary Time Loops, which is the rationale for why this movie is worth studying.

Happy Death Day is included for a couple of reasons. First of all, it is a genre twist. This movie would be classified as a slasher/horror film, since the primary question explored in the film

is not how to escape the time loop, but who is responsible for killing Tree. The addition of the Involuntary Time Loop serves as a vehicle that allows for Tree to explore world around her and piece the clues together. This also allows for there to be a lot of character deaths in this film, which adds in another effect since the movie is rated PG-13. The decision to make the time loop almost a secondary plot element means that this movie is worth taking a closer look at.

Finally, *Happy Death Day 2U* fulfills a unique role in the history of time loop movies, because as far as I am aware, this is the first and only commercial sequel to a time loop movie. Tree is sent into another time loop (which technically takes place in a parallel universe, so the majority of the loop is the same but there are still enough changes to side character's lives resulting in a new premise). As a sequel though, it still would be classified as a slasher since the question is still who the killer is, but there's also an emphasis placed even greater on Tree's emotional growth as she connects again with her mother, who is dead in her original timeline. This movie expands significantly upon the world established in the first *Happy Death Day* and uses the time loop to explore emotions in a new and interesting way.

Groundhog Day vs Palm Springs

Nyles vs. Phil: What Makes a Man?

From the beginning of each of these films, we are introduced to our protagonists in very different versions of life: Phil is a weatherman stuck in a job that he views as beneath him with coworkers he doesn't respect. Whereas Nyles, having been stuck in the time loop already for years, is lackadaisical and operating without any real ambition or care in the world, and is only existing for himself. These are two sides of the same coin, exemplifying different avenues of selfishness, though they have come about in two different manners. Nature versus nurture. Phil was born this way or at least has become accustomed to this selfish nature in his life. Nyles, on the other hand, has been driven into this world of narcissism due to the repetition and lack of outside influence; he has embraced a mentality of living for the most personal pleasure. These characters represent two similar methods of philosophy, with Phil embodying the principles of existentialism, while the aptly named Nyles takes on the idea of nihilism.

When Phil originally enters Punxsutawney, he's got a whole host of problems, both with himself and the people around him. He hates being trapped in this rural town and tells anyone who will listen how excited he is to leave it. He has big dreams and even bigger briches, thinking that the whole world should revolve around him. The lesson that he learns by the end of the film is to become part of the community, care for the group rather than the individual. The obvious example of this comes at the tail end of the film, where the plot follows Phil as he makes his rounds around the town, changing tires and saving lives, but there's another moment that shows it as well. In an oxymoronic way, the moment where Phil expresses the most humanity stems from when his ego is still enormous, calling himself a god.

This is the time where Phil earnestly attempts to tell Rita about everything he's experiencing, using his knowledge of the repetitions to convince her to trust him. While he ultimately convinces her through other manners, he tries the tactic of explaining everyone's life story in the diner, sharing incredibly detailed and intimate parts of their lives. He brings up the fact that a bride-to-be is having second thoughts about her wedding, the waitress's deepest desire of traveling to Paris, and the new waiter's gay lifestyle. None of these facts are things that would usually be brought up in a surface level conversation, but something that would be built up with a deep rapport. Of course, they still had to have happened within the span of a day, but this goes to show that Phil had already connected with people around him and cared enough to learn their innermost thoughts and feelings, even though it wasn't shown on screen.

Pivoting to philosophy, Phil as a character serves as a stand-in for the theory of existentialism. When he is first introduced into the loop, he has no real meaningful interactions. Sure, he has his fun becoming rich and sleeping with women. On a narrative level, these moments are supposed to be appealing to the audience, something entertaining to entice viewership. But Phil as a character isn't being fulfilled spiritually by these actions, signified in his attempts to create a lasting relationship not only with Rita, but the citizens of Punxsutawney as well. His attitude towards the loop changed with the realization that death is not an escape from who he is or who he has become. From his point of view, he is left alone in the loop with himself as the only person who can change, and he chooses to do so. This embodies the basic principles of existentialism: to find meaning in the abstract or strange. In other words, if nothing matters, then you must make something matter. Evidently, Phil chose to focus on the people around him.

Interestingly enough, some of the original texts that existentialism is based on have differing opinions about this. In Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, he writes, "The feelings of

devotion, self-sacrifice for one's neighbor, the whole morality of self-denial must be questioned mercilessly and taken to court... There is too much charm and sugar in these feelings 'for others,' 'not for myself,' for us not to need to become doubly suspicious at this point and to ask: 'are these not perhaps—*seductions?*'" (Nietzsche 235). There is an intense focus here on working towards the betterment of yourself as opposed to those around you. This quote is not expressly arguing against the idea of helping out your community, but it tries to raise the question of why you would. What are you getting out of this transaction, what are your true intentions behind these actions? It's part of the search for attributing meaning to both the actions of you and those around yourself. In these writings, Nietzsche has a cautious feeling regarding others around him, highlighting the importance of the self, which courts the thin line of selfishness.

This isn't to say that Phil isn't a selfish person. Throughout the course of the film though, his intentions change as he realizes the futility of his situation. By the end of *Groundhog Day*, he has made the decision to use his powers no longer to create the perfect day for himself, but for everyone else around him. He took the time over an unspecified number of loops to learn about all the major and minor obstacles facing the city and created a schedule to care for those around him. Now, most people would argue that Phil's emotional apotheosis happens when he encounters the homeless man's destined death, but I think that it happened before that, based on the fact that Phil already knows the inner lives of those around him as established in the diner scene. While his exact motivations for learning all of this information cannot be determined, through boredom, seduction, or genuine care, it still stands that not only did he take the time to talk to a random stranger about their lives but also remember the tiny details that matter.

Even now, before his third act resolution, Phil is a completely different person than he was at the beginning of the movie. He has already begun to create meaning in the experiences he has

with the people around him, and he gains something by being around them. The death of the homeless man is just Phil being confronted with an extension of his care, his search for meaning in the lives of those outside of himself. It externalizes the fact that he does care and tries desperately to save the man's life. This moment forces him to realize that life is precious, and Phil has to acknowledge the impact he can have on those around him. Phil, the man who has many emotional walls up, is forced to admit to himself that everything around him matters to him, and he can no longer turn a blind eye.

Let's flash forward almost three decades to look at Nyles. At the beginning of *Palm Springs*, he has stagnated into a passive protagonist. He lets the events of the day happen to him, passing each day in a state of pure pleasure, taking the minimal steps to maximize his own happiness. This is the result of having been trapped inside a time loop for so long that he has genuinely begun to forget what his life was like prior to it. He makes the most of his day by making the least of it so that he can get right into the next one, led the exact same way. He has reached a state where nothing matters to him at all, with the exception to the rule being the random torture methods brought on by Roy (J.K Simmons) for accidentally trapping him in the time loop as well. The problem that he faces here is quite different than Phil's was: instead of creating meaningful connections from scratch with other people, Nyles must reforge these connections and understand that a life worth living is one that values the importance of other people.

Sarah is the reason why he begins to feel this way. This is because she has become the only other person he consistently interacts with since she becomes trapped inside of the time loop as well. Now there is someone to hold Nyles accountable, whose actions will be remembered by someone else, influencing his decisions on what he can do now. He has found an equal partner, one who can attempt to understand the experience he's having. Since this movie is also a romantic-

comedy, with greater emphasis placed on romance than *Groundhog Day*, Nyles also begins to develop romantic feelings for Sarah, who feels the same way.

The conflict of the movie arises when Nyles reveals in an argument that the two of them have slept together countless times in the past, as he had experimented enough to know the exact steps he would need to take to make Sarah allow him to do so. When trying to justify his reasoning to an irate Sarah, he says, ““It was different then, it was always going to reset,”” (53:20). This mentality, that permanence is the difference in humanity, is the lesson that Nyles needs to discard in order to rejoin humanity and grow as a person. Prior to Sarah joining the time loop, he could justify the ramifications of his actions thanks to the reset, and his feelings towards Sarah (or anyone else he met at the wedding) could not mean anything beyond a general hookup because it is impossible for their relationship to progress. Even with Roy’s addition to the loop, the forced travel from Irving to Palm Springs everyday allows for his intrusions to be not consistent enough to force Nyles to worry in his everyday actions, as Roy himself comes to realize. Nothing else in his existence has been as significant as Sarah. In his own mind he has created a distinction in his experiences, a Before Sarah and After Sarah. But it doesn’t matter as Sarah leaves Nyles behind after this exchange.

This moment is also one of the first times that we can see the change in Nyles himself and is the beginning of his emotional growth. Prior to this, he is living this life of nihilism, where nothing matters and there is no true purpose, a mentality that resulted in him plateauing and remaining static in terms of skills and talents in comparison to the hundreds of times he’s lived through this same day. There has been no outside motivating factor for him to grow, until the very moment when Sarah prompts him to do so. The loss of her company after she leaves forces this

moment of self-reflection, where Nyles can no longer return to his sedentary ways. To put it simply, Sarah matters to him now, something which hasn't happened to him in a very long time.

This realization is only one of two pivotal moments for his growth. The latter comes when Sarah returns to him and offers a potential solution to escape the time loop, by way of simultaneous detonation in the mystical cave as the loop resets. She has a theory that it will either allow for them to escape the loop or permanently kill them, which would ultimately end the time loop for whoever goes through one way or another. Nyles, who has now realized how much Sarah means to him and has just finished telling her so, is initially hesitant in joining her in this step. Sarah is asking him to leave the comfortability of the time loop, where every action of the day is predictable and safe. Where practically every possible outcome has already been determined, and if there's a problem, it only matters as long as it takes for you to fall asleep. While it may be a prison, it is one built of creature comforts. Nyles has found a routine that has worked for him over years of a time loop, and the next step for his growth is to willingly break it. And he can't do it. Yet.

The reason why Nyles as a character has been craving community can be explained in a couple of the other setting details. First of all, he's attending a wedding for his girlfriend Misty's (Meredith Hagner) friend, not someone he's close to in the first place, let alone all of her extended family and friends that he hasn't met before. On top of that, his one point of contact that he could ground himself with, Misty, will always cheat on Nyles during the party, destroying any trust or respect that he would have for her. To add even more salt to the wound, the wedding is being held in the desert of Palm Springs, at a resort that makes life feel isolating from any outside city where Nyles would be connected. Without people that really know who he is, Nyles becomes detached from them, and the community they represent. With the time loop, it has become near impossible to create these meaningful connections that he desires, because at the end of the day everyone

around him is a stranger. It would take a large portion of the day to get to know these other people well enough, and even then, it could only be a short-term gratification with the loop resetting once he falls asleep. Roy may be an example of Nyles's attempts to get to know someone, making the choice to introduce him to the loop so that their party would never end. Of course, the act of adding him to the time loop, also known as Nyles's surrogate community, turned Roy into a sadistic killer bent on exacting revenge. So it makes sense why he clings on to Sarah so strongly as soon as she is introduced into the loop, since she is the only one in his community that he can build these positive connections with that he has been desperately desiring.

Let's return to the climax of the film. While the film is not specific about the length of time the couple was separated, it has to have been a long enough time for Sarah to learn astrophysics. This period of isolation after experiencing a form of community that has been just outside of his reach for potentially decades has changed Nyles into recognizing how his life has been enriched by other people. As a character, his choice is then brought down to the question of what is more important: safety within isolation, or leaving the cycle and beginning life again, but this time with Sarah. So essentially, continue the sedentary life of nihilism he has, or take a step towards a communitarian outlook, where he will be reintegrated back into society on multiple levels: one with Sarah as a couple, and the other with the rest of the world in the standard flow of time. When confronted with these choices, Nyles changes his mind in a climactic and genre-specific chase through the night, arriving mere moments before Sarah would leave him forever. He talks through all of these faults to Sarah and makes the choice to go with her into the cave and escape the time loop, finally choosing community.

As stated before, it's quite easy to initially view Phil and Nyles as two sides of the same coin, but below the surface it becomes quite evident how they are very different characters who

are only placed in similar situations. Phil is someone who has made the conscious choice to attempt to sever his bonds with community, and through the repetitions granted to him through the time loop, is forced to recognize the importance of said community. Nyles on the other hand is someone who had this community ripped away from him as he was trapped on the most isolating day of his life, meaning that after decades of being stuck in a time loop, he has to figure out how to reforge these bonds of community. These stories are not being told individually, but in conversation with one another, telling different stories of forced seclusion into the triumphant return to those that love and care about them, adapting these ideas into different days and ages.

Changing Times: The Nineties vs Now

Films do not exist in a vacuum, they are influenced by the culture around them. Whether this happens in a direct allusion to another movie, television show, or any form of media, or potentially a cultural phenomenon, there is always some way of dating when a movie was made. Sometimes this comes in comparisons of technology used in the movies, such as the comparison to a corded landline to a pocket-sized cellphone, or a boxy brick of a computer to a paper-thin laptop. All of these details help shape and define the world that they are placed in. A film can act as a time capsule, giving a glimpse into what life was like in the year it was released in. One important part that changes and evolves through the passage of time is the values and morals depicted in a film.

While in the process of becoming a good person, for the sake of a joke Phil is allowed to pretend to be gay towards Ned Ryerson (Stephen Tobolowsky) in order to scare him away from being friends with him again. On the other hand, Nyles as a character is canonically bisexual, and while it is still played for a laugh there's an obvious difference. Nyles is the one making the joke of something that he participated in, rather than preying off of the fear of being gay like Phil's

joke. These are two similar jokes that had very different intended effects on the audience, one that revolves around the difference between laughing at a group of people versus laughing with them.

This is one of the ways that entertainment serves as a time capsule for the period, a litmus test for what is deemed to be socially acceptable. Phil's moment is a small joke that is a throwaway gag, ultimately having no real bearing on the plot besides letting Tobolowsky appear another time in the film. This then begs the question of what scenes were left on the editing room floor in favor of this moment, or why this moment wasn't excluded. There was something about this joke Harold Ramis and writer Danny Rubin collectively thought it would make the audiences laugh and decided to keep it in the film. Culturally when this film was released in the nineties, casual homophobia was an acceptable viewpoint held by the masses. While homophobia and other prejudices are unfortunately still alive and well in the modern era, it seems to be uncommon for large production films to continue having these elements in them, unless they are specifically working as part of a character trait to show a flawed character as opposed to a casual one-off joke.

This is what it means to examine these two characters and the growth that they go through as two distinct individuals from three decades apart. Even though these two films are not that far away from each other in terms of history books, the world and its perceptions is a different place since then. Overall, this showcases the change in the collective knowledge of what elements comprise a good person. Of course, the messages of the films remain the same, to fundamentally become a better person than you were before, but different time periods produce different standards of being better. The evolution of cultural accountability can be seen within these films.

To that point, take a look at the values that are being promoted in these films, comparing the lifestyle promotions. Film theorists Bordwell and Thompson have described this as a symptomatic meaning in the film, where the values represented in the film are actually reflective

of the societal norms at the time (63). *Groundhog Day* is a film that at least in part promotes the ideals of small-town living, as the film ends on the note of Phil joking about moving there for good. The entire film also taking place here leads to Phil discovering the values of this community that he had once entirely disregarded, and this rural town is painted in a different light because of this portrayal, creating a picturesque hometown. On the flip side of things, *Palm Springs* is promoting more of an idea that people are flawed, and that part of life is accepting them for who they are, mistakes and all. Neither Sarah nor Nyles is a perfect person, and the resolution of the film comes in accepting this fact, not only about each other, but also themselves. This note of acceptance of the self stems from a world where people can constantly be scrutinized by one another.

It makes sense to begin the comparing and contrasting by looking in terms of connective technology back in 1993, when *Groundhog Day* was released. This was the year that the World Wide Web (technology that allows for people to host their own websites beyond knowing a lot about computers) became popular with the masses, and people discovered the outreach that was now available with one another. With an introduction and adoption by society, this was first step towards the version of the internet that we have today. In a complete contrast, the rise of social media in the 2020's has created another platform where people interact with others, creating another online version of themselves to broadcast to people that they wouldn't necessarily see in person. The internet has gone through a serious revolution from then until now, which has led to an entirely different ecosystem, both on screen and the actual users of technology.

Take for example shopping malls. In every major city, these were bustling centers of life, a secondary location for people to congregate. In 1995, a few years after the release of *Groundhog Day*, director Kevin Smith made the film *Mallrats*, a comedy which focuses on a specific "clique"

of people that would simply spend their free time at the mall. Nowadays however, the mall environment is entirely different. Malls across the country have closed their doors for good as their income isn't enough to justify keeping their doors open in these locations. While people obviously still continue shopping at these locations, malls are culturally no longer a place to simply meet up at. This has resulted in the loss of one of the few secondary locations to allow for people to hang out. These small moments are what makes up a community, not just large gatherings. Compare this now to websites such as Amazon, which conveniently allows users to purchase almost anything and get it delivered to anywhere for a low additional shipping fee with only the tap of a finger. This makes economic sense in terms of opportunity cost but also eliminates the small talk and other moments created in the physical act of shopping. Highlighting the differences between physical and online shopping is not necessarily meant to say that one is superior to the other, but merely as indicators of change between the years in the communities that arise.

It could be argued that the twenty-first century and technology has given rise to a secondary community being created. There exists two that humanity interacts with on a daily basis: the physical and the virtual, each with their own social and cultural connotations. A lot of overlap extends between the two, such as the emotional responses elicited, but there is an inherent difference from how people interact with each other now than how they did thirty years ago.

Now, let's return to the original discussion of the films in this paper: *Palm Springs* and *Groundhog Day*. Each of these movies address community and how each protagonist interacts with it. The important takeaway is to understand that each film is addressing a different type of community. *Groundhog Day* tells the tale of a man trying to retreat from the community around him until he is forced to recognize the physical joy of participating with those around him. Conversely, Nyles is someone who has become unattached from community in a similar manner

as someone who only can interact with the virtual community and realizes the importance of multifaceted connections. However, the overall messages of these movies are not so separate that if you were to switch when these movies were released, each message would still be relevant to the audiences. But it is important to take into account why this question was being raised culturally at this point in time, and what prompted this film to answer that question, which boils down into the variations in community seen here.

Single vs Dual Protagonists

A fair portion of this paper so far has been dedicated to Nyles serving as Phil's counterpart in their respective movies, which is true, however this is only half the story of *Palm Springs*, a story equally about Sarah's journey. This is an important distinction between these two because Sarah is a protagonist as well, since the story only begins once she has been introduced into the time loop. She also experiences a character arc, though hers is more focused on recognizing her own self-worth. Together, the story of Sarah *and* Nyles is what makes the movie so memorable as they rely on each other in different ways during their times of need, which is different from *Groundhog Day* which exclusively follows Phil. At its core, this contrast comes from the narrative choice to play more into the rom-com genre and flesh out both love interests rather than focus on the efforts of one person trying to win over the other. While this choice allows for the exploration of both characters, it also has a butterfly effect on the rest of the plot because by nature of the specific genre, there must be two people trapped in one time loop.

From this realization comes the question: how does this impact the way the story is told? The answer lies in accountability. A hallmark in nearly every time loop film is a hedonistic montage where characters go on a selfish rampage, doing everything they never thought they could

before because there are no more consequences to their actions, as the day will always reset. There can be no judgment because by tomorrow no one will have experienced anything to be judged upon. In theory, this could last as long as the protagonist wants. However, this formula is changed by adding a second person into the mix. Now, there is someone who experiences the flow of time the same way, and can remember your actions, forcing you to adjust to being around them, holding each other accountable.

Another way to examine these stories and the choices in single vs dual protagonists is in the scope of characters. For example, *Groundhog Day* is almost exclusively a character study on Phil, as he is practically always on screen (and even when he isn't physically there, characters are discussing his actions). Phil serves as the driving focus of the story, and the audience follows him as he adapts his personality to the people around him. The only moment that breaks from this formula is the ending, where the focus shifts towards Rita as she reacts to each good deed Phil has done. Now, this doesn't mean that she has been elevated to a protagonist, but it works as the closest point of comparison of what a dual protagonist plot in this film would be like.

Rita's character development in this movie stems predominantly from her backtracking on her first impression of Phil from the first day she met him, the day before the loop actually began. The issue that prevents her from becoming viewed as a protagonist is that she remains outside of the loop, and is forced to be a reactionary character to Phil. Without his outside influence, she would repeat the same actions, as seen in the "I only drink to world peace" montage where Phil can create the exact same environment over and over to manipulate her. By the sheer definition of what a strong protagonist is, someone who causes the story to happen rather than let it happen to them, she cannot be one as written. Given these baseline viewpoints, to follow Rita as a protagonist would not add to the greater message of rejoicing and rejoining community but serve to reinforce

the ideas of romance as the main theme. This isn't to say that this wouldn't make for a compelling story, but this would change the tone and potentially genre of the film, making it a fundamentally different story from *Groundhog Day*. As is, Rita is currently the second most important character of the film (as evidenced by Andie MacDowell being second-billed in the cast), though she serves more as an indicator of how Phil's relationship currently stands with his community.

Now, let's switch to the other hypothetical: *Palm Springs* as a single protagonist. Right off the bat, it becomes clear that Nyles is not able to fulfill the role singularly, since he is shown to have accepted his position in the time loop by the point that the film begins. There could be an argument made for the plot of a solo Nyles film involving him resolving his antagonistic relationship with Roy, but it would be hard to sustain the stakes as is and again detracts from the thematic resonance of community. The events of the film only begin following Sarah getting sucked into the Involuntary Time Loop. To view the film from a single perspective, it would need to follow her much more closely, answering questions sooner in the film than currently given.

For example, the revelation that each morning she wakes up in the groom's bed from cheating with him the night before is something that retroactively explains her initial reservations seen presented in the first act of the film. The hypothetical solo protagonist film would make the internal turmoil more obvious, moving the audience closer to her emotional state. Sarah's own past currently has some questions left unanswered, such as her relationship with her previous ex-husband, as well as the events that drove her to sleep with her sister's fiancée the night before their wedding. Currently, with the spread of attention being divided between Nyles and her, these questions can be left in passing, but these questions would take a forefront in a character study film on her life, especially if the movie kept the romantic themes. These are all integral moments to her character's background to explain how she ended up in this scenario. Tiny details that would

enhance the revelation that Nyles has slept with her in the past, emphasizing the betrayal that she feels from his actions. Though with this choice and the heightened emotional attachment, it may be harder for the audience to accept how Sarah forgives Nyles so easily during the third act, depending on how empathetic they make his character's actions as a secondary character.

This is the crux of how the choice of protagonists in a story impacts audience interpretations of the film and subsequently its genre placement. While the nature of a time loop cements the basic world as science-fiction, for the plot to revolve around the romance of two people, both characters need to be fleshed out, and both characters should have agency in their actions, moving the genre closer to romantic-comedy. I argue that *Groundhog Day* is less a true rom-com than a comedy film with a romantic plotline, due to the fact that for the majority of the film it is a one-sided relationship that is unable to develop. The movie only follows Phil, which makes it harder to understand Rita as a full character. In comparison, *Palm Springs* has become one of the more memorable romcoms in the twenty-first century due to the nature of the two protagonists both experiencing a time loop, a plot device novel to the rom-com, and the rom-com an interesting twist to the science-fiction. Each character's actions can be understood at some level, and neither are perfect people which the audience is able to see closely happen on screen.

The ultimate decision between either option comes down to the specific impact of the story, and the intended meaning behind it. Again, relating to the themes of each film, each one has a different effect, with *Groundhog Day* being one person discovering the importance of community for the first time, while *Palm Springs* is about two people helping each other rejoin this community once again. The breadth of the message being told is something that impacts the decision between these choices. The plot device of the time loop is a limiting factor, as these characters who are supposed to have differing viewpoints and reconcile are forced to go through the same events as

one another. It depends on if the message is speaking to a larger group of people, such as the human condition overall, or if there is more of a preference to dissect what makes one specific person tick. It boils down to a decision to focus on the big picture, or one detail of the whole painting, and the screenwriter standing in front of the easel with the brush in their hands.

Happy Death Day and Happy Death Day 2U

Effects of Genre

In the other movies discussed so far, the protagonists had a pretty nice time being stuck inside of their time loops, spending years relaxing in a quiet town or resort, able to experience their lives to the fullest. Transitioning to the *Happy Death Day* films, the opposite rings true. In both of these films, Tree instead struggles to survive until the end of the day, being hunted by the murderous Babyfaced Killer (hereto after referred to as BFK). This twist turns the discussed genres sharply from romantic comedies to slasher, but that doesn't mean that there isn't a similar theme attached to the movie. This exploration of the genre is the most compelling part of these films, and how the plot chooses to sideline the time loop in favor of pursuing a deeper, emotional story. These two movies are similar to *Groundhog Day* and *Palm Springs* only on the basic plot level but expand the Involuntary Time Loop in interesting ways.

Tree's exposure to the effects of Sisyphus Quantum Cooling Reactor (Sisy) through no fault of her own, and while she could move past September 18th (the day of the loop), she is unable to because the actions of the BFK cause her death every night. In this cinematic world, the time loop is more of a reset point that she is able to progress past, however the plot of the film causes it to function functionally the same as an Involuntary Time Loop. The decision to repeat the day is predominantly out of her hands, allowing for the same level of intimacy with the repetitive events to arise as expected in a time loop. For the intended purposes of discussing these films, it can be treated as an Involuntary Time Loop.

To distinguish the genres of these movies, it serves to explain how the slasher film genre is operating here. Typically, these films involve a plot where a masked killer hunts down a group of friends and murders them in some melee attacks, and the driving question is not only how the

protagonist will survive, but equally who the killer is. This is applicable to the *Happy Death Day* films, because The BFK is always masked and they have one target in mind (usually Tree). However, Tree's ability to return to the beginning of the day allows Tree to fulfill the death count expected to be found in a slasher, creating an almost paradoxical "final girl" who almost the only person killed in the movie.

Continuing with this line of thinking, a slasher film with a masked killer involves some element of mystery, where the protagonists must try and figure out the identity of the killer, and why they are doing so. Tree does not question the fact that a time loop has happened but instead is reasonably focused on figuring out who is killing her. From a character standpoint, that makes sense, as the person hunting her down every night should take precedence over the freak accident of getting trapped in a time loop. Since Tree is unable to explore the nature of the time loop due to the looming presence of the BFK, the main plot question of "how did this happen to me/how can I escape the loop?" shifts into "who/why is this person trying to kill me?" This changes the crux of the conflict, from the current one of "man vs fate" seen in the other films discussed here to a physical manifestation of a "man vs man" conflict as expected with the slasher genre.

The other difference in the conflict rising here is the creation of a definite antagonist. The BFK is someone directly opposed to Tree, forcing her to make decisions and progress through the story. The tango between these two characters drives her from plot point to plot point as they try to thwart one another. In comparison, *Groundhog Day* does not have a direct antagonist to Phil's actions outside of the nature of the time loop itself. Through the plot he experiences a give and take between his control, experiencing a daily god-like, and yet he comes to discover this is meaningless in the face of the Etch-A-Sketch of the world being shaken every time he falls asleep.

These are two distinctly different antagonists that reside within their respective genres, the driving forces that harry the protagonists.

Another element that is changed with the genre is the inclusion of stakes, a question of survival. Of course, Tree is able to reset each day but inexplicably retains some of the damage from how she had died previously, which will lead to a permanent death due to her body shutting down. This sets a time limit on how many times Tree is able to reset the loop through her own death, because each time brings her one step closer to the real thing. This allows for the slasher film genre to continue in this film, because even though Tree is saved from the actions of the BFK, she still is being harmed by them, albeit not as rapidly as the BFK would hope for. The one issue that this film has for its stakes, which is unfortunately more a moment of weaker writing than a comment on the character of Tree herself, is that there is no specific quantifiable limit on how many times she is able to reset the loop before dying. The effects seem to only rear their head when narratively applicable rather than being pervasive. For example, the original faint that led to the discovery of the ongoing health problems is something that she should be experiencing in the next four loops as well (not even to mention the second film), unless she takes specific action to counter it. In essence, this plot point purely exists to work with the expectations held within the slasher genre of making death seem like a possibility for the main character.

Contrast the slasher's stakes with the romantic comedies studied earlier. In *Palm Springs* their relationships are at risk, not only as lovers but also as friends, creating emotional stakes in comparison to the physical ones of danger presented here. These stakes are one of the prevailing elements that set the tone for the story, because the stakes are ultimately what the plot must center around, raising the question of success in the minds of the audience. Different stories obviously demand varying types of stakes, and so each genre would demand an expected level of stakes. This

is one of the reasons why the life and death stakes are seen in *Happy Death Day*, even though it seems almost antithetical to the expected nature of a time loop.

Notably, this does not halt Tree's progression as a character. Much like the prior protagonists, Tree begins the film as a selfish person focused on her life as a sorority sister and image, not caring about anyone else's life. The strongest evidence of her progression as a character is how she treats Carter, who transitions from a total stranger when the loop began to an ultimate love interest (even though he retains no memories of his interactions with Tree in any timeline). Throughout the course of the first film, she comes to care about him as a person, eventually going so far as to sacrifice her potential escape from the loop so that he will survive. Tree's relationship with him transforms quickly considering her timeline is only two weeks. Similar to the development of Nyles and Phil, Tree also retains this level of character growth and recognition of the community that she surrounds herself with, eventually growing to fully appreciate it.

To the point of community, the time loop does present an interesting dilemma in the nature of a slasher as well. While Tree is not as isolated as Phil is physically or Nyles emotionally, she still has a hard time connecting with her peers to explain the gravity of the situation. Slashers typically require a cohort of teens to fight back against the villain to progress the story, eventually leaving the Final Girl by herself. In the first film, this is almost exclusively limited to how Tree interacts with Carter and recruits him. Each day they begin as strangers, and Tree must bring him up to speed about the time loop and the danger posed to her by the BFK. Sometimes the audience is treated to these explanations from Tree's perspective, but by the second and third acts of the film, these conversations happen off-screen. This is done to not bore the audience with these repetitive scenes, but it speaks volumes of Carter's character that he willingly goes along with these ideas in every repetition. *Happy Death Day 2U* takes this and expands on it even more,

including all of Carter's scientist friends. The second film is more in line with the larger cast seen in a slasher film, though noticeably none of these characters are ever in danger from the BFK due to the nature of the vendetta held by the killer. To continue with the discussion of elevated stakes, they work to develop the conflict of the B plot and are faced with expulsion and lack of continuing their research with Sisy, something that they hold to an almost equally important value.

The time loop works as a throughline for these characters to grow and change over the course of the film, regardless of the specific genre that the plot and stakes are calling for. Each film has vastly different rationales for how or why the time loop has happened to these protagonists, but these character seemingly all follow a similar storyline of progressing to become a better person. To grow is to be human, and science-fiction contain some of the most human moments someone can go through, no matter how exaggerated the scenario they arise in.

How Does a Sequel Work in a Time Loop?

This is the question that *Happy Death Day 2U* really raised that had never been explored before, because in almost every other version of a time loop, the story is over as the protagonist has escaped the time loop. Let alone what other plot-specific problems they found themselves in, the fundamental structure of the story has been resolved. To create a sequel, it would be expected to follow the characters in a similar scenario, which could grow trite after just having seen the almost exact same thing play out in the other film with little variation, since that is the quite literal same plot. Along with that, a second film would require the creation of a second time loop, which is something inherently against the nature of an Involuntary Time Loop. Offering the character the choice to go back in the loop provides a agency, something that would alienate it from the first film.

Yet, *Happy Death Day 2U* provides a satisfactory answer, by using science-fiction magic to send Tree to an almost identical parallel world. These slight changes allow a new slasher to arise, however the central plot of the identity of the new BFK takes a backseat in comparison to the emotional stakes that Tree faces in this alternate universe. In the original universe, her mother has passed and Tree has formed a romantic relationship with Carter. In this new universe, her mother is now alive, but Carter is dating Tree's sorority sister. This movie takes a significantly more emotional turn as Tree is forced to confront her feelings, essentially having to choose between her past and her future. While the slasher element still remains as part of the driving force to get consumers in seats to see the film, this internal conflict dives deeper into the psyche of Tree as her values are tested. A clearer message to the audience is being presented here, and one that feels more pertinent and deeper, more in line with the ones seen in other romcoms. You can either live in the past or move on to the future, but you cannot have both. Jessica Rothe embodies this in an emotional depth that wasn't as present in the original film since the conflict didn't call for it.

One of the reasons why this movie works is that it almost experiences a complete tonal shift from the first film. The primary slasher antagonist on paper, the BFK, only affects Tree's life four times throughout her stint in this universe, a strong downgrade from their eleven physical bouts in the first movie, though this is enough of the central climax of the film to still classify it as a slasher as it does propel the narrative. The sequel returns to a science-fiction genre as it takes more time to discuss the nature of the time loop as opposed to being a force of nature as in the first film. Also, the inclusion of the moral dilemma of which universe Tree should remain in is in line with the philosophical quandaries typically explored in science-fiction, to a notably greater extent than the other films discussed in this essay. *Happy Death Day 2U* feels like an entirely different movie, even though a majority of the sets, costumes, props, and actors are recycled for a new story.

Another facet of this story that is intriguing is Tree's own character development. She remains as the more-open person that was discovered in the first film, caring less about her social standing in the face of good people around her. Since there hasn't been a developmental backslide in her character, the plot serves more to test her mettle and growth from her previous movie. For example, she grew to appreciate Carter's nerdy personality in the first film, and in the sequel, she now is exposed to three of his other friends, each of whom have a stronger nerd personality than Carter. Tree becomes close with these people, working with them to help her as well as developing inside jokes with them, notably bonding with them. Her reconnection with her family in the form of speaking with her father again is put to even greater lengths due to the reintroduction of her mother in this universe. A highlight of every day she shares in this universe is in part due to her family, getting everything she ever wanted, but she is then tested with the option of a return. She even has to grapple with the notion of selfishness in the face of living a life that is not her own, as evidenced in the shared memories that people have with the version of her that existed before Tree was sent to this universe. If she were to just adopt this alternate version of herself, she could eventually have her cake and eat it too by eventually getting to be with Carter, but she would be stealing that experience from another version of herself. In essence, character details that were sprouting in the first film flourish here in the sequel, allowing for continued character development.

Interestingly, none of the character development is necessarily specific to the fact that this story is being contained inside of a time loop. Each of these moments comes down to specific choices that she makes, where Tree's mettle is tested until she ultimately makes a decision. As opposed to the forced interactions sparking humanity and connection in community as typically highlighted by a time loop as previously stated, this story enriches these connections more in the

one-off conversations that only Tree will remember, as opposed to the daily tests of character that usually befall her. These conversations feel like a continuation between these characters, where Tree's relationship with them seems to match what she has experienced as opposed to the reiterating their connections at the beginning of each day.

Change is important for a time loop movie, because the lack of it is the problem the characters are trying to overcome in the first place. To return to that cinematic world for a sequel is to attempt to create another compelling story, one that needs to be close enough to the original to ensure interest and that the characters are acting in accordance with what the audience knows about them. At the same time there must be an element of change, of novelty that reinvents the concept of a time loop. This seems to work well for the *Happy Death Day* series, because of the transfer of focus away from the nature of the time loop towards the inner self is a continuation of the story that feels justified and earned through exploring these new problems, rather than creating a sequel fully intent on cashing in on the popularity of the first, an issue that is currently plaguing the film industry.

How Can I Franchise This?

This is the million-dollar question that Hollywood is dying to answer. In an industry where everything must be profitable, executives are looking for the angle of known money, movies and productions that will draw in an assured number of viewers. This can be seen in the use of rote formulas in new movies or using nostalgic characters to convince people to see the next installment of their favorite characters. If a concept is sound and a movie garners a large enough audience, it is all but guaranteed to get another installment in this current entertainment system, where blockbusters almost exclusively exist on reboots and sequels. One interesting absence from this

empire of franchise is the inclusion of a time loop, involuntary or not. Except for the *Happy Death Day* franchise, which at the time of writing has recently been greenlit for a third installment in the series and is the only time loop movie to get any kind of sequel (Squires 2025). This final film likely will serve as a canary in the coal mine for the future success of franchised time loop movies.

The ending of the second film actually includes a post-credits scene that serves to set up the events of a third installment. After returning to her original dimension, Tree and the rest of her friends are serving their punishment for the school when DARPA agents escort all of them to their lab, where they have confiscated Sisy for governmental use. They were rounded up to help the government understand the device, and when Carter asks who would even deserve to be put in a time loop. Tree thinks, and then the film smash cuts to Danielle (Rachel Matthews) waking up in her bed and screaming, implying that she was the one chosen. This is as far as the universe has been explored, with more to come as the next installment is released.

Comparing the time difference between the release of both of the sequels brings up some interesting points that plot the course of the cinematic industry. The first film was released in theaters on October 13th, 2017, and filming for the sequel began the following May, ultimately releasing in time for Valentine's Day in 2019, less than a two-year turnaround between films (Squires 2018). In contrast, Christopher Landon was only able to confirm that the script was outlined and awaiting approval from Universal studios by November of 2020 (Chand 2020). Very little was then heard until 2024, where both Rothe and Landon confirmed that the story was still being made, and they were waiting for the script to receive the green light (Salcido 2024). Finally, in April of 2025, the film was announced to be moving forward in production, revealing a light at the end of the tunnel for the third film, tentatively titled *Happy Death Day to Us* (Squires 2025).

Of course, there are many other events that took place in this time period that caused the delay between production. The COVID-19 pandemic hit in March of 2020, and there was the SAG-AFTRA strike of 2023 where writers and actors refused to work. Both of these events severely impacted the capacity of film productions, meaning that it was more of a gamble to produce the film. Along with the production issues, movie theater attendance has declined, likely in part of the rise in streaming services and some ripple effects stemming from the pandemic restrictions.

Another metric of whether or not a film will be made is to look at the box office popularity. After being released in theaters, the first film made over 125 million dollars, over 120 million more than the budget for the film, securing a profit (Box Office Mojo). While the second film still made a profit making almost 65 million dollars over its 9 million budget, a decline of over half the profit scared studios away from making a third installment right away. In the wave of modern time loop films in all variants, involuntary or not, there has also been a trend of the movie releasing entirely on streaming after a limited theater run. For example, *Palm Springs* technically operated at a loss, only making 1.5 million (Box Office Mojo) in comparison to their 5-million-dollar budget (Deadline). However, each of these services have some form of internal metrics that track the views a movie brings in from subscriptions, tracking overall interest generated. Without being inside of the board room where the discussion happens, it is difficult to determine the exact profit generated from one film, as this data is not generally released to the public. Time loop films as a genre seem to have been pigeonholed into a category of direct release on streamers, seen as not worthy of a true theatrical release.

Many stories can stem from the concept of a time loop, but it seems like in today's day and age there is a lack of franchise, with most films containing the entire story for their characters, not looking to get another installment. A time loop as a story concept creates a difficulty for a sequel,

where the inherent plot of the narrative calls for an escape to the loop, ending that chapter for the characters in theory. A second film would almost always require a second loop, rewriting the chapter once again, potentially at the detriment of the character's development. The loop is an integral manner of learning a lesson as a character, serving more as a metaphor for the character's flaws. As demonstrated, there would have to be a significant shift in the main source of conflict, something even greater than the concept of the time loop itself, which seems to be outside the general premise of other recent time loop concepts. A significant amount of care would need to be placed for a franchise to continue, a level of care not reflected well in today's industry.

Connecting the Climaxes

Or: How Do All Four Films Interact

Allusions abound in every movie made, but Involuntary Time Loops seem to be the most easily influenced by other films around them. For time loop movies, the most popular version enshrined in pop culture is easily *Groundhog Day*, a hallmark of the 90s comedic era. This movie has been referenced in both of the cinematic worlds discussed in this thesis to varying levels of impact on the plot. For example, in *Happy Death Day* it serves as a subtle wink, a punchline delivered two minutes before the credits roll as Tree reveals she is unfamiliar with the movie. This is a joke aimed more at the audience, referencing the similarities in the plot device. In *Palm Springs*, the concept of needing to be a good person to escape the loop is discussed, to which end Sarah confesses something to Tala that Nyles was unaware of (later revealed to be the fact that Sarah slept with Abe), creating an air of mystique around her. It raises the question to both Nyles and the viewers of what Sarah has done. When Sarah discovers that this isn't enough to free her from the time loop, she accepts that she is stuck, leading to the end of the first act of the film. *Groundhog Day* was not mentioned by name by either Nyles or Sarah, and yet this was proposed as a solution to the time loop, the same way Phil was able to escape. Echoes of allusion exist between these films, but each tale is ultimately different.

Character development is something that is able to shine through in any story that features a time loop, defying genre entirely, for one simple reason. Each day is expected to play out in the same way as the one before it, with only the protagonist's actions changing the outcome. The simple nature of a time loop means that as the timeline of the movie progresses, each previous incursion creates a point of comparison for the audience, allowing for the tracking of the mentality of the protagonist changing over time. This is something unique to the Involuntary Time Loop,

because they can react without any consequences since the day will be reset. It is representative of their personality and where they are at in their journey towards betterment. In most types of films (with exceptions for some dramas and the like), the audience is expected to become endeared to the protagonist, so they must either begin as likable or become so as the plot progresses. By creating a character who starts off as rude and eventually becomes kind, growth becomes obvious to all the viewers, and it reinforces the message of the film.

Every single one of these films has at least one moment of this. In *Groundhog Day*, this appears most obviously in the interactions between Phil and Ned. Ned originally is a nuisance that Phil attempts to avoid, to eventually starting outright fights with and scaring him in return, to ultimately supporting his job by buying his insurance. This can be best explained as a neutral interaction, then a negative, finally ending on a positive.

The scene in the quad is the best reference for the first *Happy Death Day*, as Tree original simply notes the events around her rather than the impact on those they are happening to (e.g. the sprinklers turning on for the couple studying, or the fraternity pledge collapsing from exhaustion). While Tree doesn't necessarily exacerbate the experience to an entirely negative one, she does add to the absurdity for everyone by walking through the quad naked. Finally, on what she plans to be her last day in the loop, Tree helps those around her, warning the couple about the sprinklers and providing a pillow for the pledge who collapses, having a much better attitude towards her peers.

This moment is revisited in the second film, though it serves as a point of comedy as Tree goes on a rampage through the quad, in pure anger at being trapped in the same time loop again. It is harder to find a direct point of repetition in the sequel, as Tree's emotional development is on a different level of complexity within herself, seen more in the varying levels of restraint she has in conversations with Carter. The first time around she keeps the pain to herself, then informs him

of their relationship in the other universe (which could be perceived as selfish for her emotionally), finally implying that things could be different between them without directly saying it. This is a much more nuanced manner to showcase how Tree has developed, and is not as much of a throughline since in this film the scenes are more emotional than comedic.

Palm Springs has two repetitions: the first being Nyles and his conversations with Misty when he wakes up, and the second being the wedding, not a specific repetitive scene by the entire concept. Misty's scenes are primarily played for comedy, but the actions of Nyles and Sarah at the wedding are most indicative of their characters. At the beginning, they are largely neutral towards the concept, allowing it to happen without a hitch. By the second act, they use it for their own personal entertainment, with the best example being the use of live dynamite inside of the cake, but they finally allow for a happy wedding ceremony with a heartfelt speech at the end.

Each film has some variation on the same neutral, negative, positive interactions, but they are all present as integral hallmarks of their character's growth. Each of these moments serves to track the passage of the three acts, with the neutral being the starting value presented in the first act, the introduction to the scenario. The negative moment emerges during the second act, during the hedonistic indulgence scene where the protagonists prioritize themselves. Finally, the positive value shows off the complete transformation, showing how much they do care in direct contrast to their prior actions.

Another major connector between these films is the discussion of isolation and community. Previously touched upon, there is a relevant theme of perceived alienation from other characters. Each character is already generally unattached from the world around them in any meaningful manner, and the time loop exacerbates this significantly by taking these flaws and forcing them to experience what it really feels like to have no one around to help. The time loop continues this

cycle of isolation by bringing each of their relationships to a halt, isolating them from their peers. As they can no longer rely on what little connections they previously had, the intrinsic value of them increases due to their perceived scarcity. When the little moments that they have taken for granted their whole lives are ripped away from them, the impact of community becomes apparent, as the time loop paints a definitive picture on how the free will of others impacts the decisions they themselves make.

A time loop can be seen as a rite of passage for a character. When the time loop begins, they are removed from their community. Isolation sets in from the people around them. The next step is the challenge, which varies from each individual protagonist as they encounter their own story, and due to the nature of the time loop, they are the only ones who understand the entire picture. Once the challenge has been completed, the time loop has ended and they are allowed to reintegrate with society, a new person with a newfound idea about their place in the world. The survivor rises from the ashes of their previous loops, reborn as a new man.

Towards A Perfect “Perfect Day”

Another element seen in these films is the notion of a perfect day where the protagonists attempt to send their best selves forwards into the future. In *Groundhog Day*, it is the completion of this perfect day that allows for Phil to escape the loop, sending the best version of himself forward. All three of the other films have specific methods that allow for the protagonists to escape the loop, so instead they all make the conscious decision to be better. Each of the positive repetitions happen on the perfect day, where they make the world the best they can for everyone around them, as well as themselves. Sarah performs a beautiful maid of honor speech for her sister, and Tree figures out how to stop the BFK and save the lives of those around her. Twice. These perfect days can really

be seen as the greatest example of the development of these protagonists, tracking them from the beginning of act one to the climax of act three.

Take Phil for example. He starts the movie as a man who barely wants to do his own job, let alone go out of his way to help others. The upstanding man around town who has a routine scheduled to bring as much utilitarian happiness to those around him has nothing in common with the Phil Connors that was on screen an hour and a half before. The cinematic decision to follow Rita's reaction to him on this last day of the loop also serves the best, quite literally exemplifying how Phil's character is drastically different seemingly over the course of one day from her perspective. She is the only character that seems to note a difference between from who the protagonist was into what they've become.

Tree's perfect day is similar, where she tries to set right all the wrongs she's done. To put it simply, she's a mean girl. Just to name a few of her discrepancies, she breaks off the affair she was having, she owns up to Lori for being a bad roommate, she is unashamed of her status of being in a relationship with Carter to her sorority sister. Each of these moments is a complete reversal of who she was at the beginning of the film, where she continued to act in ways that would only benefit herself. While no one expressly comments on this change, the small reactions together paint this picture of change, a general disbelief that this is the same person as before. Unfortunately for Tree, her perfect day is not the day she is able to leave the loop, as the plot twist reveals that Lori is the one trying to kill her as opposed to it solely being Tombs. This leads to her having she the unique experience of being one of few protagonists to *not* be able to put their best foot forward. This means that this version of the self was actually not the one people will remember, and she will need to take these steps once again with everyone. Having to own up to her past twice

increases her overall development, and her willingness to do so is very indicative of the overall change, showing her humility to those around her.

For Sarah, her perfect day is balanced around her openness towards love itself. She begins the movie as someone who is previously divorced and currently having an affair with her sister's future husband. Overall, she is relatively disillusioned by the concept of love. Her experiences with Nyles changes that, where she takes the time to actually prepare a maid of honor speech that shows how much she cares, both for her sister as well as herself now. She even accepts Nyles's run-on sentence apology, choosing to love once more. The forced proximity to Nyles showed her what love could really mean, coming in varying forms. This perfect day paints a picture that is antithetical to who she was at the beginning of the movie, and yet she's made every decision along the course of the film.

That is the crux of the perfect day. Each protagonist has decided on who they want to be in spite of who they were. It may seem like the exact opposite of who they were at the start, but each decision and realization can be tracked throughout the plot points. This moment is the epitome of their change, the chance to turn over a new leaf in the span of a day (at least, from everyone else's perspective). Every moment in the movie prior to this can only lead to this conclusion, the perfect day that is the sum of their character, with each turning point easily able to be picked out on the timeline of the movie, creating an easy method of tracking the character growth of the protagonist.

Conclusion

As far as we are aware, no one has ever truly experienced a time loop, and yet humans have told many stories about possibilities of what someone could do if they ever found themselves in that situation. Films, television shows, books, video games, something about the isolation of the loop has become so prominent in our storytelling, leading to different interpretations about the impact that it would have on the protagonist. The main throughline is a sense of loneliness, a sense of being plucked out of the stream of time and stuck in an eddy, perpetually circling around one moment, knowing that no one else has this same problem. Every story must have a narratively satisfying conclusion, which results in a joyous reunion between the protagonist and the people around them. Throughout this process, the main character has learned the importance of the community they surround themselves with, having experienced a true absence of it. Each of these stories are unique, with their own differences that set them apart from one another, but they tend to have this constant throughline that relates back to enjoying the presence of the people around them.

An Involuntary Time Loop is catered to tell a very specific kind of story that seems to defy genres, a plot device that presents a unilateral theme no matter the intent of the story. No matter what challenges the characters are facing, the Involuntary Time Loop forces people to learn from their past mistakes and build towards a brighter future. The predominant message seen throughout these movies is that the next step is always the most important one. Hopefully the lessons learned by these characters can ultimately be translated from the big screen into reality.

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