Bill & Ted's Retcon Adventures: The Do-it-Later Retroactive Solution

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Abstract

The *Bill & Ted* film series has always employed a unique narrative device yet to be discussed in detail. In the series' first two films, the titular characters use a "do it later" approach through time travel, which I call "retroactive solution", to solve the narrative problems at the respective climaxes. It has the same retroactive nature as the narrative device of retroactive continuity, or retcon, which is an inevitable but problematic plot device that facilitates reboots and sequels. The third, presumably final, film, *Bill and Ted Face the Music* (2020), would inadvertently pit these two narrative devices against each other and create a paradox. Through a series of analyses employing analytical philosophies of time travel and historicization, this paper synthesizes the two narrative devices, temporal paradoxes, Capitalist credit economies, and personal "mid-life crises" into the *Bill & Ted* series. In the process, it illuminates the usefulness of the time-travel genre for narratological case studies and cultural commentaries.

Keywords

narrative device, paradox, Bill & Ted, time travel, retcon, retroactive, capitalism, sequels

Introduction

Twenty-nine years after the second film in the *Bill & Ted* series, the third film, *Bill & Ted Face the Music* (dir. Dean Parisot, 2020), was released.[1] Despite the generally warm reception of the film, I argue that its narratological treatment of its narrative problem is contentious: primarily, the time travel depicted in the third film is inconsistent with that in the first two, indicating a bad case of retcon (retroactive continuity). This paper first identifies the problem and resolves it by historicization. *Bill & Ted*'s most unique yet under-discussed time-travel narrative device is what I shall call a "retroactive solution." *Face the Music* cleverly challenges the use of this device, but in doing so, retcon has to be deployed, and problems emerge. Critically looking at these problems not only becomes useful in thinking about the philosophies of time travel as a whole, but when historicizing it, we begin to appreciate all the connotations of postmodernity the film series entails.

Although first released in the 1980s when there was a plethora of releases of "time-travel films," the *Bill & Ted* series has never been talked about as much as classics such as *The Terminator* franchise and the *Back to the Future* trilogy as canonical examples of the genre. The *Bill & Ted* series has a unique quality that makes it at once quintessentially of the time-travel genre and simply "buddy movies" that happen to have a convenient time-travel element for comedic effect. Despite the Tardis-like time-traveling vehicle—quite literally in the shape of a phone booth—that propels the narrative, the films have never focused on the more serious aspects of time travel, such as its logic and mechanics (e.g., "Doc Brown" drawing timelines on the blackboard explaining "tangents" in *Back to the Future Part II* that is less for comedic effect but more about the peril of the situation), commentary and speculation on history (e.g., on technology and war in *The Terminator*, *The Time Machine*

[1] In the interim, there have been both animated (1990–91) and live-action (1992) television series, as well as a short-lived comic book series published by *Marvel Comics* (1991–92), which was reprinted by *Boom! Studios* in 2016. These media are not considered "canon" within the narrative of the main film series, which operates as a standalone. This article will not consider these additional media and will focus solely on the main film series.

[both the 1960 and the 2002 feature adaptations]), or the moral implications that time travel may incur (e.g., main characters sacrificing themselves to save others in *The Butterfly Effect* and *Looper*).[2] The *Bill & Ted* films have a distinct quality of frivolousness and tongue-in-cheek, synonymous with the titular protagonists—Bill S. Preston, Esquire (Alex Winter), and Ted "Theodore" Logan (Keanu Reeves)—a couple of "slackers" from San Dimas, California, who talk in an exuberant (or "most triumphant," as Bill and Ted might say) style that is made up of the Southern Californian "surfer" culture influence, their inventive vocabulary, and their optimistic and carefree (often naïve and clueless) personalities. The facetiousness can also be seen in the films' subtle self-reflexivity and premise. The premise of the entire series is also strikingly lighthearted: that the entire universe's fate hinges upon Wyld Stallyns' future music, which somehow induces universal peace and harmony. The *Bill & Ted* franchise does not seem to take anything seriously, so critically considering any of its elements might seem silly. However, the series has a unique narrative element that, I believe, deserves serious consideration. I call this narrative device the "retroactive solution," which relies on the characters' ability to travel freely across time. While virtually all time-travel stories involve characters solving problems by traveling across time, the *Bill & Ted* series positions it in a crucial and frivolous way, in the most distinctly *Bill & Ted* blend of seriousness and facetiousness. The retroactive solution as a narrative device puts the series in an exciting position in the time-travel genre: the films may not be as canonical as classic time-travel films and literature, but they offer useful entry into the philosophies about time and narratology.

The Retroactive Solution: Assume Success Now, Do it Later

[2] While self-sacrifice is present in both the theatrical release and the director's cut of *The Butterfly Effect*, the theatrical version sees Evan (Ashton Kutcher) simply sacrificing his relationships with friends and his lover, whereas the director's cut sees him killing his unborn self, hence preventing his own birth.

The retroactive solution plays a vital role at the climaxes of the series' first two films; Bill and Ted use the same "do it later" logic to solve their problems. In the first film, all the historical figures Bill and Ted have gathered across time and space (Socrates, Beethoven, Billy the Kid, etc.) are arrested after causing havoc at the local shopping mall in the present (1988). They are locked up in the holding cell at the police station where Ted's father works. Bill and Ted must rescue them so they can appear on stage later for their high school history report to pass the subject. The premise is that Bill and Ted must pass history; otherwise, they will go separate ways after graduation, leading to the dissolution of their budding band, which in turn leads to the effacement of the band's eventual universe-uniting song—endangering the universe. Beings from the 2600s sent Rufus (George Carlin) to 1988 to ensure that Bill and Ted passed high school history to preserve the universe's existence.

Bill and Ted, rather ingeniously, devise a "do it later" solution. They cannot find the keys to the cell, but they assume they will succeed in the rescue. They will then steal the keys afterward and place them somewhere they can find in the present moment through time travel. In a decidedly uncinematic fashion, Bill simply reaches behind the police station sign, and the keys are there because that is where they decide to put them in the future. The subsequent time-travel journeys to steal and place the keys behind the sign are not depicted but simply implied by the keys' magically appearing. From then on, Bill and Ted rely solely on this "do it later" approach, assuming items will be there because they will prepare them afterward through time travel.

The whole sequence becomes equally uncinematic because all it depicts is Bill or Ted speaking out loud—for the audience's benefit—what items they need, and then finding the items a few seconds later, unceremoniously: a tape recorder that plays Ted's voice to lure his father away, a typed message to warn them to duck and avoid being spotted, and a trash can that falls from the ceiling to trap Ted's father when he eventually finds his detainees

escaping. The falling of the trash can is perhaps the most visual representation of the "retroactive solution" for its slapstick. However, despite its convoluted time-travel logic that reverses the cause-and-effect chain, the visual depiction is ironically simple. Ted closes his eyes, muttering, "Trash can. Remember a trash can." Then, a trash can magically appears on top of Ted's father and traps him. This visual depiction is no different from seeing Bill and Ted conjure items out of thin air by the power of thought—as if by magic.

Turning Bill and Ted from ordinary, mortal, clueless teenagers into magical wizards with conjuring powers raises moral questions: how does one reconcile that Bill and Ted never seem to exert any effort while solutions present themselves? In other words, how can their future success simply be assumed? This issue was somewhat addressed at the climax of the second film, but only tangentially. De Nomolos (Joss Ackland), a disgruntled teacher-turned-terrorist from the 2600s who wants to kill Bill and Ted in 1991 à la *The Terminator*, declares, "I, too, can play the time game." Items miraculously appear for De Nomolos during his climactic confrontation with Bill and Ted. However, as Bill and Ted explain, "Only the winners are gonna be able to go back and set things up." Like the logic behind the saying "history is written by the victors," commonly attributed to Winston Churchill, only Bill and Ted can go back in time to prepare for these items afterward because they will be the eventual "winners," as the future beings have assured them. It turns out that De Nomolos's items will not be prepared by him but by Bill and Ted as a ruse. Ultimately, Bill and Ted's retroactive solution is impregnable because future beings guarantee their success. But how can one's success be assured or "guaranteed"? Is the future determined and cannot be changed?

Temporal Paradoxes

The question about the future concerns the deterministic system of time travel that the *Bill & Ted* series has employed up until the third film's release. In determinism, past, present, and

future events are fixed. So even if a time traveler were to attempt to alter the timeline, their actions would eventually become part of the history that leads up to the present and into the future; hence, no "altering" is possible (see Smith; Hoefer; Dowe; Lewis). This explains why Bill and Ted, in the second film, must also prepare for De Nomolos's items. While these items give De Nomolos a momentary advantage, but because they have already appeared during their confrontation, their appearance becomes a fact and cannot be altered.

Determinism has been consistently adopted throughout the first two films, where the following facts are determined in history and cannot (or should not) be changed: Wyld Stallyns' excellent music will "become the foundation of our whole society," to quote Rufus in the first film; Bill and Ted are icons to be worshipped religiously by future generations (of which there are clear on-screen depictions); and their ad hoc mantra, "Be excellent to each other. Party on, dudes!" will become the founding philosophical dictum for all of humanity.

Determinism serves as the franchise's premise and justifies why beings from the 2600s must ensure that Bill and Ted are on course to create the peace-inducing music they are destined to make. More importantly, the same determinism also justifies Bill and Ted's "do it later" retroactive solutions: since their eventual success is determined in history, it can be safely assumed. Hence, all the subsequent, conveniently off-camera preparations can also be safely assumed. However, the problem with a deterministic model of time travel is the question of origin. Where do the keys to the prison cell come from if they cannot find them in the first place? What if Bill and Ted fail to prepare these items afterward? Can they choose to fail? These are problems of free will, paradoxes, and causal loops, which are fundamental questions about time travel.

Many philosophers maintain that "time travel requires causal loops" (Monton 55). In his oft-cited seminal 1976 article on the philosophy of time travel, David Lewis maintains that "the paradoxes of time travel are oddities, not impossibilities." Lewis famously cites two

of Robert Heinlein's time-travel stories, "By His Bootstraps" and "—All You Zombies," as "perfectly consistent," where Heinlein has "thought the problems through with great care" (145). Heinlein's 1958 short story "—All You Zombies," which was adapted into the feature film *Predestination* (dir. The Spierig Brothers, 2014), features an intersex protagonist becoming both his father and mother, having traveled backward in time to have sex with his earlier female self before gender reassignment surgery, conceiving himself. While the logic and mechanics of the time travel in the story are, as Lewis puts it, "perfectly consistent," the bigger issue remains: where does the protagonist come from exactly?

This type of temporal paradox is often known as the "bootstrap paradox," a term believed to have been popularized by Heinlein's "By His Bootstraps," which exhibits similar causal loops. It is more commonly known as the "grandfather paradox." If a time traveler traveled back in time and killed their grandfather before he conceived the time traveler's father, the time traveler would, in turn, not be conceived—hence nulling their existence. Yet, the time traveler did exist to conduct the time travel and the killing. *Back to the Future* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1985) is a classic filmic portrayal of the possible self-erasure resulting from a "grandfather paradox." As Marty (Michael J. Fox) travels to 1955 from 1985, he inadvertently prevents his parents from meeting and falling in love. The film depicts the danger of Marty's self-erasure by fading his appearance, making him translucent, while the people in the family photo that Marty carries with him disappear one by one. In the end, the film avoids the paradox because his parents eventually fall in love through Marty's intervention, restoring[3] the timeline and ensuring his existence.

The only plausible way to solve the grandfather paradox is to have a temporal system that allows multiple timelines to exist instead of just one. David Lewis mentions it in passing

[3] Strictly speaking, the timeline is never "restored," as the reality Marty returns to at the end of the film is decidedly different from the one he leaves. While this is beyond the scope of this paper, I have discussed it elsewhere (Lee 2017).

toward the end of his article (152), while Jack W. Meiland proposed "A Two-Dimensional Passage Model of Time for Time Travel" in 1974, two years before Lewis's article. Meiland's work was pioneering in the philosophical understanding of the type of time travel that involves the "multiverse" theory, which would later be popularized (in some cases, abused and overused) by mainstream films such as *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (dir. Bob Persichetti et al., 2018), *Avengers: Endgame* (dir. Anthony and Joe Russo, 2019), and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (dir. Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, 2022). Essentially, a multiverse model of time solves the "grandfather paradox" by having multiple timelines, with multiple "selves" and multiple "grandfathers" to kill. A time traveler may go back in time to kill their grandfather, but because it only happens on one timeline, all the other "grandfathers" on other timelines are safe and can go on to conceive the time traveler's father; hence, the time traveler's existence would not cause a paradox. Of course, all the people involved becoming pluralized (even duplicated) creates a new logical problem concerning the uniqueness of each individual's identity—but this is beyond the scope of this paper. While the first two *Bill & Ted* films strictly adhere to the deterministic approach to time by portraying Bill and Ted's eventual success as guaranteed, the third film from 2020 conflates the two mutually exclusive temporal systems by depicting possible realities where Bill and Ted fail to deliver their promised song, as seen in the few scenes where they encounter future versions of themselves living miserable lives.

Bill and Ted's Not-so-Excellent Retcon

Referencing the multiverse theory has been a popular trope in recent mainstream films, primarily to facilitate the narrative device of retcon or retroactive continuity. Retcon has traditionally been found in comics or other long-form serials, where writers "disingenuously [reveal] that the events that occurred in the old comics [or other formats] were depicted incorrectly or incompletely; to this end, retcon often employs false memories or simply

restages events that were ostensibly not depicted the first time. Retcon can also employ time travel to actually alter the history of the narrative" (Kidder 79). In popular cinema, one can find recent notable examples in the superhero genre, such as *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (dir. Bryan Singer, 2014) and *Avengers: Endgame* (dir. Anthony and Joe Russo, 2019). *X-Men* is a particularly apt comparison with *Bill & Ted Face the Music* in that they are both meant as "franchise reboots" but are technically retconned instead (as explained later). Considering that the third *Bill & Ted* film came out a staggering twenty-nine years after the first two—only two years apart—*Face the Music* was intended as a "franchise reboot." However, as Andrew J. Friedenthal explains, retcons and reboots have an intricate relationship that makes them similar in many ways but fundamentally different in a few crucial areas. A retcon "is often used not just to tell a good story but also to fix up bad storytelling decisions in previous installments of the series without just pretending they never happened. It narrativizes what was basically a marketing decision.…" Moreover, a retcon only "alters elements of a series' chronology without collapsing the narrative continuum altogether—i.e. it does not 'begin again'" (7). Therefore, while both a retcon and a reboot attempt to "fix up," improve, or offer reinterpretations of previous installments, a reboot "begins again," disregarding any previous iterations, whereas a retcon attempts to keep the integrity of a single narrative continuum that encompasses all previous iterations. In popular cinema, *Batman Begins* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2005) and *Casino Royale* (dir. Martin Campbell, 2006) are notable examples of reboots, as they operate separately from their established film series in the past. Meanwhile, *Face the Music* is a re-telling rather than a complete restarting.

In some respects, a reboot such as the ones mentioned above is reminiscent of the multiverse approach to time, where the multiple timelines, or iterations of the same story, do not interfere with one another, while a retcon is similar to determinism, where there is only

one timeline (one story) to maintain. However, similar to the "grandfather paradox," retconning to maintain a single storyline inevitably entails logical issues that may ultimately be unresolved. Many examples, such as the ones mentioned above, use time travel as a narrative device to facilitate retconning their respective storylines, where time travel is not part of the premise. Time travel only becomes a last resort for these stories to retcon. However, in the case of the *Bill & Ted* series, where time travel is already an integral part of the original premise, the retcon in the third film becomes particularly problematic in its logic.

The third, and presumably final, film in the series was essentially an exercise in retcon. As per Tzvetan Todorov's classical structuralist approach to narrative, any story has to have a narrative problem—a "disequilibrium"—that destabilizes the initial "equilibrium." The problem with the third film's disequilibrium is that it challenges the otherwise impregnable "retroactive solution," whose stability and equilibrium have already been firmly established by the first two films. The third film's disequilibrium requires a retcon, which creates a paradox with the logic of the first two films. Bill and Ted are now middle-aged and washed-up "has-beens" suffering from financial and marital problems. Wyld Stallyns' popularity has rapidly waned, and—worst of all—they still have not come up with the definitive world-uniting, peace-inducing music that the future promised. Beings from 2720 send Kelly (Kristen Schaal), Rufus's daughter (to accommodate George Carlin's passing in 2008), to bring Bill and Ted to the future to meet the Great Leader (Holland Taylor), who issues an ultimatum for them to come up with the world-uniting song; otherwise, "reality as we know it" will cease to exist.

The Great Leader provides Bill and Ted with magically appearing guitar cabinets with a variety of guitars (in a fashion reminiscent of the "guns, lots of guns" scene in *The Matrix* [dir. The Wachowskis, 1999], in which Keanu Reeves also plays the lead role) and threatens them to "get to work." Now Bill and Ted face a serious problem: since they have failed to

come up with the elusive universe-saving song for the 29 years that have passed, there is no way they can magically come up with it on the spot. In a flash of genius—or naivety—Ted suggests using the same "do it later" retroactive solution they have always relied on in the previous films. Since people in the future have assured them that they will write the universe-saving song, they simply assume its future existence and plan to "steal" it from their future selves. However, unlike the trash can in the first film, their universe-saving song does not magically appear. No matter how far into the future they travel, they cannot find the destined song.[4]

The central premise of the third film creates a paradox that collapses the founding logic that binds the entire film series: the retroactive solution that is guaranteed. Bill and Ted will always have written a song that can unite the entire universe, which has always been an established constant in the first two films' deterministic and singular timeline. Similar to the "grandfather paradox," how can the universe-saving song both exist and not exist? How can it be both present and absent at the same time? The film solves this paradox by haphazardly retconning a new interpretation of the initial promise made by the future, implying the existence of multiverses that allow for both possibilities—of the promise being either fulfilled or failed. Ultimately, instead of Bill and Ted, their daughters, Billie (Brigette Lundy-Paine) and Thea (Samara Weaving) lead the whole world across space and time to play music together, signifying the universe's union and peace.

This reinterpretation may seem fine, especially when it adapts to contemporary values. Bill and Ted's children are both daughters (albeit with visible masculine qualities)

[4] After a few time travels that result in failure to locate the song, the middle-aged Bill and Ted eventually travel to 2067, where their elderly selves give them a USB stick that supposedly contains the fabled song. However, through some narrative complications that I must digress from for convenience, the USB stick is destroyed before its contents are revealed. Even if Bill and Ted had retrieved the contents of the USB stick to be the universe-saving song—creating a “grandfather paradox” in the process—it still would not be “logically consistent,” unlike the Heinlein stories. The irresolvable inconsistency is that, while future beings stipulate that the song would have been written within the next “77 minutes and 25 seconds,” the year 2067 would still be a few decades too late.

rather than sons, which suggests a deliberate feminist push. However, this reinterpretation simply does not make any sense when the third film is positioned as a direct sequel to the second, at the end of which they have already solved their musical problem! At the end of the second film, Bill and Ted still have one final problem yet to solve: they "still don't know how to play" any musical instrument. After Bill says, "Maybe we ought to get good, Ted," they realize they can apply the retroactive solution one more time by hopping onto the phone-booth time machine. Like the trash can, the film does not depict the "16 months of intensive guitar training" in a montage sequence à la *Rocky* (dir. John G. Avildsen, 1976); it unceremoniously and uncinematically skips over it. They instantly transform from clueless beginners to guitar-shredding rock gods.

The end-credits montage sequence then shows newspaper clippings of Wyld Stallyns' success: achieving peace in the Middle East, solving the nuclear crisis, eliminating air pollution, and even performing on Mars—hence implying that the promised interplanetary "universal harmony" is now achieved. Furthermore, the first two films prominently depict future beings worshipping holographic images of Bill and Ted making big and slow circular movements with their right arms, simulating and exaggerating the strumming of guitars; their daughters are nowhere to be seen in any of the icon-worshipping. The way the third film ignores narrative facts established by the previous films would suggest that the third film should be considered a standalone "reboot." However, the unmistakable continuation from the previous films makes it a bad case of retcon—an extremely flawed attempt at continuing the story because it breaks its foundational narrative logic without justification.

Bill and Ted's Self-Reflexivities

Face the Music may be a "bad case of retcon," but there are still positives to think about. While the first two films see the titular characters solving their respective narrative problems by "retroactive solution," the third film effectively makes it the source of the narrative

disequilibrium. By positioning the franchise's unique "retroactive solution" device as a disruption instead of a resolution to the narrative, it is clear that the writers, Chris Matheson and Ed Solomon, are aware of its significance and its flaws. They cleverly confront the impregnability of the "retroactive solution" that has previously gone unchallenged. For the first time in the series, what Bill and Ted require no longer magically appears. While this clever challenge conflates two irreconcilable systems of time travel and collapses the franchise's founding narrative logic, as a way to salvage it, I propose looking at it as a self-reflexive gesture to the franchise.

When viewed as a self-reflexive work rather than simply a time-travel story that must uphold consistent mechanics and logic—like in a Robert Heinlein story—the *Bill & Ted* series reveals another dimension beyond being a case study in time-travel narratology. Many instances in the film series are conducive to a Jamesonian reading. For example, the way Bill and Ted perform their high school history report in the first film is a classic postmodern pastiche. A "blank parody" (Jameson 17) of stage performance and history, Bill and Ted gather historical figures from vastly different periods and places with no apparent logic to connect them and have them perform on stage (Ted uses the phrase "world tour" to feign them being a rock band). Jameson identifies a "crisis in historicity" (25) as a postmodern symptom, where "we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that History," and historical works can "only represent our ideas and stereotypes about the past" instead of the actual past. The facetiousness can only explain so much at the fictional level; still, one cannot help but recognize a hint of truth in the reality of what is happening at real high schools and real history reports, where the spectacle overshadows the need to have any substance in the "report."

Incidentally, the climactic universe-uniting music performance in the third film is reminiscent of the history report stage performance from the first film. The daughters, Billie

and Thea, gather from across time and space: Jimi Hendrix, Louis Armstrong, Mozart, Ling Lun (an ancient/mythical Chinese "inventor of music" from around 2600 BCE, commonly portrayed as male but represented as female in the film), and Kid Cudi (a contemporary American rapper) to lead the charge for everyone across time and space to play music together. The diversity of the "band members" may be appreciated, but the music they play is inevitably of a generic contemporary Western pop-rock variety.

Besides the history report stage performance, a previous scene at the local shopping mall tells most of a postmodern, ahistoricized depiction of history—a perfect embodiment of late capitalist society. To learn about life among the present-day (1988) folk of San Dimas (and, by extension, the United States), the historical figures enjoy themselves at the local shopping mall in what can be described as a pastiche of the famous shopping mall sequences in *Dawn of the Dead* (dir. George A. Romero, 1978). Each historical figure finds an activity that reflects their stereotypical image as commodified icons of history: Beethoven plays an electric organ at a music shop; Genghis Khan frantically waves a baseball bat at a sporting goods store; Joan of Arc feels the urge to lead a women's aerobics class; and Sigmund Freud tries to chat up girls at the food court, and so on.

Aimed originally for its comedic effect, these sequences also showcase a lack of historicity characteristic of postmodernity in late capitalism, as Jameson suggests. At the end of the first film, Rufus introduces credit cards to the two medieval princesses from fifteenth-century England, with whom Bill and Ted met and fell in love earlier. While it may have been a throwaway gag, credit cards—much like the shopping mall—become the perfect symbol for late capitalist consumer culture. More significantly, credit cards' "buy now, pay later" logic is the same mechanism as Bill and Ted's "assume victory now, prepare later" retroactive solution.

Credit cards, or other credit systems of loans, mortgages, and finances, sell the illusion of ownership of otherwise unaffordable commodities in an accelerated conditioning of commodity fetishism. Jean Baudrillard makes a Marxist connection to credit systems: "Credit is a disciplinary process of the extortion of savings and the regulation of demand, just as wage labor was a rational process of extortion of labor power and increases in productivity" (*The Consumer Society* 99). When Baudrillard also describes credit as "the enjoyment of objects ahead of time" (*The System of Objects* 156), it is clear that Bill and Ted's retroactive solution runs much more profoundly in a postmodernist reading of what is otherwise a convoluted narrative device.

If many popular film genres can be read as wish fulfillment, then the *Bill & Ted* films can not only be read as the spectator's identification with the main characters as they go on fantastic journeys but they can also be read specifically as embodiments of a consumerist dream that endlessly satisfies commodity fetishism. Considering all the "retroactive solutions" by Bill and Ted in the first two films are very tangible objects—or commodities—one can see the parallel with consumerism. Furthermore, instead of paying for the items with either money or effort, Bill and Ted only have to use the power of thought to obtain those items—similar to the "magical" powers of credit cards for people with poor financial responsibilities. Joshua Clover makes an astute connection between credit systems, capital, and—perhaps most importantly for the discussion here—retcon by saying that "Credit [too] is a kind of time travel" (16). Clover further explains:

> … this is the ontology of capital as such: *value is*. There is no capital without it. It is the *value of value* – its magnitude – that *will have been*, the quantity of exchange value that will turn out to have been embodied in the concrete element of socially necessary abstract labour time expended in commodity production. It is this that

> remains unmeasured and in flux until some later moment when it meets its price and is then retroactively revised.
>
> […]
>
> Retcon recognises the production of value already existing, already at play; it moves to regularise it, to fit it to the exigencies of the present moment. (23)

Bill & Ted's "bad case of retcon" can be seen as a fulfillment of a potential: retroactive solution's "value already existing." The potential lies in uncovering a triadic relationship. The series' "do it later" retroactive solution makes it unique in the time-travel genre. This defining feature of the *Bill & Ted* series is similar in mechanics to both—on the interior, the narrative device of retcon, and, on the exterior, credit economies of late capitalism and its accompanying "cultural logic" of our way to see history, value, and effort. These three pillars—retroactive solution, retcon, and capitalism—form a close relationship with one another, as if in a triangle. *Face the Music* then tries to unsettle this triad through the writers' self-aware challenge of retroactive solution by introducing a retcon. However, the retcon still cannot be reconciled with the previous films. At this juncture, one possible way to resolve this impasse is by means of further historicizing the *Bill & Ted* franchise.

Mid-life Crisis as Retcon

Twenty-nine years is an unusually long time for any series to resurrect from dormancy. The cultural landscapes are very different now compared to when the first two films came out. The attempt to include more female characters (their daughters) in an otherwise all-male "buddy movie" genre is one of the many signs of the series adapting to the changing cultural landscape. However, the third film almost never came to be. In fact, despite the two stars and the two writers reportedly staying close since the second film, the idea for a third film was never discussed until around the mid-2000s, when it was first brought up in a noncommittal fashion. Funding an otherwise "dead" project was difficult, as there was no financial

incentive. It was the “career resurgence” of Keanu Reeves—thanks to the *John Wick* franchise (2014–)—that partly helped secure funding for the third *Bill & Ted* project. In explaining their story, one half of the writing duo, Ed Solomon, says that they wanted a genuinely good premise: “We wanted to ask, ‘What would happen if the things that you were told your life was going to be about when you were a teenager turned out to be wrong?’” (Greene). Essentially, Bill and Ted undergo a midlife crisis, as the franchise also goes through a similar process of self-doubt.

In an unexpected twist of events (of this analysis), is a midlife crisis not simply a "bad case of retcon"—an unforeseen development of one's life that one needs to make sense of? Indeed, Bill and Ted even go through the same kind of midlife crisis as any ordinary, non-time-traveling folk would. When they were teenagers—clueless, failing history in high school, and, crucially, unable to play the guitar—they were told they would achieve great things in the future (saving the universe is as great as it gets). It is safe to assume that almost every child hears similar parental encouragement growing up. Bill and Ted arrive at midlife in the third film. They have tried their best (as seen in their visible frustration in the opening scene), but they still have not achieved what they are supposed to achieve. Bill and Ted even suffer marital problems like typical ordinary folks during midlife crises, like Lester Burnham in *American Beauty* (dir. Sam Mendes, 1999). Had the franchise not relied on time travel for narrative progression, the premise of *Face the Music* would have worked beautifully.

Perhaps time travel should be taken out of the equation *for Bill & Ted*. Alternatively, time travel has also changed as times and cultural landscapes have changed. All the popular time-travel films coming out of the 1980s (when the first *Bill & Ted* was released) adopted the single-timeline determinism: the *Back to the Future* series (1985–1989), *The Terminator* (dir. James Cameron, 1984), *The Philadelphia Experiment* (dir. Stewart Raffill, 1984),

Somewhere in Time (dir. Jeannot Szwarc, 1980).[5] However, since the late 2010s, the understanding of time has become prevalent today, involving the multiverse theory, thanks to the popular Marvel Cinematic Universe films and many others—to a point where even the term "alternate universe" has become common parlance. This shift indicates a general trend toward possibility and diversity—or, in Lyotardian terms, a move away from metanarratives.

The ending of the third film presents an image that indeed differs from the one promised by future beings and very clearly depicted in the first film. The promise presents a picture where only Bill and Ted become the heroes of the universe. If Bill and Ted have a midlife crisis, then it can be argued that they never overcome it because they fail to live up to the dream of becoming the individualistic heroes they were once promised. But while they fail to become individual heroes, they succeed as a family unit, with their daughters realizing their musical talent while they reconcile their marriages with their wives. To this end, a happy ending is still a happy ending.

Whereas the first two films skew very heavily toward a patriarchal narrative structure—where there are virtually no female characters (at least of importance), and the male protagonists are expected to carry the narrative forward even when they do not seem to work for any of it (Bill and Ted never having to learn the guitar is but one example)—the final, third film fixes it by including the daughters, who share a lot of heavy lifting in the narrative progression. Even Bill and Ted's wives get significantly more dialogue and screen time. In this way, one can argue that Bill and Ted's midlife crisis was successfully averted, even if their initially promised dream was not achieved, because how their lives turned out was arguably even better than that dream. Analyzing the third film this way, the retcon is, in the end, a good one.

[5] Detailed analysis may complicate this assessment; e.g., *Back to the Future Part II* inadvertently requires the "multiverse" to sustain its otherwise deterministic narrative (Lee 2017).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have identified the unique narrative device the *Bill & Ted* series utilizes: the "retroactive solution." I mapped out the temporal paradox inherent to this device while arguing that the premise of the third film further complicates it by introducing a logically irresolvable retroactive continuity—a necessary but problematic device facilitating sequels. Through historicizing with an alternative postmodernist reading, it became apparent that all of the concepts that have been brought up—time travel, retcon, retroactive solution, capitalist credit economies, and even midlife crises—are similar in nature. Despite being unresolved in a purely logical consideration, *Bill & Ted* can be read as a reflection on the cultural logic of the current epoch and a family drama that gets a well-resolved happy ending. That is until the next sequel comes along.

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bio

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