

Free will is quite nice. It's comforting to presume we have full agency over our lives and we can do basically anything we want unrestricted.

But when you add Time Travel to the mix, Free Will starts to get a bit fuzzy. If events inevitably will or must play out in a certain way, otherwise the future goes to total manure, do you still have free will?

Take the ending of Back To The Future 3.

*"It means your future hasn't been written yet. No one's has!"*

That's not true, we just saw a whole movie about the future, it looks very written to me!

It seems like Time Travel and Free Will would not be compatible at all and yet, Time Travel stories frequently explore Free Will. A Christmas Carol has Scrooge travel to the past and the future in order to change his ways. Or, in my head-cannon, he invests his money to become a Victorian Ghostbuster.

In Endgame, there's heavy debate and discussion but ultimately the characters choose to go back in time to recover the chaos emeralds and save the world.

In Terminator, Kyle travels from a futuristic wasteland, which leads to the birth of John, which makes the future inevitable and the film ends with Sarah explaining what her son must do.

"Please send one of your soldiers back in time to bone me, love mom".

We have free will and freedom of choice being guided by their impact, guided by their circumstances or given no choice whatsoever.

I want to explore the relationship between free will and time travel with Back To The Future, the ultimate time travel movie. Does Marty McFly have free will? Is the future unwritten or is it our density?

So a brief recap -

Back To The Future 1, Marty accidentally goes back in time and interrupts when his parents were supposed to meet, resulting in a paradox he must fix before he can go home.

Back To The Future 2, Marty's rival Biff gets a Sports Almanac from the future, leading to an alternate timeline where he's Donald Trump now, and Marty has to fix this before he can go home.

Back To The Future 3, Marty goes back to the old West to rescue Doc and they live happily ever after and this kid points to his junk.

I'm not about to comb through every individual choice Marty makes, like what drink he orders, but in Back To The Future 1 he toys with this giant amp Doc has for some reason, and explodes. We're not in the time travelling stuff yet, but we're introduced to the concept that whenever Marty does something on impulse, he tends to get punished for it.

Back To The Future incorporates many different possible timelines rather than be restricted to just one. And as a result, this can create paradoxes.

Marty pushes his own father out of the way of the oncoming car, thus interrupting the moment his parents were meant to fall in love, instigating a paradox where he was never born that leads to the fading away dilemma. And even when made clear how imperative it is to reunite his parents, he can't help but intervene whenever Biff gets involved. Marty is capable of following instructions, but whenever he takes impulsive actions, it's a major setback.

When will he learn that his actions have consequences?

And because of this, Back To The Future has a Mutable Timeline. I've covered this before but basically, changes to the past have an impact on the future. Like Marty hitting this tree turns the Twin Pines mall into the Lone Pines mall.

And even when things go wrong, Doc and Marty are still given the freedom to go back and correct it.

In terms of Free Will, this leans towards Libertarianism. But I don't mean this.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZITP93pqtDQ>

In a metaphysical sense, even if Marty HAS Free Will, but that doesn't mean he's free from consequences.

During the covid lockdowns, there were requirements put in place to wear masks. [1] *Some* people took issue with that and by "*some*" I mean very loud and annoying. By imposing this rule, it was felt, by "*some*", that it was inhibiting their freedom. And because "*some*" people would rather be irrational rather than wrong, they'd also deny the vaccines or even that the virus exists at all.

But, the reason to wear masks was to reduce the spread of coronavirus. It was to protect others. Resisting wearing masks on the grounds of defending free will, is just stealing the free will from other people instead, including those autoimmune who don't get given a choice.

In Back To The Future 2, Marty's selfish desire to take the future Sports Almanac back to the past, has disastrous results for everyone. And he is obligated to fix it, not just for the good of himself, but for the good of everyone. Except Biff. Fuck Biff.

So if Marty technically has free will, does anyone else?

Throughout Back To The Future 1, Marty is trying to coerce his parents to date each other, even though neither one really wants to. Marty resorts to some extremes to force them, against their will. He lies, he threatens and sets up an elaborate ruse. Despite their will being expressed, Marty denies them - for self-preservation reasons of course. But he is taking away their free will. Marty is incentivised to ensure the "right" sequence of events happen, and while they may have small interactions which suggests some degree of freedom, they're ultimately herded into their predetermined destiny.

And how is this deception rewarded? With a more financially prosperous family, with the exact same kids - down to the sperm. And a truck!

Even Crispin Glover, who played George McFly, took issue with this ending, part of the reason he never returned to the sequels.

This now leans towards Determinism. Which basically suggests there is no such thing as free will. The future is already predetermined. Marty's free will is very limited because his actions causes paradoxes.

In the first film, Marty almost disappears because his attempts to reunite his parents nearly fails, making him cease to exist. But if he didn't exist, he wouldn't have been able to go back in time and cause the interruption in the first place, so it must both have happened and will happen. Marty's entire existence is seemingly deterministic.

Even when he returns to Lone Pines, he witnesses his alternate self, apparently unaffected by the change in circumstances and affluence, repeat everything he did before and disappear to the past to begin the loop again.

Therefore, is Marty getting a truck a reward for making a better future, or the way things were always supposed to be?

There's a scientific thought experiment called Laplace's Demon. Yep, science demons! Basically, imagine a demon who is capable of knowing everything that has happened, down to the atom (which as we know is the sperm of science). With all that data, it would in theory be able to predict everything that will happen in the future. Cause and effect, with the past being the cause and the future the effect.

Obviously this is too vast an amount of knowledge for anything to process, and there's a logical flaw in that the demon cannot predict his own future memory, but ah whatever.

Marty does have his very own demon of sorts, with access to newspapers and photos, he can see if their actions in the present are having an impact on the future or not, and alters his actions to suit that end goal. And Doc himself is also a sort of Laplace Demon. Having visited the future, he knows how things will play out, and does what he can in the past to ensure these things play out as they should.

So with this advanced knowledge of the past and the future, that makes the present easy to predict, such as knowing exactly how someone will react when they're called *CHICKEN!*

For the second and third film, being called chicken causes Marty to abandon rational thought in favour of impulsive predictable action, even when it's counterproductive to his mission.

However, the third film shows him finally learning his lesson. When being threatened by a shootout, instead of immediately rising to the challenge, he remains level headed and tries to find a way to escape. And when *that* fails, he uses his wits to outsmart the villain. This lets him accomplish the same goal, but on his own terms, and finally shaking off those demons.

So maybe in the end, it's neither Libertarianism nor Determinism but somewhere in between, which is called Compatibilism. This is definitely more of a spectrum, but in very basic terms, free will can exist but it does so within predetermined parameters. Such as genetics, money, politics, laws, etc. For example, I have the free will to say I will become the next United States President. I might have the will to decide to do that but my circumstances say this isn't gonna happen. Even your own opinions and morals may be influenced by your upbringing so how much of your free will is really your own?

In the third film, Doc saves Clara Clayton from falling into the ravine, only to realise the ravine was supposed to be named after her and Doc fears the worst. But instead of falling into a ravine, they fall in love, and in a role-reversal, Marty is the one telling Doc to break it off. Doc agrees it's the thing he must do, but then after the thrilling train sequence, Doc and Clara defy what they should do, in favour of what they want to do. And while this seems to be a point scored for free will, given that Clara is not meant to be alive, Doc really does the universe a big solid by removing her away from the timeline. And the ravine gets named Eastwood Ravine instead, named after Marty's pseudonym. So in a way, things happen as they're supposed to, but the characters get to decide for themselves how.

Which brings me back to:

*"It means your future hasn't been written yet. No one's has!"*

This starts to make more sense to me now. Despite evidence to the contrary, it might be there just to provide us with a heartwarming ending. And I'm not counting the games or cartoon show here. But it might be more that the future isn't the result of the things we do but what we don't do. A vision of things to come if they were allowed to stay the same without care or consideration.

In the second film, Marty's future is in ruins because he rose to the challenge of a car race that he was meant to crash. But in the third film, having now seen where this predictable pattern will take him, he changes within, leading to a better future. And presumably one where the events of Back To The Future 2 technically didn't happen but fuck it.

Obviously, these time travel stories are not real. But there's a philosophical debate if free will is real either. Ultimately, I don't think it really matters. By their very nature, time travel stories generally have to place limitations on the changes characters can do to time, and in doing so it can provide us with a fun exploration of these concepts. Looking at cause and effect and the possibility of second chances.

And so in the spirit of a future that isn't written yet, I have not written an ending to this video. Except this one.

Shit.