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CTRL + Z

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Reflective Essay

The original idea of *Ctrl + Z* did not originate with a deep meaning, intent, or purpose. It was simply an idea sparked from a real life scenario. My cousin had just finished writing an extensive email when she accidentally deleted the entire thing. After losing her sanity temporarily, I told her to hit control Z. The smile on her face went from ear to ear. She gave me a huge hug, called me a life saver, and went back to work. Later that day while on the train I thought about what had happened and wrote down an idea for a short in my sketchbook. I thought of the idea as a cool idea for sketch comedy. All I had at that point was a story where a woman realizes her computer can undo reality saves a man's life.

At the time I had no intention of turning this idea into a major project, and there was no real intent behind it. Originally my honors project was going to be a documentary about social media. I had everything lined up and the script was essentially done, but then when I went to start filming all of my interview subjects decided they did not want to be involved. That is when I decided to open my sketchbook to find a new idea to use.

My solution was to switch to fiction and resurrect the Control Z story, but it was not until much later in the process that I realized the true underlying purpose for the film. In fact it was incredibly late in the

process and required drastic script rewrites. It was getting towards the end of February when I began thinking that this project was not sufficient for what I wanted it to be. At the time it was a cute story with a neat trick and a entertaining ending. I thank my adviser, Richard Breyer, for helping me realize that it needed something deeper; it needed an underlying message. I soon recognized that it is far more difficult to come up with a story that has significant meaning, but it is also more rewarding.

It was my final intent for this project to illustrate the notion that while small everyday occurrences certainly affect us, it is the larger, big picture events that are truly important. Often we get wrapped up in our immediate surroundings and shut out everything else. We feel comfortable trying to control what is near to us. This causes us to compromise and lose track of what we truly desire. If we were to include the entire world around us for consideration, things outside our normal sphere of influence, life would become far more daunting and unpredictable, but also more fruitful. There are many dangers out in the vastness of the world, but there are also many opportunities. It is when we are willing to venture out into the unknown that we can make significant changes.

This intent was not decided overnight. That is not to say the story was completely void of meaning at the genesis. When I decided to take on *Ctrl + Z* as my thesis project, my aspirations for the story

were initially very high. Every time I thought of a new idea I would try to include it. The problem was that when I tried to add certain ideas, others would be lost. Trial and error is one technique for creation, but it is not the most efficient or elegant process for making a movie. However, I like to think that it worked. In the end I was able to create a coherent meaningful story through mental evolution.

When developing the plot of the story, each plot point had a purpose. Through constant manipulation of these purposes I was able to extract a deeper underlying meaning from the project. This may seem backwards, and I agree, but I also believe it was the process I had to go through. Think of it as reverse engineering. Before I knew how to create the meaning, I first had to understand the little pieces that constituted the message. Once I had all the pieces I could arrange them in a way that would give me the bigger picture I desired. I've always been able to extrapolate the bigger picture in movies I watch, books I read, etc, but because I had never attempted to create one myself I was a bit naïve of the process. Now that I have the basic blue print, I will be able to consider all of these aspects from the beginning of my next project.

The chief reason why I was not able to complete my project in a more efficient manor would be because of my tendency to change my mind. Over the entire period that I was working on my honors thesis, I switched projects far too many times. Additionally, I wanted to

collaborate with other people to try to create the best idea possible. Unfortunately college students are not known for being the most dependable people in the world, and I ended up revamping the project on my own with limited time. If I had done the intelligent thing and stuck with a single idea from the beginning, I would have been able to plan each plot point long before starting production rather than during it.

Indecision plagued me throughout this project, and I would not have been able to overcome it without the help of my adviser Richard Breyer. When it came down to crunch time he was there to guide me and make sure that I actually pushed myself to make a decision. He never spoon fed me anything, but he was able to encourage me to seriously contemplate everything I had done so that I could choose a path that would get me to where I needed to go.

My indecisiveness was compounded by the fact that I ran into more problems than I initially expected. Filmmaking is always a bumpy process, but when everything seems to be falling apart at every turn, it becomes overwhelming. Luckily I had a great adviser and reader who were both instrumental in keeping me sane during the most stressful times.

The first major hurdle that forced me into making decisions that I normally would have taken longer to evaluate was the fact that my head writer did not write more than a single page over the span of

multiple months. We would conduct these wonderful collaborative meetings, but he did not want to write the script together. He preferred to sit down and write on his own time. Originally I saw no problem with this, and the three of us continued trying to construct the story. However, myself and the other assistant writer seemed to be the only ones doing consistent work. The annoying part was that we were simply writing the backbone. Our head writer was supposed to be weaving in the meaningful elements using the material that we discussed in our meetings. We were simply setting the stage for him to have free reign using the ideas that we had brain stormed as a group.

In hindsight I should not have relinquished so much power on my own project. As the time for shooting the film drew nearer I began to feel the beginnings of panic. What we had was not acceptable. When it was apparent that the other writers did not have the time to invest any more effort into this project, I decided to turn to my adviser as well as my friend Ben Rosen for assistance.

We held regular meetings and tore apart the story, rebuilding it with a slightly different twist. Occasionally Corey Robinson, the writer who didn't abandon me, and my Director of Photography Ian Heifetz would join the conversation, but both of them were incredibly busy people. By the time casting was done I was still unhappy with the script we had written. I decided to venture to New York City over

spring break to meet with the actors and massage the plot it even further. Unfortunately while I was on my way south, two of the actors ended up having to drop out of the project. I quickly filled the positions, and attempted to continue with rehearsals. They went well, but not as swimmingly as I had hoped. The actors did not seem to understand that I wanted them to play with their characters a bit to try and pluck a gem or two out of the improvisation. Instead I decided I needed to spend the next week or so really ironing out the wrinkles, but the film gods would not allow it.

Three more actors, including the lead actress, ended up dropping out and I was forced into a frenzy. Instead of putting all my energy and focus into perfecting the script, I instead needed to spend my time scrambling to find new acting talent. Professors Breyer and Quin can attest that this was an extremely stressful time for me. Admittedly I almost threw in the towel at this point. Nothing seemed to want to stick, and I was wasting all my energy trying to keep everything together. The creative juices were being cannibalized in order to keep the remaining bits of the project from crumbling.

Fortunately I was able to lift myself out of the doldrums just in time to fill all the holes. The logistics were finally settled and I was at a point where I felt comfortable that the project would happen. I finalized the script and we were able to shoot the scenes on time.

Even though it was one of the biggest sources of stress, the organic evolution of this project was one of my favorite aspects. Some pieces existed from the start, and others were added much later. The focus on small everyday occurrences was present from the very beginning. This was one of my primary reasons for deciding to shoot in a coffee shop. It was a place where I could escalate small mundane problems into catastrophic events. At the time I thought it provided practical benefits as well. I had found a location in Recess that I could rent for an entire day at relatively low cost. None of its windows received direct sunlight, so continuity would be less of a hassle. It was a cozy place that required little redecorating, driving down the cost of the set and props. At the time of the decision I thought it was an incredibly convenient choice.

What I did not realize however was that all of my acting talent would end up being from New York City. Therefore I had to pay to drive everyone up to Syracuse, as well all their food and lodging. Luckily most of them were younger people willing to stay on couches and inflatable mattresses, but I figured I should pay for the hotel of the oldest and youngest actresses. Had at least some of the talent been from the Syracuse area I could have afforded to shoot on multiple days. Instead I needed to constrain the entire shoot into one day. Eventually I realized the scenes that took place outside or in the bathroom could be shot before the big shoot, but most of it needed to

be completed in one day. If you know anything about filmmaking you know that this is not an ideal situation. It meant I had to simplify the story. I could not use the overcomplicated plot I had written originally.

Luckily I had a very self-contained idea, and I was already trying to focus on the small aspects of the story. Not much out of the ordinary happens in a coffee shop. People do work, read books, talk on their phone or to each other, and drink coffee. Sometimes you might even make eye contact with a complete stranger. These things seem trivial, and yet they can still have an impact on how we act. At the same time we try to take control over these small things. Usually we are unsuccessful, but when we do we must be conscious of how we use that control.

In the story Amanda discovers an unnatural ability to control her surroundings. This was the aspect that sparked the entire story, and I knew that it could be influential in delivering a message. The message behind the undo function changed many times throughout the process. Originally I was playing with ideas about destiny, probability, chance, and love. While these are all things I kept in some way or another, they were not the themes I chose to illustrate with the undo power. Instead I decided to represent the need for responsibility and helping the greater good above self-interests.

The entire time all Amanda wants is to make eye contact with the guy she spotted. Her goal is narrow and short sighted. After initially

being playful with her power as I feel most of us would be, she uses the power to manipulate her surroundings and improve her own situation. She does not realize that she is negatively impacting others. For example Amanda clogs the toilet so that she does not have to endure the smell caused by Charles. Nick desperately needs to use the bathroom, so he is forced to sprint across the street, without his jacket on a cold day. Those who think of only the consequences for themselves will often be creating problems for others.

I also wanted to demonstrate that often times when one is malicious, as Amanda was when she tampered with Nina's (the antagonist) phone. She may have enjoyed the outcome initially, but it ended up causing unforeseen problems for her later when her keys fell through the drain. Nina demonstrates this point even more clearly. Her only concern is with herself, without any thought for the discomfort she causes Amanda. In fact she is so unaware of her surroundings that when she gets a call informing her of the event she is missing (originally conceived as a final exam), she sprints outside and gets hit by a passing car. Whether or not she dies is unimportant. She receives heavy penalties for her inconsiderate actions.

The car crash symbolizes the outside world blasting its way back into Amanda's consciousness. It is then that she realizes she must decide between herself and others. It is when she sacrifices her

own interests and interacts with those outside her realm that she does something meaningful. She may have had to give up on her original intentions, but she also discovers that there was a more fulfilling option all along. People that think of others before themselves are often unexpectedly rewarded.

As for other artistic choices I decided very early on that I wanted to make this film Amanda's world. Most of the shots are of Amanda or simulate her point of view. They are close shots to bring the viewer into the action. She was very comfortable in the coffee shop, so the shots needed to feel cozy and warm. I tried to demonstrate this with the color correction that I applied. Inside the shop the colors and textures are vibrant and in your face, while outside they are a bit more reserved. At the same time I wanted to represent that while Amanda felt that it was her world, each character had his or her own part in it as well. You may not have noticed that the curtains on each window match or represent in some way the character sitting next to them. Each character had its own presence, just like we each have our own identity in the real world.

Another important metaphor for me was the difference between the interior of the coffee shop and the exterior. Like I mentioned before, inside represents Amanda's comfort zone, and outside represents the unknown. For that reason I made everything that happened inside mundane and normal, while everything that

happened outside was dramatic. Yes, dropping your keys in the storm drain might not be the most dramatic thing in the world, but it is a lot more significant than someone going to the bathroom or talking on their phone.

Things that happen inside our comfort zone might feel important to us, but they don't always have a significant impact on the course of our lives. It is when we venture outside that comfort zone that things can change, for the better or for the worse. To demonstrate this I had Amanda experience both a negative event, losing her keys, and a positive event, asking Nick for his number, while outside the coffee shop.

These two events introduce two more themes relating to the bigger picture. When venturing out into the unknown sometimes bad things happen. Usually forces that are not under our control cause these problems. They happen at inconvenient times and cause us to have to deal with additional obstacles. Often times those events cause us to regress back into our comfort zones just as Amanda reenters the coffee shop. We can then get caught back up in the problems and habits that we just escaped.

On the other end of the spectrum, if we go out into the real world and attempt to take control rather than let things happen to us, we can advance ourselves. When Amanda exits for the second time, she runs into Nick again. She takes charge and asks for his

number. This ends up being a significant move on her part as she never returns to the coffee shop and she eventually marries him. This symbolizes a life-changing event that requires one to move out from the comfort of the known into a new zone.

While the footage came out well and we had everything I wanted, I was not completely satisfied. The actors I had chosen for the replacements were fine, but they were accustomed to the stage. They overacted most of their lines. I should have directed them differently, but I had to keep on an extremely tight schedule I was unable to address every issue.

To my disappointment the rough cut was long, clunky, and slightly cheesy. I needed to find a way to slim it down. Trimming the fat out of the footage was easy, but it was taking away from the story. It may have flowed better, but it didn't have the character necessary to make it captivating to an audience. To address this problem I decided to capitalize on the exaggerated acting. After some contemplation I decided the best way to take advantage of the material I had was to make the story a memory instead of present tense. People never remember things exactly the way they happened. They often morph things in their mind and toss out other details. When cut correctly the acting certainly helped this position, but it could not support this new idea on its own. Therefore I had to figure out how to further expand

the style to convey this new concept. My solution was to essentially cartoonize the film using the audio.

The most crucial element of this new path was the music. Before choosing to make the story a memory, I was going to use everyday songs that I could relate to the film. I would have found music that had lyrics that could be easily associated with the themes. When the story was happening in real time I imagined that the music would have been playing on the radio in the coffee shop within the film. I also thought about making the music myself using garage band to give it a more unique feel, but I thought garage band loops were a bit unprofessional.

It was not until my friend's brother, Steve, volunteered to score it with me that I started imagining ways to really utilize the music. One idea I had was to strip all the natural sound away from the inside scenes and use only music, while leaving the natural sound in the outside scenes. This would have further distinguished between the two worlds. Initially Steve was excited about having such an important role. I did my best to describe to him exactly what I wanted and he tried to translate my words into melody. However this was proving to be difficult for Steve so I had to reevaluate whether this was the right way to compose the music.

My second idea was to reframe the story as Amanda telling her friend what happened to her earlier in the day via a skype

conversation. I would start the movie off with a screen capture of skype and Amanda talking, and then move into the main story with the music representing the voice of the character. This was still proving difficult for Steve, and I really was unhappy with the new script I had written for the conversation. It was then that I made my final decision. This would be a story that Amanda was telling her own son. The year would be 2052 and we would be watching her memory as it unfolded in her mind.

I wanted to make the point that we only remember the parts of things we think are important and we subconsciously change or delete things we don't think are necessary. This allowed me to continue to strip out most of the sound, while adding in the small details that Amanda would have remembered more clearly. With the added sound effects Steve held less responsibility in the music and we were able to move forward with the score more effectively. This new story structure and technique added to the concept that Amanda was focusing on the small things in her life. Sounds like the beeping of the cell phone when the guy walks right by her are the ones that are clear and present. They represent trivial things that seemed important to Amanda. On the other hand, the effects I applied to the jabbering of Nina paint those memories in a light that the actual content of the words are not important. It is the general idea of annoyance that matters to Amanda.

I also took into account Amanda's state of mind when the events were happening in her life. For example, in the scenes where she is talking to Nick the voices are airy and distant. This is because at this point in time she had not made a connection with him. However, once she does make that connection and asks for his number, his voice becomes crystal clear as if it was actually happening in reality rather than her mind. From that point on she was bound to him.

The last thing I would like to discuss in regards to my artistic choices is the frame story. The rough cut was long, clunky, and slightly cheesy. I needed to find a way to slim it down. Trimming the fat out of the footage was easy, but it was taking away from the story. It may have flowed better, but it didn't have the character necessary to make it captivating to an audience. To address this problem I decided to capitalize on the exaggerated acting.

After some contemplation I decided the best way to take advantage of the material I had was to make the story a memory instead of present tense. People never remember things exactly the way they happened. They often morph events in their mind and toss out many details. When cut correctly the acting certainly helped this position, but it could not support this new idea on its own. Therefore I had to figure out how to further expand the style. My solution was to essentially cartoonize the film using the audio, but that still was not

enough make an audience understand the concept. I needed to set it up with a proper frame story.

When I was thinking about how to construct the framing I decided to try to strengthen a theme that I had originally intended when I wrote the script but which had essentially been lost. The point I was trying to make by having Amanda and Nick get together in the end was that sometimes the flashy thing that you think you want, or that society or some other entity says you should want, is not really what you desire deep down. Sometimes you need to look harder to find what truly fits your ideals. Amanda was a quirky artsy type, while Anthony (the guy for whom she lusts) was a formal gentleman-like figure. She thought she wanted him because he looked appealing to her at first glance, but it was really Nick, the shy, dorky, misfit that was right for her. This didn't come through as well the way I had written it, so I had to come up with a way to parallel it in the frame story.

I decided to achieve that goal by changing the context of why she was there in the first place. Instead of being at the coffee shop to finish her research paper, she was there applying for jobs. She didn't know what kind of job was right for her, but her mother wanted her to work someplace more "professional". This parallels her desire for the clean-cut guy. In the end she instead decides to pursue the man who is similar to her style. He convinces her to stay at the job that fits her ideals. She takes the path that best fits her priorities and she thrives in

it, eventually marrying him and becoming the boss of that same company.

In order to pull this off successfully, I decided to introduce her character using the pictures she was viewing on her computer. I went through every picture of the actress I could get my hands on and picked out ones that showed her as a fun loving, somewhat bizarre girl. Additionally I wanted to symbolize that she is a free spirit, yet grounded in her interactions with the world. To do that I found pictures of vast open beautiful landscapes to set the mood before you ever even see her face.

It is fitting that I discussed the beginning of the piece last, because I feel like most of the process of making this project has been out of order. Had I done what I now feel is the “correct” way to make a movie, I certainly could have ended up with what I have now. The difference being that I would have planned for everything more efficiently, which would have improved the overall quality of the final product.

When I started working on this project I had a general idea for the plot, specific characters in mind, and the idea of undoing a death or serious injury. From there I played with many different aspects of the story until I had massaged it into something with actual meaning. It was like taking a semi-sculpted piece of clay and tweaking it until something more complete emerged. Instead I should have

imagined the complete structure and then molded the basics into shape to create the finished product.

On my next project, which I have already begun working on with a friend, we began by choosing a main theme that we wanted to convey. We then created the characters that would fit with that theme, and a setting that would work as well. Then we began to construct the elements that would come together to represent the bigger picture. It was much easier working towards that single theme from the very beginning rather than trying to extrapolate one from previous work.

The major benefit to this method is that every last piece of the puzzle can be planned out with that theme in mind. From every line of dialogue to each event that takes place, we can instill the essence of the theme in it. Rather than choosing the shot composition based on vague ideas and then trying to use them to patch together the message, I can take the time to debate different angles and lighting arrangements to best illustrate it. I am not saying that I am displeased with what I did, but rather that if I could do it all over again it would have come out far better.

Next time I embark on a creative adventure I am going to be more aware of my influences and inspirations. There are many films that influenced the creation of this short film, but had I been more in tune with those influences from the very beginning I likely would have had a more concrete plan.

Many of my favorite movies, especially from my early childhood, are magical realism stories. I've always had a fascination with stretching and distorting our perception of time and space. At the same time I enjoy movies where you are thrust into someone else's completely unique experience.

One of my favorite examples of this is *Donnie Darko*. The story is supposedly based in the real world, but you experience the crazy alternate reality that is unfolding within Donnie's mind. It was my intention to create such an alternate reality, but I didn't want to make the character seem insane. Instead I wanted it to be the case that she was experiencing something completely supernatural. Additionally I wanted it to be something that she randomly discovered, as in the movie *Being John Malkovich*. However this changed slightly when I decided to make the movie a memory rather than present tense.

Instead of being based in physical reality, I moved the story into the "mental reality" of the storyteller, quite like the movie *Big Fish*. In that movie some things might be true while others may be completely made up by the character. The audience watching the film is like the person in the movie listening to the story; there is no way to know for sure what the storyteller is conjuring and what actually happened. Amanda might have just created the idea of the undo

function to make the story more interesting and to demonstrate a point. That is up to the audience to decide.

Other movies that heavily influenced my choices in this film were movies where each and every action affects the rest of the events in the movie. Yes, this is true of most films, but the ones that stick out in my mind are *Snatch*, *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, and *Pulp Fiction*. In these movies every plot point, even ones enacted by different characters, comes back to have an effect on the ending. In my opinion this is the sign of a fantastic movie. In the future if I can make a film where there is not a single action or line in the entire script that does not in some way connect to the outcome, I will feel I have succeeded in making a proper film.

A third genre that has always had an impact on me is stylized film. *Sin City* and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* are stylized in a cartoonish manner. These movies go a bit farther than what I was attempting, but I tried to use color, sound, and content to make my movie cartoony too. The difference is that they were trying to fit pre-established forms, where my film was a case of form following content. In other words the content of the story allowed me to stylize the film instead of the form dictating the plot.

One of my favorite movies of all time, *Memento*, is stylized in a different way. The writer of that movie came up with a completely unique way of telling a story. That is something I wanted to do from

the beginning of this project. One of my original ideas was to tell the story entirely through facebook using chats and video posts, but I was convinced to move in a different direction by my peers. However, it is still one of my goals to invent an entirely new form of storytelling.

Lastly I would like to take the time to thank everyone who helped me on this project. I already mentioned their vital role in this process, but I need to mention Professors Breyer and Quin again. There is no way this project would have been completed without their encouragement. Otherwise I would have given up on this project back in March.

Thank you to Corey Robinson for setting your intentions clearly from the beginning. You may not have had much time to devote to the project, but at least you did not abandon me.

Ben Rosen, you helped motivate me during the times where I was severely displeased with my own work.

Eva Carafa, you were probably the most dependable person in this entire process. Thank you for being willing to do whatever I needed whenever I needed it.

Steve Ellis, I appreciated the effort in helping organize the auditions. It is too bad most of the actors we chose did not stick with the project.

One of the actresses, Tamar Kummel was instrumental in helping keep my head on straight when I was in New York City. I am

not sure I would have been able to plug the holes in this project had she not been there to keep me on track.

To the rest of the cast, thank you for being such wonderful people. You all could have easily walked away when pieces of the project were tumbling around me. Thank you for sticking with me and for being understanding. I wish I was able to be as playful as you during production, but I was far too stressed. All of you helped diffuse a nerve-wracking situation.

Ian Heifetz, you are an incredibly talented individual; thank you for sharing your time and knowledge with me.

Steve Karman, I know this was a brand new and difficult experience for you as it was for me. I may not have been to use specific musical terms to describe what I wanted, but you kept with it and together we came up with a fitting composition.

Olayemi Falodun, aka Yemi, thank you for being the one and only person to be present during 100% of the shooting. It was calming knowing that no matter what I was not going to lose my entire crew.

As for the rest of the crew, thank you for coming in general. We had to shoot on a Monday so it was difficult to find people who were willing to commit to helping on set. Whether you came in at 6:30 AM or 2:30 PM, and whether you left at lunchtime or well past dinnertime, thank you for being there.

Mr. Andy Weigl, you came through for me when I decided to do an additional shoot. I know you are a busy man so I appreciate you taking the time out of your day to lend a hand.

Thank you to the owners of Recess. Your price was fair, and you were very accommodating. I especially thank you for letting us stay past sunset. Hopefully some Syracuse students will see my film and venture out to your establishment.

Finally, I want to thank my parents for being supportive not just during this project, but for my entire life.