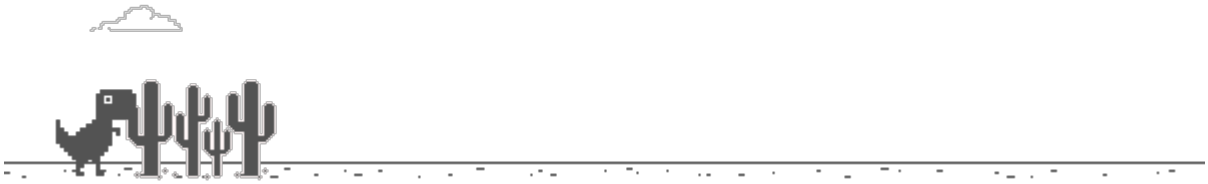

February, 2020

It' s been over a month now since I've gone offline and people keep asking me what has changed. The most obvious difference I've noticed so far is that it feels like my days have become longer and slower—although not in a lethargic or sour way. It may have to do with more than just being offline, but the pace of my life feels much more manageable. This partly has to do with my imagined headspace; cut off from the seemingly endless potential of the internet and the convenient, asynchronous communication it allows, I've been compelled to embrace slower and more in-depth meetings or conversations. The other part of my new pace comes from actually having more time; I don't know what I was doing online that was sucking up so much of my time, but everyday now, instead of checking my email and reading the headlines, I have time for conversations with friends and classmates. Instead of looking things up and planning my week, I've found time to journal and for all sorts of things I've been putting off. Instead of buying and downloading, I find myself reading books and cooking meals. Instead of scrolling through pictures and profiles, I've been going on more walks, wandering around and noticing things, even talking to strangers. It all sounds a bit too romantic and I know I'm very fortunate to be able to afford this slower pace, but I'm a full time student, I have two partime research jobs, I've been dating and keeping up with my friends and family... I don't really want to be any busier than I am, even though I feel like that's what's expected of me.

Until I began my offline year, I was the kind of person who would make sure to follow through when someone would tell me to check something out (a news story, a cool video, a new song, a relevant thinker, etc.). I would write myself a note—or text myself actually—and then make sure to look it up. Without the internet though, I'm mostly not able to...and it's been such a relief. I feel like I have more space in my mind and on my to-do list. I was surprised to realize how much of my day-to-day was based on obligation. I get such a strange thrill now when someone says, "you should look up such-and-such," and I respond, "thanks but I can't." Don't get me wrong; I'm not hoping to live in a bubble. Even without being online, I still feel like I'm encountering plenty of new and challenging information (maybe even moreso than in the echo chambers of the internet). But I don't feel saturated by it. I feel like I have time to think and discuss and feel and even to be bored.

For a class I'm taking this term called Critical Disability Studies, I'm doing research on "pace of life" and we're learning about the social model of disability. The social model suggests that people are not innately disabled but rather are disabled by social structures and expectations. For example, one of my disabled friends told me that they've always had ADHD but that only since they've been a parent, have they considered themselves disabled. As a parent with ADHD, my friend feels like the pace of like expected of them is unreasonable and unachievable. Seeing the way that this friend became disabled as a result of social context clarifies the importance of reflecting on social expectations and structures, ensuring that they fit with what one needs from their life. Many critical disability scholars (i.e. Alison Kafer, Irv Zola, Margaret Price, Carol Gill) use the term "crip time" to refer to a flexible and accommodating pace of life, and to the process of challenging conventions in order to achieve such a pace. "Crip time" is a disruption, a negotiation, and a way of knowing disability. And re-imagining social and professional expectations around pace of life helps more than disabled people. In a world where—due to the conveniences of digital shortcuts and the ease of immediate gratifications—faster and faster paces of life have become more possible, it has become less viable to allow oneself a more flexible and personal life pace. A professor I look up to, Darin Barney, has a great quote about this:

> "Every day we are surrounded by people who 'choose' to work incessantly, not because mobile technologies mean that they *can*, but rather because the mere availability of these technologies suffices to make them accept that they must. The work cannot wait because mobile technology means it does not have to."

Through my offline project, I'm advocating for rethinking pace of life expectations based around healthy, happy, and fulfilling personal paces, rather than setting expectations about pace around productivity and the capabilities of mobile technologies. Last week, when the weather was predicting snow, my friend John's boss told him to make sure to take his laptop home so that, if there was a snow-day, he'd still be able to work from home. Whether it's for work reasons, social reasons (FOMO), or just about keeping up with the latest news and media, we seem to have lost our right to downtime. Today's hyperactive expectations for pace may work for the most resilient of us, but not without some wear and tear...and/or medication. And yet, we seem to be throwing ourselves further into the machine with smartwatches and digital contact lenses, trusting AI predictions that buy things for us before we've even chosen them, or that finish our sentences for us before we've even numbers cannot be prime.

While many of the ways digital and internet technologies impact our lives lead to quicker and more rigid expectations surrounding pace, these technologies can also help people engage with one another in more flexible and accommodating ways. In my critical disability studies course, there's a focus on the value of social media for bringing disabled communities together, especially those with mobility impairments. Plus, even with critical disability studies' preference for structural or systemic changes—as opposed to individual/medical interventions—much has been written about the value disabled people find in relying on technologies; cyborg and scholar Jillian Weise reminds us that "those of us with pacemakers or on dialysis, those of us kept alive by machines or made ambulatory by wheelchairs, those of us on biologics or anti-depressants" are all relying on technologies in important ways. In her piece, "Common Cyborg" she contrasts the experiences of cyborgs who "depend on machines to breathe, stay alive, talk, walk, hear or hold a magazine" to what she calls "tryborgs" who depend on machines for texting and networking, for example. Weise makes a case for embracing technologies without suggesting that all technologies ought to be accepted as they are or by everyone, even the ones she relies on: "I am not impressed with their tech, which they call 3C98-3, and which I am wearing, a leg that whirs and clicks, a socket that will not fit unless I stay in the weight range of 100-105 pounds." Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch's *Crip Technoscience Manifesto* discusses the transformative potential of digital tools for disability justice, while also considering the historical and ongoing issues with these tools: "many of the technologies that have enabled disabled people to gain access to the social world have been produced through military-industrial research and development, imperial and colonial relations, and ecological destruction." It's about context and balance, the secrets to most of life's questions.

For this month's recommendation, I want to mention two books, one fiction and one non-fiction. The fiction one is a sci-fi/magical realism book by one of my favourite authors, Samuel Delany. It's called *Dhalgren* and I'm only a couple hundred pages in so far, but I'm loving it. It describes a city called Bellona where something happened that led to most of the population leaving, and time has sort of stopped. The city newspaper's editor chooses what day of the week it is arbitrarily and people don't know until they get their paper. In Bellona, socializing and work have become quite a bit more fluid and spontaneous. The other recommendation I have is Alison Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip*—the non-fiction book where I learned about "crip time." I'm also only partway through Kafer's book, but I'm appreciating the premise that the book works with: "we all have bodies and minds with shifting abilities" and there's value in wrestling "with the political meanings and histories of such shifts." The book explores disabled people's "ambivalent relationship to technology." Kafer also considers the idea of a cyborg in relation to disability and suggests that being a cyborg isn't about one's body, but that it can be used as a blasphemous political tool. You'll have to read the book to unpack what she means.

This month's challenge is about rethinking our relationship to technology by working towards a more personal pace of life in connection with how we engage online and on our devices. It comes out of the ideas and influence of many different people. One of these people is my PhD supervisor, Naomi. She and I have frequently discussed the ways that checking our email and our other internet portals contributes to feelings of stress and anxiety or, as Naomi put it, they can even function for some people as "a barometer of self-worth." I think this is particularly true for many of my friends' and students' experiences of Instagram, where the amount of attention they receive is public. I don't know whether these digital feedback mechanisms are more positive or negative, but they're definitely powerful. Last week my friend Bashar (currently a video game designer) told me that email is what gets him out of bed in the morning, especially when he's working on exciting collaborative projects with people from other countries. In a letter Naomi wrote me in response to my January mail-out, she described her similar experience of email, but with less optimism. She suggested that "the constant promise of praise or denial began to profoundly influence [her] well-being and self-confidence." Later in the letter, Naomi explained that she's trying to make changes so that she has more control online:

> "The first thing I do when I wake up and the last thing I do before I head to bed is (WAS) check email. This past fall I began turning my email off each night before dinner (or trying to do this – I'd often sneak one more peak)."

Naomi's strategy for making these changes has to do with becoming more self-aware:

> "I've been trying to notice when I get the urge to check and really thinking about this—what prompts me to check (usually still some form of discomfort)—as a means of avoiding unconsciously turning to email as a bizarre distraction from my life."

Which brings us to CHALLENGE 2: *Avoid using your phone or device right before bed or right when you wake up*. This includes emails and social media messages, but also the news and your other apps and notifications. In order to make sure you succeed, maybe leave your phone outside your room at night. (If you use your phone as your alarm clock, you'll have to find something else to use as an alarm. Maybe an old phone?) Giving yourself just twenty minutes without your phone at night and in the morning is likely to change the kinds of things you're thinking about while trying to fall asleep and when starting your day. Through this challenge, let me know if you notice any mental or physical impacts (for eyes, stress, sleep quality, etc.). Also, aiming for the self-awareness Naomi introduced, I'd be curious to hear your thoughts about what prompts you to check your phone; where does that urge come from? And I shouldn't be so sure that those urges are always negative. If you're like Bashar and checking your phone is a motivation or something you value, I'd be especially interested in hearing your thoughts.

My friends Thomas and Horaţiu also helped me come up with this month's challenge. Thomas got an alarm clock last month so he wouldn't have to face his phone in bed. I followed his lead and started leaving my phone plugged in outside my room at night, and not using it as my alarm clock. Already, I notice a difference in the way I feel in the morning. (Although the urgency and stress of the day's tasks and appointments do seem to spring back into action as soon as I finally do check my phone.) Hora's inspiration came from a letter he sent me in response to my January mail-out. In the letter, he mentioned how email relates to his pace of life and state of mind:

> "Unread emails carry a weight. There's an empty, short-lived rush when new ones arrive, but then a dread sets in because they sit in my inbox like reminders of how little time I seem to have and how unresponsive I tend to be towards long-distance friends. None of that feels good, and so even when I finally drag myself out of whatever's drawing my attention over in the other browser tabs, and click that REPLY button, so much of the time, my email is about how shitty I feel for letting so much time pass before I wrote back."

I have had very similar experiences to this. In contrast to emails though, with letters I feel like the timeline and expectations are relaxed. It's no rush, and more importantly, it can be a joy to send and receive mail. It reflects a time when we had more patience and maybe more...well, time.

I realize that negotiating a slower and more fluid pace of life for myself has been possible because I'm a student with lots of flexibility and supports. Making the structural changes that could promote a slower pace on a larger scale will take more sustained, collective modeling and advocacy. Hora and I are planning to set up a bed on McGill campus in the next couple weeks with some provocative signs about pace. Our plan is to invite students passing by to come rest for a moment, and to help us put together a petition. The petition will aim to address concerns that students have about McGill's expectations around the pace of their academic lives—issues like rigid deadlines and heavy course loads. If any of you have other ideas for how we can collectively and systemically challenge and change our life paces (in school or elsewhere), please send me a letter...but take your time! As well, if your address changes, please send me a letter to let me know. I received over twenty mailed responses to my first mail-out and every letter I found in my mailbox felt like a gift. Thank you to everyone who wrote back, and for all the ideas and sources that were recommended or included in your letters. My year offline has already been enriched beyond my expectations by your thoughts and generosity.

YT,
Aron Rosenberg

P.S. I asked a few friends and my parents to send me 'offline tweets' about how they are impacted by expectations around pace of life. Thank you to—in no particular order—Max, Eve, Thomas, Amelia, Rebecca, Julia, Ghazaleh, Talia, and my Mom for your responses. Feel free to re-tweet, respond, or suggest a new hashtag. In March I plan to write about data, so if you have any short thoughts about that, mail me a tweet. Here are this month's submissions about pace of life:

Fast pace is increasingly required of us. We've developed tools to improve communication, speed, and efficiency, but I believe it's perverted our expectations. I'm extremely aware of this, but I'm the first to complain about a response that's less than immediate. #MyPace

I've been acting like I've no time to read, but that's only the case because I'm wasting it. #MyPace

This is my new thing, work sprints: I set a timer and focus for 20 minutes and then I get to take a break when the timer goes off. #MyPace

What is pace of life? @lawyers #MyPace

I go onto my 'bring' (shopping list) app to add an item. Sometime later I realize I've responded to an email, played some 'words with friends', checked my news feed, and forgotten what I wanted to add to the shopping list. #MyPace

As I rode my bike this morning on my way to university I had to remind myself of enjoying the kinetic experience of being in the fresh morning breeze. Thoughts were rushing in my head in an automated fashion that reminded me of the traffic jams, cars and grey streets around me. The body-breath is a good measure of promising paces. As I ride my bike through the streets, I carve lines, the brush of a calligrapher, zooming in and zooming out so far that I can see the continent at bird's eye view. Those lines become an aesthetic experience totally useless to my mastery of my day's agenda. Lines of ruptures in the tasking task tasker becoming. #MyPace

I'm a New Yorker and I think fast and talk fast. My best ideas come quickly, I've never found additional value from further and deeper thought. #MyPace

Life in the fast lane has often been venerated and encouraged (not to mention sang about), but for someone who's coping with anxiety, fast pace if a huge trigger. #MyPace

@JamesBaldwin @NoNameInTheStreet1972 "Time passes backward and it passes forward and it carries you along, and no one in the whole wide world knows more about time than this: it is carrying you through an element you do not understand to an element you will not remember." #MyPace

Being busy isn't necessarily efficient. And I'm not even sure I value being efficient. #MyPace

I find I'm always eating my lunch in meetings and it gets kind of exhausting. I use the 'ritual' app to get lunch quickly inbetween meetings, so I don't even take a break to go out and get lunch. #MyPace

I don't have time for this. #MyPace