

Human beings potentially repeat their destructive behaviors not out of ignorance, but because the human spirit is endlessly prone to the gravity of its own delusions. Sometimes they repeat it because the very process that allowed them to survive the experience slowly destroys the emotional evidence that taught them the lesson in the first place. Some just have a very short emotional memory and they are trapped in their own self-made feedback loop.

feed·back loop \ noun

\ 'fēd-, bak 'lūp \

- A **Feedback Loop** is a closed system or process in which the output or result of an action is fed back into the system as an input, directly altering or influencing its future behavior.

also: the recursive mechanism or cycle so produced.

Imagine doing a stupid thing makes the system give you a reaction, which tricks your monkey brain into doing the stupid thing even harder, forever. Or a microphone held too close to a speaker. The microphone picks up a tiny little whisper in the room. The speaker plays that whisper out loud, but bigger. The microphone picks up that bigger sound from the speaker, sends it right back through, and makes it even louder. Within a few seconds, that tiny whisper turns into an ear-piercing, painful **SCREECH!** That's a feedback loop.

This particular rabbit hole started while listening to Chris Williamson on the Joe Rogan Experience #2544 discussing feedback loops in relationships. I realized right from the start of the podcast that I had already visited that conceptual framework when I described an accelerating culture that nevertheless leads to nowhere. *"Motion with no progress,"* greed, delusion, and *"going backward, fast..."* The machine didn't create the behavior. The machine discovered that the behavior was profitable.

It's the year 2026 and why does every year since 1999 feel like a rerun of the last? Remember when each decade had its own distinct style, sound, and attitude? The '60s had their hippie rebellion, guitar distortion and psychedelic madness. The '70s came in with disco fever, cocaine-fueled random sex, bellbottoms, and a post-Vietnam hangover. The '80s were a neon-drenched capitalist fever dream with synth music, big hair and the music it came with, the birth of movie franchises, the overindulgence that is thrash metal and alcohol-fueled optimism. The '90s? Grunge, dial-up internet, techno music, Zima, designer drugs and that last gasp of authenticity before the world got stuck on repeat. Then... 1999 happened. Or rather, maybe nothing happened after 1999. Maybe the world ended, not with a bang, but by having to slow down due to an oversized speed bump on an empty road just showing up out of nowhere—like someone hit the brakes on progress and left us idling in a loop.

Modern culture is in a perpetual feedback loop. We are accelerating and that acceleration creates the appearance of movement without necessarily producing actual progress. I will paraphrase Joe Rogan here: *"we don't do enough to mitigate the unfairness. And I don't mean in terms of redistribution of wealth or anything like that. Making sure there's not that level of despair and poverty in a functional society. There's almost no effort, no real concerted effort to clean up any of these problems that we have had for decades upon decades upon decades in our cities. It's kind of crazy the amount of money we spend on other things."* And there you have it. Motion with no progress. We take a fair step forward followed by one step of delusion and another step of greed. No one person, anywhere, can make a big enough difference alone. This has to be a concerted effort and we are not even close. I will take a step further and say we are going backward, fast...

“Healing destroys its receipts.” Chris Williamson

What if healing contains the mechanism for relapse?

The mechanism protecting you from yesterday can eventually make you vulnerable to yesterday happening again.

The digital feedback loop is probably the easiest version of this to understand because we can literally watch the fucking thing happen. You click something. The algorithm records the click. It gives you more of the thing you clicked. You click more because it gave you more. The machine records that as further evidence that you must really like this shit and gives you even more of it.

Input. Output. Input. Output.
Round and around we go.

That is where this gets much more interesting to me because feedback loops don't exist only inside computer systems. Humanity itself operates through them. Society does. Culture does. Governments do. Markets do. Families do. Relationships do. You do. They aren't different cassette tapes. They're different tracks on Side One of the same cassette tape.

Take society.

We identify a problem. We react to the problem. Our reaction changes the environment surrounding the original problem. Those changes produce new problems, consequences and incentives. Then we react to those. Twenty, fifty or a hundred years later we're standing around arguing about a mutated version of the same fucking problem while congratulating ourselves on all the progress we made getting there.

Even more motion with no progress.

That doesn't mean humanity never progresses. Obviously, it does. We have antibiotics, airplanes, computers, satellites, artificial intelligence (to a degree) and toilets that flush. We aren't exactly banging rocks together waiting for Zeus to explain lightning anymore. But progress in one direction doesn't automatically mean progress in every direction by default. A society can technologically accelerate while socially running on a treadmill. Faster and faster and faster while remaining more or less in the same place.

That is one kind of feedback loop.
Culture is another.

An idea becomes popular because people repeat it. People repeat it because it appears popular. Its popularity then becomes evidence of its legitimacy, which creates more repetition, which creates more popularity. Eventually nobody remembers where the fucking thing started. It is simply THERE. Accepted. Normal.

Familiarity becomes mistaken for truth because the system has fed its own output back into itself enough times that the output now looks like independent confirmation.

This is where algorithms become gasoline rather than the original fire.

The almighty algorithm isn't necessarily creating the loop. It can identify one already occurring between human beings, measure it, amplify it and throw the amplified signal back at us. Then we react to the amplified version of ourselves as if it came from somewhere else.

Microphone.

Speaker.

Microphone.

Speaker.

SCREECH!

Scale the same mechanism downward and eventually you arrive at two people. Relationships are feedback systems whether we like thinking about ourselves that mechanically or not. What I do changes how you respond to me. Your response changes how I respond to you. My reaction becomes your next input. Your reaction becomes mine. This can be incredibly positive. Kindness can produce trust, trust produces openness, openness produces intimacy and intimacy makes kindness easier.

But reverse the polarity.

Suspicion produces defensiveness. Defensiveness looks suspicious. That produces more suspicion. Someone pulls away because the other person is clingy. The other person becomes clingier because someone is pulling away. One person becomes angry because they feel ignored. The other ignores them because they're always fucking angry. At some point asking who started it becomes almost meaningless because the system is now helping sustain itself.

The original whisper doesn't need to still exist.

The speaker is screaming plenty loud on its own.

This is also why I don't think feedback loops are inherently negative. That's too simple. A healthy relationship can reinforce healthy behavior just as easily as a dysfunctional one can reinforce destructive behavior. Exercise works through feedback. Learning does. Friendship does. Confidence can. Civilization itself probably couldn't function without feedback because without consequences being fed back into future decisions we wouldn't learn anything. And sometimes that is exactly how it appears to most.

The problem begins when we mistake repetition for progress, reinforcement for evidence, familiarity for truth or survival for resolution. And the closer this mechanism gets to the individual, the harder it becomes to see.

Seeing it inside TikTok is easy.
Seeing it inside society is harder.

Seeing it happening between yourself and someone you love is harder still because now emotion has entered the laboratory and contaminated half the fucking samples. But there is another level below that.

Remove society.
Remove the algorithm.
Remove religion.
Remove politics.
Remove culture.
Remove the other person.

What happens when the entire feedback system exists inside one human being?
You become both microphone and speaker.

The thing generating the information and the thing receiving it. The observer and the observed. The person remembering the past and the person whose present decisions are being altered by that memory. And unlike a computer database, human memory isn't a perfect archive. I have explored this in the past by explaining that **the past may be causally fixed, but our access to it isn't**. We don't load yesterday like an old save file and inspect every variable exactly as it existed. We remember pieces. Images. Feelings. Smells. Arguments. A room. A face. Something someone said twenty years ago that somehow survived while the entire fucking Tuesday surrounding it disappeared.

The event stays where it is.
We keep moving.
Which creates a bizarre problem.

The farther we travel from an experience, the more life we have accumulated since it. In theory, that should make older-us wiser. More data. More experience. More context. More scars from touching things clearly labeled **DO NOT TOUCH**. But distance also changes the resolution of the original evidence. The twenty-year-old standing inside the disaster may understand less about life than the forty-year-old remembering it. But the twenty-year-old knows exactly how that disaster fucking felt because they're standing in it. Forty-year-old you isn't. Now the feedback loop has crossed time. Past-you made a decision using information available inside the experience. Present-you inherits the consequences of that decision but not necessarily the original emotional intensity that produced it. Present-you then reevaluates past-you using newer information but degraded access to the old information. And whatever decision present-you makes becomes another input for future-you. Maybe that's one of the stranger contradictions of being human.

We require memory to learn from experience, but we also require some ability to emotionally distance ourselves from experience in order to continue functioning. Remember everything perfectly and perhaps we never heal. Heal completely and perhaps we eventually forget what the scar was trying to tell us. Not because healing is bad. But because biological systems aren't optimized for philosophical truths. **That's all us, baby...** We humans do that... Biological systems are optimized heavily toward **continued functioning**. A nervous system that preserved every humiliation... at its original emotional intensity would probably eventually become unusable. So, forgetting some of that intensity can be useful. We have to be able to put the hot pan down without feeling the burn every time we remember touching the hot pan.

I just wrote about an exaggerated version of this in the philosophical movie review of the 2009 film *The Fourth Kind*. In the movie, people have little to no conscious memory of what supposedly happened to them, yet their bodies react as if the event is still happening at that very moment. That isn't the same mechanism I am talking about here. If anything, it's a cousin of the same idea: the conscious receipt is gone while the emotional and physical bill somehow remains unpaid. **Different mechanism**. Same strange neighborhood of memory, trauma and the unreliable relationship between what happened to us and what our brain allows us to carry forward.

An event remains fixed while our emotional memory of the event changes. The past doesn't literally change. The observer does. And because the observer changes, yesterday can effectively become different information even though yesterday itself remains exactly the same. Forward motion eventually brings you back around to the beginning on a curved surface. One is not walking a straight line. One is walking in a very long curve that only feels like a straight line.

Which brings me to something Chris Williamson said on the podcast that got stuck in my brain:

“Healing destroys its receipts.”

Entropy prevents us from physically reversing history. But psychologically, humans constantly attempt something resembling it.

We return to old relationships.

Old jobs.

Old addictions.

Old friends.

Old ideologies.

Old habits.

Old versions of ourselves.

We cannot reverse entropy, so instead we reconstruct the past badly enough that returning to it begins looking reasonable in our own mind's eye. We begin to remember the past as we

want it to be rather than how it actually happened. We are more tied to the emotional memory of the event than the actual event as it happened.

The universe won't allow us to go backward.
So, the human brain apparently said,
"Fine. Fuck it! I'll just forget why I left."

Older you possess information a younger you did not have—but the younger you may possess *higher-resolution evidence* about something the older you now remembers abstractly. So, the future, older self isn't automatically the smartest version. Sometimes **past-you knew something future-you has forgotten.**

Circulus retroactionis
Latin for *Feedback Loop*
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