

Article

Action, Reaction, and Iteration: Newtonian Dynamics and the Creative Process in Gabrielle Zevin's *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*

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Abstract:

This paper examines Gabrielle Zevin's *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* through the interpretive lens of Newton's Third Law of Motion: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." While this principle originates in classical physics, the novel demonstrates its broader relevance to literary narrative, human relationships, creative collaboration, and emotional development. Through the evolving relationship between Sam Masur, Sadie Green, and Marx Watanabe, Zevin portrays personal and professional actions as forces that generate powerful emotional, psychological, and creative consequences. Sam's withdrawal, Sadie's ambition, and Marx's mediating presence each produce reactions that shape the characters' identities, relationships, and artistic trajectories. The novel's depiction of video game design further reinforces this action-reaction framework, presenting creativity as an iterative process marked by experimentation, failure, feedback, and renewal. Grief, trauma, rivalry, and collaboration function as narrative forces that continually alter the direction of the characters' lives. By linking Newtonian dynamics with literary structure, psychological response, and the creative process, this study argues that *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* presents human connection as a system of reciprocal movement, where every choice reverberates beyond the individual. Ultimately, the novel reveals how conflict, loss, and creative struggle can generate resilience, transformation, and renewed forms of emotional connection.

Keywords: Newton's Third Law, Gabrielle Zevin, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, Action and Reaction, Relationships, Resilience, Creativity

1. INTRODUCTION

Newton's Third Law of Motion, succinctly stated as "*For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction*," is one of the foundational principles of classical physics. It governs the way forces interact in the physical world, ensuring that no force exists in isolation, every push or pull elicits a corresponding counterforce of equal magnitude but in the opposite direction (Newton, 1687). This law, though rooted in mechanics, extends far beyond the realm of physics and can be understood as a metaphor for human relationships, narrative structures, and thematic developments in literature. Just as physical forces inevitably produce reactions, human experiences, decisions, and emotions create ripple effects that shape individual destinies and

interpersonal dynamics.

The concept of action and reaction, when applied metaphorically, highlights the interconnectedness of human existence. Every choice, whether intentional or accidental, sets off a series of consequences that reverberate through time. This principle becomes especially relevant in contemporary literature, where characters navigate complex relationships, confront past traumas, and grapple with the consequences of their ambitions. In these narratives, the relationships between characters are not static but rather function as dynamic systems where every emotional action, whether love, betrayal, ambition, or loss, elicits a corresponding reaction that propels the story forward. By employing Newton's Third Law as an interpretive

framework, we can gain deeper insight into the intricate patterns of cause and effect that define literary storytelling (Eagleton, 2008).

Gabrielle Zevin's *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* (2022) offers a compelling narrative in which the interplay of action and reaction manifests not only in the relationships between characters but also in the thematic fabric of the novel. The book follows the lives of Sam Masur, Sadie Green, and Marx Watanabe, three creative individuals whose intertwined journeys as game designers and lifelong friends illustrate the powerful interplay of ambition, love, and loss. Their relationships, both professional and personal, reflect the fundamental Newtonian principle: each decision they make triggers an equal and opposite reaction, whether in the form of emotional repercussions, artistic success or failure, or shifting power dynamics within their partnership. Through an analysis of the novel's character dynamics, non-linear plot structure, and thematic exploration of creativity and grief, we can observe how Zevin's storytelling echoes the very laws that govern the physical universe.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Newton's Third Law of Motion states that "*For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.*" While traditionally associated with physics, this principle is deeply embedded in the fabric of storytelling. Literary narratives are structured around cause-and-effect relationships, where character actions provoke responses, conflicts generate counterforces, and resolutions emerge from cycles of tension and release. This section explores how Newton's Third Law applies to literature, focusing on narrative structure, character dynamics, and psychological underpinnings in Zevin's novel. By connecting this Newtonian concept with literary theories of plot structure and psychological frameworks like Transactional Analysis and Attachment Theory, we can gain a deeper understanding of the novel's intricate web of relationships and thematic developments.

2.1. Newton's Third Law in Literature

The action-reaction dynamic serves as an effective framework for analyzing narrative structures in literature. In storytelling, every plot development is driven by a chain of actions and reactions, forming the backbone of conflict and resolution. When a character makes a decision or takes an action, it inevitably leads to a response from the world around them, either from other characters, external forces, or even their own evolving consciousness. This dynamic mirrors Newton's idea that no force exists in isolation; every push provokes a counterforce that moves the story forward.

In *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*, this principle is evident in the characters' evolving relationships and creative endeavors. Sam and Sadie's decisions, whether personal or professional, set off a series of events that shape their trajectories. For instance, Sam's initial offer to collaborate with Sadie on their first video game catalyzes their career trajectories, the external pressures of the gaming industry produce personal rivalries, and Marx's eventual death fundamentally reorients the surviving characters' futures (Zevin, 2022). These action-reaction cycles define

the novel's non-linear progression, reinforcing the idea that storytelling itself is governed by Newtonian principles.

The cause-and-effect structure is not unique to Zevin's novel but is fundamental to literature across cultures and time periods. Whether in ancient mythology, classic literature, or contemporary narratives, stories operate within a framework where every event leads to a consequential reaction. For instance, in Greek tragedy, Oedipus's search for truth directly precipitates his downfall, while in Shakespearean drama, Macbeth's ambition generates a cascade of violent repercussions (Aristotle, 2003; Gurr, 2011). Similarly, in modern fiction, Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy leads to his tragic fate, illustrating how characters' choices create ripple effects. In Zevin's work, every creative, romantic, and professional decision made by the protagonists generates a corresponding consequence, demonstrating that Newton's Third Law is as much a literary principle as it is a physical one.

2.2. Literary and Psychological Connections

Classical models of narrative structure, such as those outlined in Aristotle's *Poetics*, consist of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Each stage represents an escalation or counterforce, reinforcing the Newtonian idea that one movement provokes another (Aristotle, 2003). In the novel, the exposition introduces Sam and Sadie as childhood friends who reconnect and decide to collaborate on a video game. The rising action sees their careers flourish while conflicts emerge, creative disagreements, power struggles, and unresolved emotional tensions. The climax occurs when the fractures in Sam and Sadie's relationship reach their breaking point, compounded by Marx's sudden death. The falling action involves processing grief and reassessing relationships, while the resolution suggests a fragile balance between past and future, demonstrating the cyclical nature of action and reaction (Zevin, 2022). Through this lens, the novel follows a Newtonian model of force, resistance, and recalibration.

This dialectical process of conflict and synthesis aligns with the Newtonian principle that opposing forces generate a new state of being. Furthermore, psychological frameworks deepen this analysis. Eric Berne's Transactional Analysis (1964) explores how human interactions follow predictable scripts, often resembling power struggles or emotional "games." Sam's tendency to exert creative control leads Sadie to push back, triggering an endless cycle of assertion and defiance, while their alternating emotional closeness and withdrawal mirror the push-and-pull of Newtonian forces. Similarly, John Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1988) explains how early relationships shape emotional responses. Sam exhibits avoidant attachment, withdrawing emotionally when faced with vulnerability, while Sadie demonstrates ambivalent attachment, craving closeness but resisting dependence. These psychological underpinnings reinforce the Newtonian principle, each character's emotional action is met with an equal and opposite reaction.

3. CHARACTER ANALYSIS

At the heart of *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* are the relationships between Sam, Sadie, and Marx, which serve as primary sites where the principle of action and reaction unfolds. Each character embodies a unique force, and their interactions generate emotional, professional, and psychological consequences that drive the narrative forward.

3.1. Sam Masur: Isolation and Vulnerability

Sam's journey is marked by a series of deeply painful personal experiences, starting with the physical disability he sustains, which becomes a central aspect of his identity. This disability is not only a physical challenge but also serves as a metaphor for the emotional scars Sam carries. His trauma extends to the loss of his mother and a strained relationship with his father, reinforcing his belief that he must handle his challenges alone. Sam's reaction to this accumulation of trauma is one of withdrawal. He becomes increasingly reclusive, distancing himself from others as a defense mechanism. His physical disability, coupled with his emotional scars, makes him feel as though he must rely solely on himself, building walls that shield him from further hurt while preventing him from experiencing the joy of connection.

Over time, as he begins to interact with Sadie and Marx, his defensive posture shifts. Sadie, with her own vulnerabilities and ambitions, offers Sam the possibility of deeper connection, while Marx, with his emotional intelligence, becomes a guide for Sam, helping him navigate the complexities of his emotional world. Through these connections, Sam begins to dismantle his self-imposed isolation, allowing himself to experience vulnerability. His trauma, once seen as an insurmountable barrier, becomes the catalyst for his growth as an artist. His experiences of loss and alienation fuel his creativity, giving him a depth of understanding that influences his work. As he grows emotionally, he becomes more capable of understanding others, discovering that his personal growth is inextricably linked to his artistic expression and relationships (Zevin, 2022).

3.2. Sadie Green: Ambition and Resilience

Sadie is defined by her intense ambition and the deep-seated fear of failure that accompanies it. She is driven by a desire to prove herself in the creative world, constantly striving to achieve success and recognition. This ambition is rooted in her internal belief that her worth is tied to her accomplishments. However, beneath this ambitious exterior is a fragile vulnerability. Sadie's reactions to her fear of failure manifest in a competitive nature and heightened sensitivity to criticism. She constantly compares herself to Sam, creating underlying tension, and her competitive drive leads to self-doubt whenever she faces professional rejection or personal loss. Her reaction to failure is one of emotional upheaval, which strains her relationships, particularly with Sam.

The fluctuating nature of her relationship with Sam reflects her internal struggle. At times, their bond is strong, based

on mutual understanding and shared creative aspirations, while at other times, their differences become more pronounced, and Sadie's competitive tendencies drive a wedge between them. Sadie's growth unfolds through her reactions to setbacks. Each instance of failure forces her to confront her deepest insecurities, and over time, she learns to build resilience. Her setbacks become opportunities for self-awareness; she begins to understand that her worth is not solely tied to her success, but to her ability to persevere. This growth extends to her relationship with Sam, where Sadie begins to see that vulnerability, rather than competition, is the key to connection, allowing her to grow both as an artist and as a person (Zevin, 2022).

3.3. Marx Watanabe: Mediation and Sacrifice

Marx serves as a mediator between Sam and Sadie, offering unwavering support and guidance. His role in the narrative is pivotal, as he provides the emotional intelligence necessary to bridge the gaps in communication and understanding between the two more volatile characters. Marx's ability to empathize with both Sam and Sadie, despite their differences, allows him to act as a stabilizing force. His support is rooted in his deep care for both individuals, and he becomes a source of emotional grounding throughout the story. Marx's reaction to the tension between Sam and Sadie is one of active mediation. He recognizes the emotional barriers that exist between them and seeks to diffuse tension in a constructive way, encouraging open dialogue and fostering mutual understanding.

Marx's personal growth is rooted in his actions and sacrifices throughout the narrative. His loyalty to both Sam and Sadie, as well as his willingness to put their needs before his own, highlights themes of selflessness and emotional maturity. Marx's journey is not one of seeking recognition or success, but of providing a foundation of stability and emotional support for others. His selflessness becomes an integral part of the narrative, reminding readers of the importance of loyalty and the strength that comes from supporting others in their times of need. Through his actions, Marx not only fosters growth in others but also exemplifies the transformative power of empathy and emotional intelligence (Zevin, 2022).

4. THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

Beyond individual character relationships, the thematic concerns of *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* also align with the Newtonian principle of action and reaction. The novel's exploration of creativity, grief, and human connection underscores the ways in which emotional and professional pursuits are governed by the same forces that dictate movement and counter-movement in physics.

4.1. Creativity as Iterative Process

Creativity is not only a driving force behind the narrative but also a central theme that mirrors the characters' personal struggles and evolution. The iterative process of game design, where developers test, fail, and improve upon their ideas, becomes a metaphor for the characters' own journeys of growth, healing, and self-discovery. Much like game developers who experiment with various mechanics

to craft a cohesive experience, Sam and Sadie undergo a process of trial and error as they navigate the complexities of their lives (Juul, 2005; Koster, 2013). Their professional and personal lives are intertwined with failure and success, marked by constant feedback loops. Sam's success is the product of sustained effort and reflection, while Sadie's ambition and drive foster growth both professionally and emotionally. Each failure serves as an opportunity to reframe their goals and adjust their approaches.

Creativity, in the context of both game design and personal relationships, serves as both a source of connection and conflict. For Sam and Sadie, their creative collaboration is the primary mode through which they connect, but it also brings tension to their relationship. Their partnership in game creation becomes a mirror for their emotional relationship, reflecting the highs and lows they experience together. While they often find a deep sense of connection through shared creativity, their different artistic visions, personal insecurities, and competitive tendencies create moments of strife. However, despite these conflicts, creativity remains a catalyst for their eventual growth. It is through their disagreements and collaborations in game design that they are ultimately able to form deeper emotional bonds, as the process requires vulnerability, trust, and a willingness to be open to feedback (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Sawyer, 2007).

4.2. Grief and Emotional Consequence

Grief is an omnipresent force in the novel, profoundly shaping the characters' actions and relationships. It is the emotional catalyst that drives the narrative forward, especially in the cases of Sam and Sadie, whose responses to loss influence how they navigate the world. Grief manifests in various forms: Sam's grief over his mother's death and his strained relationship with his father, and Sadie's grief over personal loss and professional setbacks. For Sam, grief triggers withdrawal, acting as a barrier that prevents him from confronting his emotions and forces him into isolation. For Sadie, grief becomes a driving force behind her ambition, as she uses her work to distract herself from deeper emotional pain, affecting her relationships with others.

Sam and Sadie's responses to grief are markedly different, and these differences significantly impact their evolving relationship. Sam's grief causes him to retreat, while Sadie's grief compels her to push forward. These opposing responses create a dynamic where their relationship is often in tension, with Sam's need for solitude conflicting with Sadie's desire for closeness. Over time, their reactions to grief shift as they confront their emotional vulnerabilities. Sam learns to allow others in, realizing that healing cannot occur in isolation, while Sadie recognizes that her ambition does not eliminate her grief. Their grief, initially a barrier to their relationship, becomes a bridge for deeper emotional understanding and connection (Zevin, 2022).

4.3. Technology and Human Connection

In the novel, video games are not merely a form of entertainment; they are a medium for storytelling and

emotional expression. The games that Sam and Sadie create serve as extensions of their inner lives, reflecting their emotions, struggles, and aspirations. Through the art of game design, they channel their creativity and pain into a form of narrative that others can engage with, externalizing their feelings (Wolf, 2001; Squire, 2011). Video games, by their interactive nature, are uniquely suited to convey complex emotional narratives. Unlike traditional forms of storytelling, games offer the player agency, allowing them to engage with the narrative in a personal and active way. The games in the novel invite players to experience emotions in a direct, immersive manner, making the act of playing a form of emotional catharsis for both the characters and the players.

The video games Sam and Sadie develop serve as a reflection of their personal journeys. For Sam, the games are an outlet for his grief and trauma, informed by his experiences of loss, alienation, and vulnerability. Through his work, he learns to confront his emotional pain. Sadie's games, on the other hand, reflect her ambition, fear of failure, and desire for success. As she grows, her games evolve to incorporate themes of connection, vulnerability, and self-awareness, paralleling her own journey toward emotional growth and healing. Through their respective games, Sam and Sadie communicate their deepest emotions, sharing their personal struggles and triumphs with the world while discovering the power of collaboration and empathy (Johnson, 2010; McGonigal, 2011).

5. TEACHING APPLICATIONS

The literary and thematic depth of *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* makes it an excellent text for pedagogical exploration. The novel's rich engagement with action-reaction dynamics offers educators numerous opportunities for classroom activities and creative assignments.

5.1. Classroom Activities

One effective activity is "Action-Reaction Mapping," where students identify key moments in the novel where a character's action leads to a significant reaction and analyze the consequences. This exercise challenges students to examine how the characters' choices shape their trajectories and the dynamics of their relationships. Students can work in groups to highlight specific actions and subsequent reactions, such as Sam's withdrawal leading to alienation from Sadie or Sadie's ambition causing tension in their partnership. Following the identification of these moments, students analyze how these contribute to character development, plot progression, and thematic exploration, encouraging critical thinking and a deeper understanding of the narrative.

Another dynamic activity is "Character Role-Playing," where students are assigned to role-play as Sam, Sadie, or Marx in specific scenes. This exercise encourages empathy and understanding, as it requires students to step into the characters' shoes and explore their inner worlds. By discussing motivations and reactions in key moments, students better appreciate the complexity of the characters and the thematic depth of the novel. After performing

scenes, students engage in guided discussion to reflect on their performances and analyze the motivations behind their characters' actions, drawing connections to themes of creativity, grief, and human connection (Zevin, 2022).

5.2. Creative Assignments

A particularly engaging creative assignment is the "Video Game Concept" task, where students design a video game that mirrors the action-reaction dynamics of the novel. Students identify core elements of the novel, characters, major plotlines, and key emotional moments, to translate into a game. They consider how game mechanics reflect the dynamics of the characters' relationships and how feedback loops mirror the novel's cyclical process of action and reaction. The design process includes decisions about narrative structure, character arcs, and player interaction, encouraging creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration (Juul, 2005; Koster, 2013).

For a more traditional academic assignment, students can write a "Literary Analysis Essay" exploring how Newton's Third Law applies to another novel or film of their choice. This essay allows students to connect the novel's thematic exploration of cause-and-effect to broader literary and cinematic contexts. Students select a work in which characters' actions result in significant reactions, analyzing how these moments contribute to character development, thematic exploration, and the overall arc of the story. By connecting Newton's Third Law to literary analysis, students gain a deeper understanding of how authors and filmmakers use cause-and-effect relationships to build tension, reveal character motivations, and drive the plot forward (Eagleton, 2008; Aristotle, 2003). These teaching applications serve as a bridge between the literary themes of the novel and a variety of pedagogical techniques, encouraging students to engage deeply with the text in ways that are both academically rigorous and creatively enriching.

6. CONCLUSION

Newton's Third Law provides a compelling framework for analyzing *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*. At its core, the novel is a deeply emotional exploration of how individuals confront personal challenges, grief, and ambition, and how these internal struggles ripple outward, affecting relationships and creative endeavors. By applying this scientific principle, we gain deeper insights into the cyclical nature of the characters' experiences, how their actions lead to consequences that shape the course of their

relationships, creativity, and emotional well-being. In the novel, the actions of Sam, Sadie, and Marx reverberate throughout the story, creating emotional tension, personal growth, and moments of both conflict and reconciliation. By framing these dynamics within the concept of action and reaction, we better understand how these forces operate within the characters' lives and how their creative collaboration ultimately becomes a means of healing and connection.

Newton's Third Law extends far beyond the realm of physics, offering a profound lens through which we can examine human behavior, relationships, and the creative process. In literature, the principle of action and reaction is a universal narrative device, appearing in countless works across genres and time periods. Characters' choices, whether motivated by personal desires or external forces, always lead to reactions that spark conflict, drive plot twists, or reveal the complexities of the human experience (Aristotle, 2003; Eagleton, 2008). In psychology, the action-reaction dynamic plays a critical role in understanding human behavior and emotional responses, as individuals' actions often lead to emotional reactions both within themselves and in their interactions with others (Berne, 1964; Bowlby, 1988). In creative collaboration, the principle is equally important, as the actions of one party generate reactions from others, influencing the creative process and the trajectory of the work (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Sawyer, 2007).

At its heart, *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* is a meditation on the ways in which our actions shape the course of our relationships, our creative endeavors, and, ultimately, our lives. Through the lens of Newton's Third Law, we see how the characters' actions, driven by their desires, insecurities, and past traumas, lead to reactions that are often unpredictable yet transformative. The novel underscores how personal growth, healing, and connection emerge from a constant back-and-forth of actions and reactions, where the choices made by one individual impact not only their own future but also the lives of those around them. Ultimately, the novel serves as a poignant reminder of the impact of our choices, showing how every action ripples outward, creating consequences that shape our art, our relationships, and our lives. By reflecting on these dynamics, we better understand not only the novel's characters but also our own lives, recognizing how our actions carry weight and influence the trajectory of our emotional and creative journeys.

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