

## Griffith University

### Marianna Shek

#### The Marriage Plot Thickens

Abstract:

As media converges, writers are pursuing playful design between story and technology but traditional narrative techniques applied to transmedia may have unpredictable reader experiences. My research explores how the marriage plot can be deconstructed within the transmedia space using principles of hypertext and gamification. I present an extract of my creative work *Love in the Age of Time Travel*, designed as a story application (app) for tablet release. By intersecting popular fiction genres, such as romance and science fiction, my research focuses on how the typical female demographic plays in the transmedia space.

Biographical note:

Marianna Shek is a sessional animation lecturer at Griffith Film School, Griffith University. Since graduating from a Bachelor of Animation (Class 1 Honours), Marianna Shek has combined her interests in creative writing, film and animation through transmedia practice. Her Honours documentary *Love and Other Commodities* (2012) was funded by the Ian Potter Cultural trust grant for emerging artists. Her short animated films *Articulate!* (2009) and *The Backpack* (2011) have screened internationally. *The Backpack*, funded by QPIX/ Screen Australia, was recently nominated for best animation at the West End Film Festival 2013.

Keywords:

Transmedia – Marriage plot – Story app – Romance – Gamification – Hypertext

## **LOVE IN THE AGE OF TIME TRAVEL (VERSION ONE OF EVENTS)**

**1 April 2013**

(Lois Middleton)

For every woman there is a potential buyer, but leftover ladies are like last season's Mimco handbags. They aim too high. Think they deserve better. They aspire to be Louis Vuitton. They are, however, doomed to be a lesser brand, one that regularly appears on sale racks, being fondled by greedy hands. Shiny surface, serviceable zipper, silky lining. Nothing inside but neurosis. That's when they come to see us. For a certain price, Everlasting promises to find every woman, even the leftovers, their perfect match. Seeing into the future is easy when you work for a time-travelling dating agency. When my boss Jackson first recruited me as a matchmaker he said, 'Love is a window of opportunity. You've got to be at the right place at the right time.' I often repeat this adage to my clients.

2013 is Everlasting's biggest hub. We send about twenty girls through the ER Bridge every year. Men in the future are wild about millennium women. They can't get enough. I'm not sure what women are like where Jackson's from because it's against company policy to transfer into the future, but if their worm wrangler Teece Fairweather is anything to go by, then, in the words of Daft Punk, they are harder, better, faster and stronger.

Teece doesn't do much talking when she turns up. Just spreads herself out on my couch without even taking off her pilot boots and falls asleep.

'It's a shame you're after true love,' Jackson has brought in a new client, Gideon Shaw, who keeps shooting furtive glances my way. 'This is the era where women went on slut walks... For an extra thousand chronits, we could take you on a bit of a time tour.'

'I don't think you understand what a slut walk is,' I say as I pull out the database and start looking for a match.

Jackson winks at the client and they do this slapping thing with their hands, which, I suppose, must be a high five, and they almost miss the photo of the blonde girl on the monitor.

'That's her!' I snatch Gideon's letter and double check the signature, 'Amy Maise, 28 years old. She's the one.'

**1 April 2113**

(Jackson Pendergast)

A wise man once told me there are three reliable commodities in this world: coffee, drugs and women. Everything else in the marketplace is just sparkles and trimmings traded by men to get their hands on these goods. He's now in prison because being wise didn't make him smart. Ever since the Flebs got in power, it's all about re-addressing the balance.

Make an enemy of a woman and she could have you arrested by leaning against a street light, shimmying up and down a few times and calling you out for lechery. It's hard for men to pick up, let alone have a relationship. Gideon Shaw is like all the other self-loathing bastards who come to see me at Everlasting. I can see the whites of his eyes as they dart from side to side. I have Rheena fix him up a Crown, extra peaty.

I lean back in my seat, and swirl the whisky stones in my glass, 'So what's your weakness? Naughty Aughties? Plenty Twenties? Dirty Thirties?'

He looks as if I've just suggested we go sandwich Rheena in the backroom. Some of the whisky sloshes over the side as he sets the glass down on the table.

'They say... y-you can bring me a woman. N-not just for s-sex either. I mean, I w-w-want to marry her. How does it work? C-can I see a catalogue?'

Bet he's never had a woman in his life. He pronounces 'sex' like he's trying to dislodge a rotten piece of fruit in his throat.

'There's no catalogue. Love is just a window of opportunity. It's all about being at the right place at the right time.'

'Will she l-love me?'

I want to say 'man the fuck up,' but of course I don't because you never know who's a real Fleb waiting to spring you for gender crimes. I look him straight in the eye, 'A thousand chronits up front. The only thing you gotta remember is five years from now, your wife needs to send Everlasting a letter confirming she is happily married. If we get this letter, then tomorrow morning we pick up your girl.'

## **1 April 2118**

(Amy Maise)

Our cube is a hovel by the standards of the upper zones, but when the afternoon sun hits the carbon walls, it dances with an iridescent gleam that leaves me disorientated, just like those early days after the move when everything was shiny. We live in one of the remaining zones that still have garden allotments. When I sieve the soil through my fingers, I think about those whom I left behind. It's not that I liked gardening *before* but it comforts me in this femtotechnology world (I use this term even in my head because Gideon says the best way to adapt is to embrace the concepts). Plant seed in soil. Add water and sunlight. Watch it grow. Here is magic I can understand.

I don't share my thoughts with Gideon because he already feels bad about the family I've left. He starts sentences with hypotheticals, 'If I work through the holiday this year—' or 'If we cut back on nutrient pills—'

I kiss away regrets. Time travelling is expensive. A once-in-a-lifetime trip. I'm rubbing moisturiser into my raw and chaffed gardener's hands when Gideon grabs me around the waist from behind. I squeal and hear the sound of paper crushing.

'Careful.' He tries to smooth the piece of paper in his hands, 'I need you to sign this.'

There's something familiar about the handwriting. He doesn't meet my gaze as I read it.

'I've seen this before. This is the letter Everlasting showed me when they took me from 2013. I'm giving permission for Everlasting to remove me from 2013 because I'm happily living with you in 2118?'

'Yes, because maybe they would have set me up with the wrong girl.' Gideon shudders and wraps his fingers around my ponytail.

'What would happen if I don't sign?'

'But you do sign,' Gideon slips the pen between my fingers and holds it steady when I refuse to take hold, 'You just said in 2013 you saw your signature on this letter.'

'Do you just wake up tomorrow and I'm not here? Am I in some alternate universe?'

'Maybe this is the alternate universe and we just don't know it.' He wraps his long fingers around my hand and nudges me towards the line for my signature.

What a blessing it is to know the future. To have no regrets.

## **2 April 2013**

Love is like Sunday. Lazy and complacent, love sneaks up on you. The Groom glances at his pocket watch, snaps it shut and slips it into his breast pocket. He nods at the musicians.

When the opening strains of *Ave Maria* fill the chamber, the Bride appears. Her hooped skirt swings back and forth as she leads the procession. The gossamer veil flutters across the Bride's cheek as she catches her breath.

The priest clears his throat, 'Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud—.'

A blinding light shatters the triptych behind the altar. The Bride throws her hands up instinctively as shards of stained glass fly towards her. She thinks there's toffee crystals stuck to her gloves but then specks of blood seep through the white lace.

'Henri, look—.' The Bride holds out her hands but he's turned away. There's a rip in the universe. A wondrous schism in the fabric that separates the real from the imagination.

A man and a woman are poised on the other side. The man has a hawkish face and a lopsided smile that vanishes when he sees she's hurt. He hunkers down beside her. She's surprised he's graceful for someone so tall.

He pulls a handkerchief from the breast pocket of his jacket and flourishes it through the air the way a magician would disguise a sleight of hand. Then, he gently presses the fabric against her glove. Her eyelashes tremble slightly as she feels the sting but her fingertips curl willingly around his hand.

The Groom gasps but is powerless to intervene. Love at first sight.

## 2 April 2113

(Teece Fairweather)

I'm suited up and ready for the pick-up before my boss Jackson has even briefed me with the girl's details. There's some sort of admin issue because Jackson's shouting and generally doing what he does best (being an asshole, even by time pimp standards). I think the letter from the client hasn't arrived because Rheena's running back and forth checking our internal ER bridge. Part of me almost wishes the letter doesn't arrive because Jackson will have to refund the client.

Listening to his philosophical 'love is a window of opportunity' is bullshit. I don't know if the client ever realises that Gideon's not taking a punt. He knows exactly which girl to pick up because the future version of the girl sends a letter confirming her identity. So much for free will. Luckily, Everlasting pays their worm wranglers real well otherwise my conscience would get itchy.

Time travelling is a tricky science. It's not enough I'm tearing through space in my spacer at the speed of light. I need to do it with a wormhole attached to my tail. That's how I create a tunnel between two points in time. Wormholes do NOT like being dragged through space. They're unstable bastards. Having one attached to your spacer is like dragging a killer whale out of the water with silk thread and a needle. Best-case scenario, the wormhole gets away and your time tunnel closes up. Occasionally, though, the wormhole explodes taking out your spacer and crew.

I'm doing a final check on my spacer when Jackson walks up to the hanger. He's trying to look cool but I can see blotches of colour rising from his neck. When he holds out the clipboard, he leaves moist streaks across the cover from his sweaty hands.

'Sorted it out?' I pinch the pages between my forefinger and thumb, trying to avoid smearing grease onto the paperwork, 'Confirm target is 2013. Amy Maise. 28 years old.'

## 2 April 2118

(Gideon Shaw)

She's not there the next morning when I wake up. I'm slipping in and out of sleep, catching the chip notes of the sparrows nesting in the tree outside our window. I turn on my side, my hand searching for the curve of her hip.

I sit up. Her side of the mattress is dimpled with a sensuous Amy-shaped mould that proves she exists. I check the bathroom. Our cube's so small there aren't many places to hide. I open the front door—but we never take walks. It's just not safe. But we ran out of real food yesterday and Amy hates taking nutrient pills; says the dosage doesn't fill her stomach. Perhaps she went to the market.

'Amy?' I lick my lips. It's because she didn't sign the letter yesterday! Now she doesn't exist except in my head. I run back into our cube to get changed and run straight into Amy, still in her bathrobe and slippers.

‘Where were you hiding? I checked everywhere.’ I press her to me, crushing the small paper cup of colourful pills in her hand.

Amy looks at me mischievously, her round eyes dancing with flecks of green I’ve never noticed before. ‘It’s tomorrow’, she says, ‘and I’m still here.’

## THE END OF VERSION ONE

### LOVE IN THE AGE OF TIME TRAVEL (VERSION TWO OF EVENTS)

**1 April 2013**

(Lois Middleton)

As soon as I see Jackson, I get a feeling of déjà vu. His long body is stretched out on the reclining chair, his feet perched on the edge of my desk. He doesn’t see me straight away. He’s too busy preening, pointing his toes to check if his Bruno Maglis need a buff up. I sling my bag across the desk.

‘Lois! You look great.’ Jackson saunters over for a full body hug. I should shut him down but there’s a pecking order in this company. Besides, something about his rugged olive skin and thick, dark hair, without the slightest hint of thinning for a man pushing forty, makes hugging him exhilarating.

‘I need you to find this girl.’ He gets straight to business and pushes an envelope towards me that is dated 2118. As head matchmaker of Everlasting, the only time-travelling dating agency, it’s my job to find suitable matches for my clients. Men in the future are wild about millennium women. Sometimes, they’re just time tourists after a good time but occasionally we get the romantic type who’s after true love. For these clients, we charge premium rates but we can guarantee a minimal five-year relationship or their money back.

I check the details of the letter against the database. I even send a request for IT to bring up the girl’s fingerprints. All the while, Jackson’s standing a little too close. I can feel his breath tickling my ear.

‘Going to any kitty parties this weekend?’ He lowers his voice even though Teece the pilot is sprawled out on the couch asleep. I’m saved from finding out what a kitty party is by a positive identification from IT. I have all the information on Amy Maise I need. Facebook. Medicare. Dental records. Close up, Amy Maise is a pixyish blonde who probably regrets using cheap colourful hair dyes in her student days because her hair is looking brittle and thin. I notice something else.

‘You’ve got the wrong girl. This one’s engaged.’

Jackson smiles showing off even white teeth. Evidently in the future, I can look forward to a brilliant dental plan. ‘We’re never wrong. We own a time machine.’

**1 April 2113**

(Jackson Pendergrast)

A wise man once told me there's no such thing as free will. What separates us from the apes is not our ability to rationalise but our irrational belief that we control our destiny. When Gideon Shaw shows up at Everlasting, I know he's a test.

I lean back in my seat and swirl the whisky stones in my glass, 'So what's your weakness? Naughty Aughties? Plenty Twenties? Dirty Thirties?'

'They say... y-you can bring me a woman. N-not just for s-sex either. I w-w-want to marry her.' He's cradling the side of his face in one hand, like a giant baby rocking himself to sleep.

Ever since the Flebs got in power, it's all about re-addressing the gender imbalance. Never make an enemy of a fifth-wave feminist. They're known to castrate first and ask questions later. Hard to answer when your testicles are stuffed down your throat. They make good assassins but they're undateable, which is why so many single men are looking for millennium women.

I tell Gideon how it works. A thousand chronits up front and a letter of consent in five years from his wife authorising us to remove her from her old life. He sends the letter to Everlasting in 2118 and they make sure we get it. Guaranteed five-year happiness.

I brush over this detail quickly because I know Gideon Shaw's wife will never send the letter. Everlasting has a policy that employees can't transfer into the future but I'm the exception. Parts of my future are entwined in the past and vice versa. Being a time traveller is like being stuck in the middle of a full Hills Hoist. As it spins around, you catch glimpses of the universe between all the sheets and wet clothing but never enough information to make out anything solid. Hard to know if I really like Crown whisky or if I only like it because I saw someone buying it for me for my fortieth birthday. Just like I don't know if I forge the letter from Amy Maise because I saw myself kidnapping her in 2013 or because I'm just a greedy bastard who wants to keep the thousand chronits.

## **1 April 2118**

(Amy Maise)

At first I stayed because I'm a mender. I remember, as a kid, fixing my nana's glasses frame when the optometrist tried to charge her because it was out of warranty. When I got older, I turned to fixing my friends' relationships. But Gideon's broken and I'm tired of trying to fix him. I should leave but I have nowhere else to go. The crazy flebs are sympathetic to the plight of women but I'm not a woman. In the eyes of the law, I don't even exist. I'm nobody.

Gideon says it's my fault that we're not happy. When Everlasting took me, they assured me I'd be happy. They said sometimes what we want is not what we need. They even showed me a letter written from my future self-authorising my own kidnapping. I didn't recognise the shaky, uneven handwriting. My scrawl usually sprints across the page, stopping only to generously loop the 'y's and 'g's.

I'm getting ready for bed when Gideon comes up to kiss me. I keep my expression neutral as he unclasps the chain from my neck. His wedding gift. He presses the

pendant against the last drawer on the bedside dresser, there's the sound of metal clicking, and the drawer springs open.

He doesn't meet my eyes as he pulls out a document. 'I need you to sign something.'

I flinch. I know it's the same letter Jackson flashed in front of me before they took me away all those years ago.

Gideon forces a pen in my hand and squeezes tight, 'Either way, you'll sign this letter.'

'I will not.' I hear the sound of bone crushing. The end it turns out is a whimper.

## **2 April 2013**

Love is like Sunday. It lulls you into complacency but then Monday comes along and it's hard work. The Groom glances at his pocket watch, snaps it shut and slips it into his breast pocket. He nods at the musicians.

The opening strains of *Ave Maria* fill the chamber and the Bride appears. Her hooped skirt swings back and forth as she slows her step to match the occasion. The gossamer veil flutters across her cheek and sticks lightly to her lips as she catches her breath.

The priest clears his throat, 'Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud—.'

A blinding light shatters the triptych behind the altar. The Bride throws her hands up instinctively as shards of stain glass fly towards her but the Groom has knocked her sideways.

'Henri, look—.' The Bride holds out her hands but he's already turned away. A doorway's appeared above the altar framed by an electric blue current.

Two other people are moving through the archway. One of them, a giant woman, towers over the Bride and pulls her to her feet. She knocks out the Groom with the butt of her firearm, and then swings her arm back around to strike the priest.

The priest drops to his knees, 'Holy Mother of God!'

The woman hesitates, 'Anglican?'

'Catholic,' he gulps.

'Atheist.' She drops him with a quick twist of her fist to his solar plexus. The Bride screams as they drag her to the doorway. She tries to bite but the other woman pinches her chin with so much force, she hears her jaw crack.

'Don't scare her!' cries the man at the doorway, 'She's so pretty.'

The Bride faints.

## **2 April 2113**

(Teece Fairweather)

I don't remember her name. In my line of work, I move a lot of girls around. Almost two hundred at last count. You don't get attached to goods to be sold. I suppose the only reason I do remember her is because she was defective.

All the other girls, they'll come along real sweetly. Especially when you tell them how in the future, we've perfected rejuvenating antioxidants and no one looks a day over thirty. Millennium girls are vain and dumb. Sometimes, there's confusion and tears. When that happens, Jackson and Lois launch into a good-cop/bad-cop routine.

'You've wasted our time!' Jackson shouts, spittle flying across the desk.

'Like time's important to you!' Lois's arms reach out to protect whoever is being interrogated. Watching her, you'd think she's a mother hen instead of a vulture, all cunning beak and sharp talons. She'd stroke their hair, proffer tissues and croon, 'All women are slaves to our biological clock.'

They always convince the girl to go with them. Whether or not it's ethical is none of my business. With this particular girl, Rheena lost the paperwork. It showed up an hour later but if you ask me, it sure didn't look like her signature. And Jackson had that unctuous tone so thick you could choke on it.

I'm good at my job and I keep my mouth shut. The Bride was wearing this tight dress with a long slit up the back. I punched out the Groom and the priest and dragged her through the ER Bridge.

I let her go once we'd sealed off the portal. She grasped the rope barrier with both hands. For a second, I thought she was going to jump but then she sorta closed her eyes and slumped to the ground.

'Something's wrong with this one,' I told Jackson, as she huddled on the bridge, rocking back and forth crying noiselessly, 'You've picked the wrong girl.'

## **2 April 2118**

(Gideon Shaw)

She's not there the next morning when I wake up. I'm slipping in and out of sleep, catching the top notes of sparrows nesting in the tree outside our window. I turn on my side, my hand searching for the curve of her hip finding instead only slippery sheets. Just like that, she's gone as if she had never existed, except for an Amy-shaped mould on her side of the mattress that still manages to look like it's frowning at me. I throw the doona off and check the bathroom. Our cube is small so there's no place to hide.

I walk into the living space and throw open the windows. I breathe out, slowly and steadily. I'm starting to feel more like myself when I catch a whiff of rosemary. The woody bush she planted in the garden bed, a neat mound of soil around its base. I thought all traces of her would be gone.

On the buffet, there are still photos of us from our wedding day, having dinner with friends, touring the federation. Me with that goofy grin. Amy with her arms wrapped around me but still managing to hold me at arm's length. Beside the photo frames is

the letter I didn't end up posting. Thinking about it churns me up again. Amy just knows how to push my buttons. After everything I'd done for us, she refused to sign the letter—until I got mad.

I ball up the letter and head for the communc bins. Even now, I'm not sure why I didn't post it. Anyway, it's done now. I'm free. As I step outside, I run straight into her. She's still in her bathrobe and slippers.

'What are you still doing here?' I blurt out.

Her eyes spit with angry flecks of green, 'Living happily ever after.'

THE END OF VERSION TWO

### **Research background**

As media converges, writers are pursuing playful design between story and technology but traditional narrative techniques applied to transmedia may alter reader experiences. Faber’s story application (app) *The Thirty-Nine Steps* garnered average reviews from *The Literary Platform* (Walkley 2013) and *The Guardian* (Baddeley 2013), which cited that the work lacks the urgency of Buchan's original novel. My research explores how the marriage plot can be deconstructed within the transmedia space combining literary theory, such as hypertext (Aarseth 1997), with the transmedia theory of gamification (Deterding et al. 2011). The creative writing will be in the form of a story app for tablet called *Love in the Age of Time Travel*.

### **Research contribution**

This work is about a time-travelling dating agency that accidentally opens up a parallel universe when they abuse their ability to see into the future to find ‘the one’ for their client. For this paper, the story is laid out in linear form, with the real and parallel universe version of events presented in two columns. In its intended format, the user navigates the story non-linearly, and jumps between universes. A window graphic represents each vignette but the reader has to perform time-related tasks to open the window. Examples of different user experiences are represented in the following diagrams.

### **Research significance**

Hypertext and choose-your-own-adventure techniques influence my work. By intersecting popular fiction genres, such as romance and science fiction, I will investigate how the typical female demographic plays in the transmedia space.

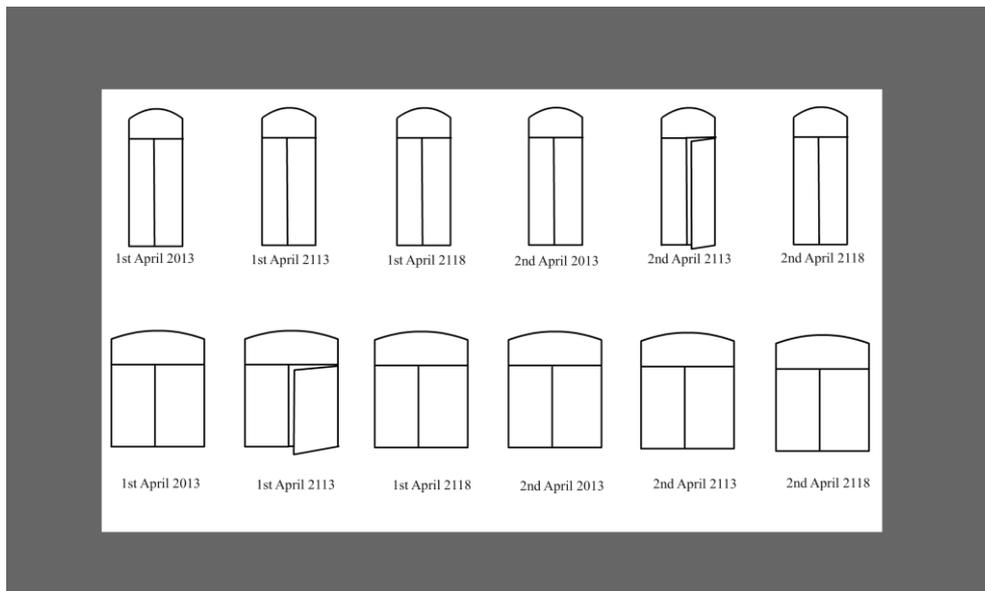


Diagram 1: Story layout on tablet

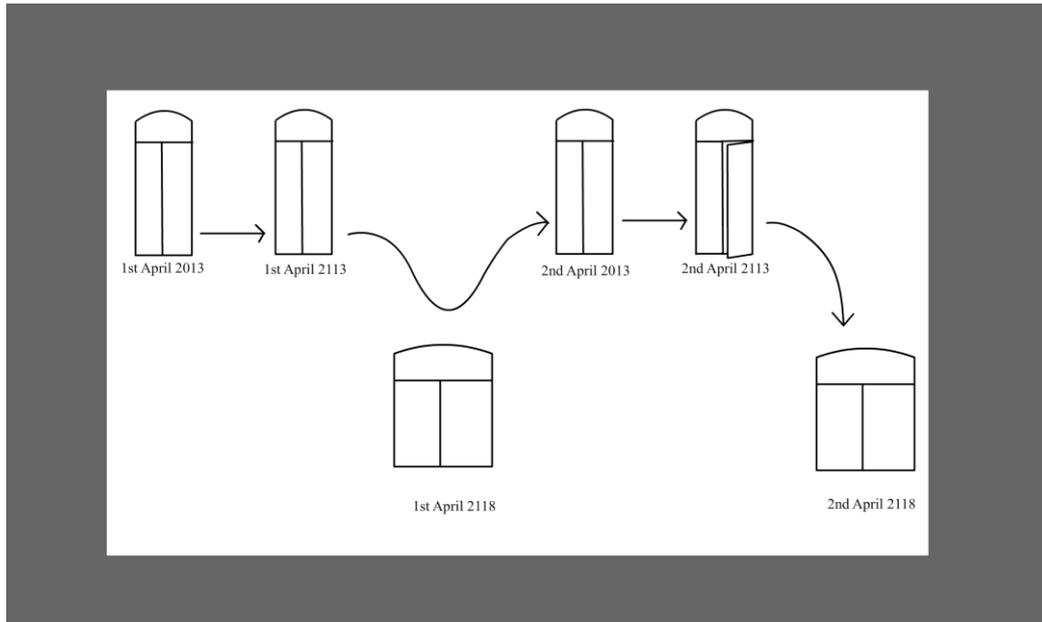


Diagram 2: User 1 possible experience

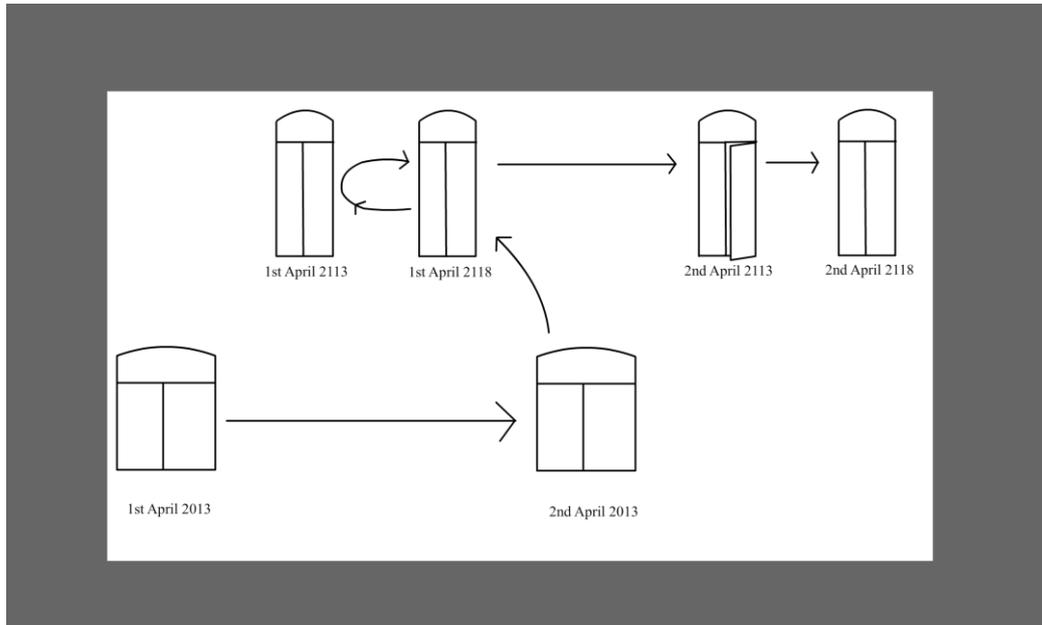


Diagram 3: User 2 possible experience

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