

# Research Report: Utilization of the CHNM Timeline Generation Tool In Plotting the Evolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Dystopian Novel

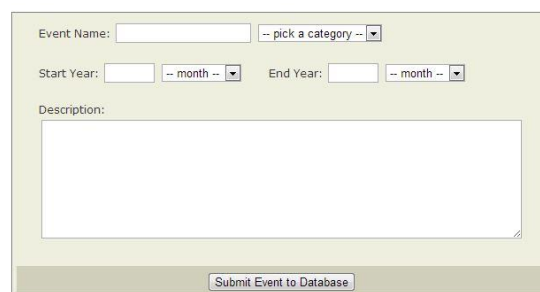
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Abstract: The Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media has developed a number of free online tools to facilitate new digital studies in the humanities, one of which is the Timeline Builder. A visual and interactive timeline allows for greater clarity in understanding relationships between events through time, and the patterns that emerge offer valuable insight. This tool allows users to create timelines without the technical knowledge of how to build websites, manage database event entries, or any programming languages. The user simply enters the desired time period into a blank form and adds events to the form one by one.

Evolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Dystopian Novel Timeline Url:

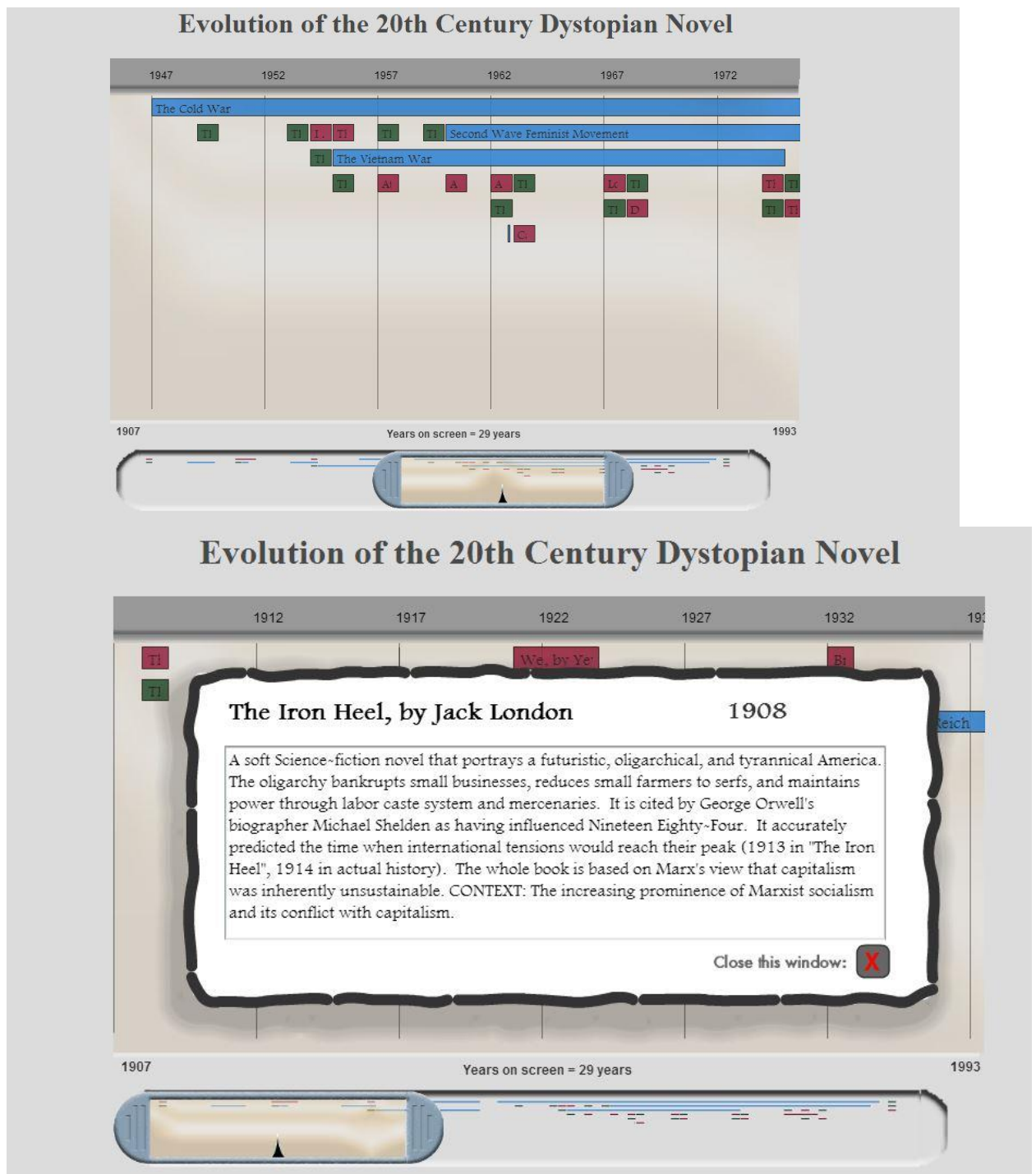
<<http://chnm.gmu.edu/tools/timelines/yourtimelines/?timelinesID=6274>>

Description: In the few clicks of a mouse, a user of the CHNM Timeline Builder can add items to timeline merely by filling in the blank fields for event name, starting date, ending date, and the text description of the event. The blank form is shown below:

A screenshot of a web form for adding events to a timeline. The form has a light green background. It contains the following fields: 'Event Name' with a text input box and a dropdown menu labeled '-- pick a category --'; 'Start Year' with a text input box and a dropdown menu labeled '-- month --'; 'End Year' with a text input box and a dropdown menu labeled '-- month --'; and 'Description' with a large text area. At the bottom of the form is a button labeled 'Submit Event to Database'.

Diverse categories of events can be color-coded to display differently on the final timeline. This allows for the dystopian novel researcher, for example, to correlate historical events like the Cuban Missile Crisis with the publication date of specific novels depicting themes pertinent to atomic warfare and international tension. The images below show first: the final product of the

timeline with its clickable scrollbar at the bottom of the page and second: the box that appears when you click on an event to obtain more information.



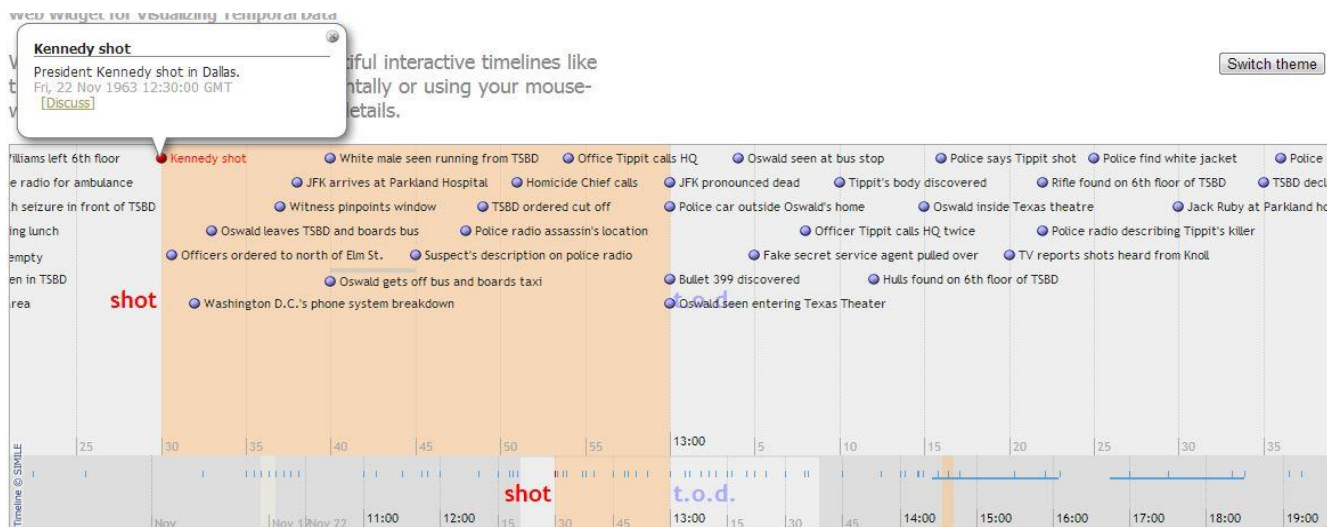
In this example timeline, red items correspond to specific dystopian novels, blue items denote historical events like the third wave feminist movement or the Vietnam War, and green boxes represent a summary of the themes extracted from the novel each box is paired with. The green theme boxes are the most important, since they allow a viewer to most easily see connections between their content and the historical events located nearby on the visualization.

Commentary: This tool served a definite purpose for the dystopian novel research group, but in essence it is very simplistic, and the end result is aesthetically unpleasant as well as being unwieldy. The value of such a timeline is extremely impacted by the fact that if the span of time of an event is too brief, the full title will not be visible unless the box is clicked. From a cursory overview of this timeline, one cannot tell which colors indicate a historical event, work of literature, or list of emerging themes. The only visible pattern one can discern is the clumping of novels around the height of the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the beginning of the third wave of the feminist movement.

The value of this undertaking lay in the simplicity of its creation. The CHNM timeline was able to serve as a quick beta test of the fruits of prior research. The most time-consuming part of the dystopian literature research project was cross-referencing various lists of the most influential novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, choosing around twenty-five to investigate, and then summarizing each book's content, historical context, and themes. The end document listing all this information was approximately 5,500 words long. Before investing hours of time into coding a more complicated and visually appealing timeline using the "simile widget" or another platform, it was beneficial to quickly copy and paste the content into this Timeline Builder to obtain a general idea of what the outcome would look like.

This tool is the starting point from which this research group can progress to a more nuanced and informative format. There are many options like chronozoom, xtimeline, viewzi, and dipity available for displaying the timeline data, but it is likely the SIMILE will be the final format chosen. By using html to code the specifics of the display layout (colors, border width, bands that scroll with synchrony at a predetermined prompt), the user has greater control over the specifics of the timeline. This will greatly enhance researcher's ability to display the correlations they wish to emphasize.

An example SIMILE timeline is pictured below:



## 1. Resources for Further Study.

Booker, M. Keith. *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature*. Westport: Westport Press, 1994. Print.

Gordin, Michael D., Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash, eds. *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010. Print.

Simile-widgets.org. MIT Libraries and CSAIL (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), 2011. Web. 20 November 2013.

West, Josh, Josh Greenberg, Jim Safley, and Tom Scheinfeldt. *The Center for History and New Media Timeline Builder*. George Mason University, 1994. Web. 20 November 2013.