

Why There Is No Timeline

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December 14, 2025

Abstract

Time is almost universally imagined as a sequence of events arranged along a hidden axis, with the present conceived as a moving point advancing through a completed structure. This intuition persists even in modern physics, where spacetime diagrams and block-universe metaphors quietly reinforce the idea of time as a dimension. In this essay, I argue that this picture is unnecessary and actively misleading. By treating collapse as the fundamental update process of relational structure, and by understanding quantum and classical descriptions as scale-dependent resolutions of that process, time can be reinterpreted not as a dimension or container, but as the local arrival of propagated influence. The past is not stored, the present does not move, and temporal order emerges from persistence and interaction rather than passage. This reframing preserves empirical physics while repairing the intuitive simulation that underlies it.

1 Why There Is No Timeline

For most of us—physicists included—time is imagined as a kind of film strip. Events are laid out in sequence, already arranged somewhere “else,” while the present is a moving cursor sliding forward through a completed reel. The metaphor is so familiar that it rarely feels like a metaphor at all. It feels like common sense.

But this picture is not just misleading. It is unnecessary.

The deeper mistake is not that we draw timelines, but that we forget we are drawing them. What follows is an attempt to repair that intuition—not by denying experience, and not by invoking exotic mathematics, but by paying closer attention to what actually persists, propagates, and interacts.

2 Collapse as Update, Not Event

At the most basic level, reality is not composed of objects evolving smoothly through a background of time. It is composed of **updates**.

These updates—what I will call **collapse**—are not special events reserved for quantum measurement. They are the universal mechanism by which relational structure is pruned, stabilized, or dissolved. Collapse does not wait for observers. It does not happen “after” something else. It is the rule by which reality changes at all.

Importantly, collapse is not a layer of reality stacked beneath others. It is the grammar of change itself. Wherever relations exist, collapse is updating which of those relations can persist.

3 Resolution, Not Realms

We often speak as if reality is divided into realms: a quantum realm beneath a classical one, with a mysterious transition between them. This language is convenient—but it quietly imports a hierarchy that does not exist.

Quantum and classical descriptions are not different worlds. They are **different resolutions** of the same ongoing collapse process.

At fine resolution, phase relations and coherence remain visible. At coarse resolution, those details are compressed away, leaving only stable outcomes. Nothing ontologically new appears at the classical scale; only different constraints become dominant.

There is one process. What changes is how much detail we retain when we describe it.

4 Persistence Is the Source of Structure

Collapse alone does not produce information. It produces **possibility pruning**.

Information arises only when collapse outcomes **persist**—when a pattern survives across many updates and becomes compressible. Atoms, cells, brains, computers, and symbols are all examples of such persistence. They are not fundamental entities; they are long-lived patterns in an ongoing update process.

Memory, in this sense, is not storage in a separate domain. It is persistence that continues to influence what can persist next.

5 The Past Is Not Stored

We often imagine the past as something that exists somewhere—an archive of completed events. But nothing in our experience requires this.

What we call the past is simply **collapse history that is still propagating influence**.

Light from distant stars, sound waves, fossil records, neural traces—all are examples of interactions that occurred earlier and have not yet ceased to matter. They are not stored “back then.” They are arriving **now**.

This is why astronomy makes the error of a timeline obvious in retrospect. Stars are not where we see them. They never were. What we observe is not a position in time, but the arrival of influence.

6 Now Is an Intersection

The present moment feels coherent, but not because it is a universal slice through time. It is coherent because many propagated collapse histories intersect locally.

Your nervous system integrates:

- very recent local interactions,

- slightly older signals carried by light and sound,
- much older influences from distant structures.

All of these arrive together, constrained by what can still interact with this stable system. That intersection is what we experience as **now**.

The present does not move. It is continuously refreshed.

7 Time Is Not a Dimension

It is tempting to rescue the timeline by adding dimensions: perhaps time is just another axis, like space, but harder to visualize. This does not help.

Whether we draw diagrams in two dimensions, three, or four, the story remains the same:

- collapse updates occur,
- some outcomes persist,
- their influence propagates at finite speed,
- and interactions occur where propagation fronts meet.

No additional dimension is required to explain this. Time does not point anywhere. Influence arrives.

8 What Relativity Actually Taught Us

Relativity did not introduce this picture. It revealed its consequences.

Time dilation, loss of simultaneity, and frame dependence are not paradoxes. They are what we should expect once we abandon the idea of a universal present and replace it with propagation and persistence.

Nothing in established physics is violated here. Only the metaphors are corrected.

9 What Changes—and What Does Not

Everyday experience remains intact. Causality still holds. Prediction at scale still works. Clocks still tick.

What changes is our understanding of **why** these things work:

- Time is not a container.
- The past is not stored.
- Information is not fundamental.
- Persistence, not passage, is what gives structure.

10 Stop Drawing Timelines

Timelines are useful tools. They are not features of reality.

Reality does not unfold along a pre-existing axis. It updates. Some updates persist. Their influence propagates. Where those influences meet, structure appears.

Time does not pass.

What persists continues to arrive.