Foresight, Forecasting, and Fiction: Directed Fiction as a Foresight Approach

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Abstract

This work explores a creative fusion of strategic foresight, forecasting, and storytelling (Dator, 2009). It begins by likening writing prompts to Metaculus (2023) questions and details the author's journey from short stories to multipath adventure novels. It explains how strategic

foresight and forecasting work together, explaining their distinct roles in understanding the future. It also addresses the challenge of incorporating complex economic factors into fiction using Metaculus-conditioned pair questions. These questions become writing prompts for each chapter, leading to multiple plotlines with varying outcomes, from miraculous to catastrophic. This work introduces directed fiction as a powerful bridge between foresight and forecasting, combining qualitative depth and quantitative precision, utilizing real-world data and community-driven insights to create dynamic narratives that allow readers to explore potential future events within real predictions. This innovative approach promises to shape future narratives and enhance our ability to navigate today's uncertainties.

Keywords: strategic foresight, futures studies and foresight, future studies, foresight, foresight and scenario planning, fiction, fiction novels and short stories, science fiction, futurism, alternative futures, speculative fiction

The Basis for an Idea

The website Reedsy hosts a weekly writing contest called Reedsy Prompts (2023). The website administrators offer writers a suggestion (a prompt) for a story. These prompts can be anything from asking a question (e.g., "What makes a monster?") to encourage writers to reminisce about summertime, or to have writers craft a story around the idea

of "Letters sent and received." Hundreds of writers respond to these prompts every week, generating an endless stream of wonderful and amazing short stories.

Since anything can be used as a writing prompt, I wondered if a question from the Metaculus (2023) crowd forecasting platform could be used in this manner. To test the idea, I selected this Metaculus question, "When will the next great financial crisis in the US occur?" The challenge was to write a story in which this question is answered "Yes" before the closing date of December 31, 2039.

From Short Story to Multipath Adventure Novel

It was very easy to write a short story based on that writing prompt. My story concluded with the protagonist, Dr. Josef Ranell, facing a difficult choice. In the face of nearly certain bankruptcy, should he use the small fleet of Lockheed-Martin hybrid airships his CEO so foolishly purchased to haul rare earth ore from the ice-bound mine at Strange Lake, Canada? Or should he return to the Skunk Works in Palmdale, California, to have his airships retrofitted with sensor arrays and missile systems in preparation for a likely war between China and Taiwan? With these choices in mind, I authored two additional Metaculus questions:

- "Will there be a test flight of a full-scale heavy-lift cargo airship before 2031?"
- "Will the U.S. conduct a test flight of a military airship capable of transporting at least a 10-ton payload by 2031?"

The two new questions became two new writing prompts. And if each of them ended in a similar choice with two outcomes each, I could have four more Metaculus questions to write about. It was my wife who noticed the pattern developing. She said, "It sounds like the *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels I read as a kid." *Directed fiction* was born.

The Foresight–Forecasting Connection

Dr. Ranell's story grew to include 15 related Metaculus (2023) questions. Viewed together, they resemble a microforecasting tournament and provide many of the same valuable insights into a subject that tournaments do. I drew on my academic background in strategic foresight to assemble the questions into a coherent whole.

In the realm of anticipating the future, two distinct yet intertwined disciplines emerge: strategic foresight and crowd forecasting. Each possesses its own unique lens through which to view the uncertain terrain of tomorrow. Together, they form a powerful symbiotic relationship that enriches our understanding of what lies ahead.

Strategic Foresight: Illuminating Plausible Futures

Strategic foresight is the art of exploring potential future states and understanding how uncertainties can shape the world. Unlike forecasting, which seeks to predict specific events or outcomes with probabilistic accuracy, foresight deals with the broader landscape of possibilities. It is a holistic and nuanced approach, emphasizing the exploration of multiple plausible futures rather than pinpointing a single trajectory.

Foresight methodologies, such as *framing*, *horizon scanning*, *STEEPLE analysis*, and *axes of uncertainty*, provide the tools for peering into the fog of the future (Merritt, 2022, February). These techniques enable analysts to consider a wide range of variables, including social, technological, economic, environmental, political, and legal factors. Foresight practitioners embrace complexity, recognizing that the world is a web of interconnected forces, and that the future is a tapestry woven from countless threads.

Forecasting: Navigating the Probabilistic Waters

In contrast, forecasting platforms serve as beacons of probabilistic clarity within the fog of uncertainty. Forecasters focus on aggregating collective wisdom to generate probabilistic forecasts on specific events or outcomes (Tetlock & Garner, 2015). While forecasting narrows its gaze to discrete questions, it excels in providing quantitative insights into the likelihood of specific occurrences.

Forecasting requires a unique set of skills, including data analysis, statistical modeling, and the ability to synthesize information from diverse sources. It thrives in contexts where precision matters, such as financial markets, public health, and climate science.

Exploring the Greater Depression with Conditioned Pairs

Dr. Ranell is caught up in the forces of the next Great Depression. As an author, I would like to write about how some specific event (such as a government policy) would lead to a specific outcome that matters to Dr. Ranell (e.g., forcing him to lay off employees).

The problem with that idea is that the U.S. economy is wildly complex. A short read of the *Pardee International Futures* (Pardee Center for International Futures, 2023) economic submodel illustrates the hundreds of factors that are involved in economic predictions. It would not be entertaining to try to write fiction that incorporates each of those variables. What would be useful is to illustrate major, easily recognizable events, or *landmarks* that would describe to the reader where they were located along a continuum of probabilities.

From a seven-factor STEEPLE analysis of economic depressions in the past (Merritt, 2022, September), four iconic images from economic depressions stand out: runs on the banks, hyperinflation, chronic unemployment (usually over 20%), and currency wars

between nations (think tariffs and counter-tariffs). If you see any of these social phenomena, it is a good indicator that you are experiencing a great depression, and not a recession, stagflation, or any number of other chronic economic conditions.

However, Dr. Ranell is not really interested in macroeconomic policy. While those landmarks affect his business, what he really wants to know is what is going to *hurt* him. He is interested in the outcomes, not the causes. From the same STEEPLE analysis, I also selected four iconic events that are routinely associated with economic collapse: bankruptcy, famine, riots, and war. The landmarks and outcomes can be represented graphically (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:

Four Landmarks / Four Outcomes

Bank Runs	Bankruptcy
Hyperinflation	Famine
Unemployment	Riots
Currency War	Hot War
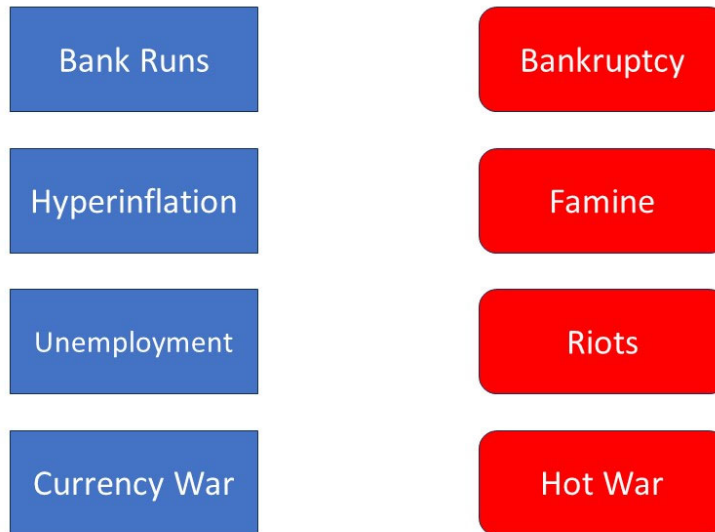
The Problem of Causation

If there was a major run on the banks, it could lead many companies to bankruptcy. Dr. Ranell is already worried about going bankrupt, so this is a possibility that scares him. However, bank runs might also conceivably lead to famine, riots, or even war.

In the intricate landscape of a chaotic business environment, determining the causes of specific events proves a formidable challenge. The multiplicity of factors at play, including social, political, economic, and technological influences, creates a complex web of interdependencies that complicates the identification of singular causes. Nonlinear relationships further muddy the waters, as changes in one variable may not

result in proportionate shifts in others. Feedback loops amplify or dampen effects, generating dynamic and evolving scenarios that defy linear predictions.

Unintended consequences add another layer of complexity; actions taken to address a perceived cause may inadvertently trigger outcomes that were not initially foreseen, challenging the understanding of causation. Information asymmetry compounds the issue, as decision-makers often operate with incomplete and imperfect data, heightening the risk of misjudging causal relationships. Time lags between events and their consequences, combined with the influence of external shocks like natural disasters or geopolitical shifts, contribute to the difficulty of pinpointing causal links in a timely manner.

Figure 2:
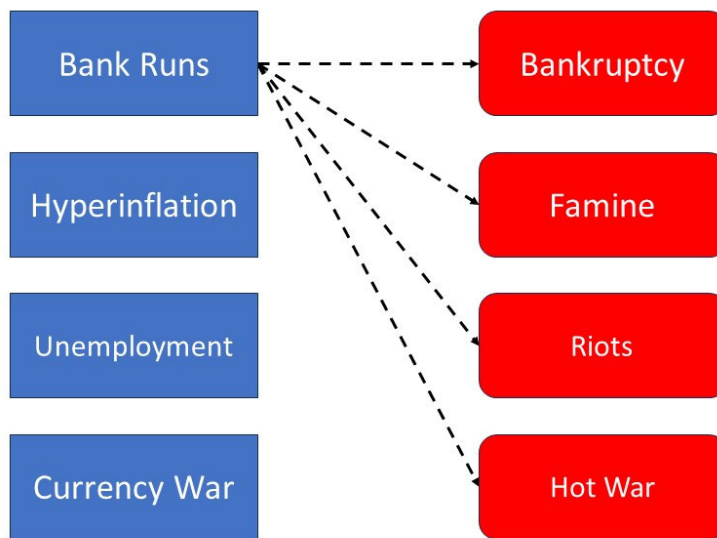
Following the same logic, hyperinflation could lead to bankruptcy, famine, riots, or war. Any landmark could lead to any outcome. Even with this limited set of only four landmarks and four outcomes, that still leads to 16 plausible future states. It would not be entertaining to try to write story lines for each probability.

One solution is to use conditioned-pair questions. Conditioned-pair questions involve predicting the likelihood of an event occurring given that another related event has already happened or will happen (Metaculus, 2023). Users are asked to estimate the probability of a specified outcome under different conditions, adding a layer of complexity to forecasting. This type of questioning encourages participants to consider

the interdependencies between events and refine their predictions based on the occurrence or nonoccurrence of a related factor. It reflects the real-world complexity where events are often interconnected, allowing for more nuanced and context-specific forecasting on the Metaculus (2023) platform.

In this example, the landmark becomes the parent question, and the outcome becomes the child question. It is important to understand that my use of conditioned pairs does not make any prediction regarding the causal relationship between parent and child questions. The four specific, individual, causal-pair questions I am using for Dr. Ranell's story are meant to be viewed in relation to one another. Together they cast a broad prediction net over a vast swath of probable outcomes:

- Bank runs lead to bankruptcy?
- Hyperinflation leads to famine?
- Unemployment leads to riots?
- Currency war leads to hot war?

Synergy of Plotlines: Where Foresight and Forecasting Converge

Strategic foresight and forecasting complement each other beautifully. Foresight illuminates the broader landscape, allowing us to see the forest, while forecasting navigates the intricacies of individual trees (Tibbs, 2000). The magic happens when these two worlds converge.

Dr. Ranell's multipath adventure story has five separate plausible endings (Merritt, 2023). And since his first decision involved either heading north to the rare earth mines in Canada or staying in California at the Skunk Works, three of the story endings have two separate paths, or *transitions*, to arrive at the same ending. This creates a total of eight separate plotlines in the story.

There are two surprise-free endings where Dr. Ranell's company goes bankrupt, and the reader learns what valuable lessons he has learned along the way.

- Surprise-free endstate: Rare earth transition: U.S. deflationary period before 2030?
- Surprise-free endstate: War contracts transition: $500 billion spending cut?

It has two optimistic endings, where Dr. Ranell finds a creative way to save his company.

- Optimistic endstate: Rare earth transition: U.S. annual CPI inflation?
- Optimistic endstate: War contracts transition: Gold standards resolution act?

There are also two pessimistic endings, where Dr. Ranell loses more than just his company.

- Pessimistic endstate: Rare earth transition: Bank secrecy act?
- Pessimistic endstate: War contracts transition: Corporate executive imprisoned?

Finally, Dr. Ranell's story also has both miraculous and catastrophic endings. In *2034: A Novel of the Next World War* (Ackerman & Stavridus, 2021), Admiral James Stavridus warned that the United States does not suffer from a failure to innovate or execute, rather we suffer from a failure of imagination. It is the job of a science fiction writer to jump beyond the boundaries of the normalcy bias and consider future possibilities that would otherwise be deemed incomprehensible or impossible.

- Miraculous endstate: Nobel Prize for MMT?
- Catastrophic endstate: China dominates the United States?

Directed Fiction is the Bridge

The fusion of foresight, forecasting, and fiction gives readers a more holistic understanding of the complex tapestry of tomorrow (Fergnani & Song, 2020). It empowers us not only to envision multiple plausible futures but also to navigate the probabilistic waters of the present. In doing so, directed fiction emerges as a powerful tool for shaping tomorrow through storytelling, creating a dynamic synergy between foresight's exploration of possibilities and forecasting's precision in predicting probabilities.

Directed fiction combines the qualitative richness of strategic foresight with the quantitative precision of forecasting. By integrating real-world data and community-driven insights from forecasting platforms like Metaculus (2023), directed fiction infuses credibility into narratives. It connects the macroscopic foresight view to the microscopic forecasting lens, enabling readers to witness potential future events unfold in the context of real predictions.

About the Author

Timothy X. Merritt earned a Doctor of Strategic Leadership from Regent University with a concentration in Strategic Foresight. He is a 36-year veteran with the Oregon Army National Guard, with combat tours to Afghanistan and Iraq, deployments to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and service as an aide-de-camp to a commanding general. He has published a variety of fiction, nonfiction, and historical fiction books and is now turning his attention to developing a new writing style called directed fiction.

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