



Wild cards

Oliver Markley on expanding the typology of wildcards to include high-probability, high-impact but low-credibility events.

Page 2

VERGE

The Swiss Army knife of futures work? Richard Lum explains the “general purpose futures framework” he developed with Michele Bowman.

Page 5

Three Horizons

Looking at patterns of change and innovation through a systems lens. Bill Sharpe on patterns of change - and patterns of hope.

Page 9

World Game

How do you let people get to grips with the complexity of systems change without being overloaded? Tony Hodgson's World Game offers an approach.

Page 12

Foresight Maturity Model

The ability of organisations to absorb futures work is a critical capability issue. Terry Grim explains her Maturity Model.

Page 15

Thing From The Future

108 cards, in four suits, millions of combinations. Stuart Candy on the card-based futures game that helps to stretch futures thinking.

Page 18

Manoa Scenarios

Maximising difference and exploring how emerging issues can stretch the future. Wendy Schultz introduces Manoa.

Page 22

Systems Mythology Toolkit

Futures work meets Carl Jung. The IFTF's Toolkit connects systems and culture. Dylan Hendricks explains.

Page 27



The Association of Professional Futurists exists to promote the value of futures practice and of applied futures thinking. It is, at heart, a community of practitioners. And one of the benefits of this is that our members and their colleagues are also at the forefront of innovation in methods. Our newsletter, *Compass*, is a place where innovators share emerging ideas about practice. In this special anthology on methods we have brought together in one place these significant contributions on methods from *Compass*, each written or explained by someone involved in developing them.

(Cindy Frewen, Chair, APF)

Understanding methods

Where practice and theory meet, innovation often follows. Practitioners resolve difficulties in practice by re-imagining what they do, and developing new approaches. But invention on its own is not enough. To stick, it needs to be reconnected to theory. The why is as important as the what.

This is the story of many of the new and emerging methods collected in this special anthology of articles published first in the APF's members' newsletter, *Compass*. It brings together in one place material on methods published in *Compass* by APF members

and their colleagues and collaborators.

It is a strong collection. Some of these articles are the first published accounts of methods that have real value to futures practice, such as the reframing of wildcards, *VERGE*, or the Manoa scenarios method.

Some are accounts of methods that have been documented elsewhere, but in a more academic context.

But all—including the interviews—are intended to be used. These accounts are designed to inspire people to try these approaches for themselves. (Andrew Curry)

More about a new typology of wildcards

by Oliver Markley

In long-range forecasting and strategic planning, futurists often use the concept of “wild cards” to denote possible change drivers that are considered to have a low probability of occurrence, but a very high impact (often negative) if they were to occur (Petersen, 1997). An asteroid hitting the earth is a good example. Recently the term ‘black swan’ (Taleb, 2007) has come to be used in a similar way—especially in business and the popular media.

Recently (Markley, 2011a, 2011b). I demonstrated the usefulness of considering a second distinct type of wild card—one having high, rather than low probability (as seen by experts who can specify why), but low credibility for most others who don’t believe that such a thing is plausible.¹ Thus:

- **Type I Wild Card: low-probability, high-impact, high-credibility**
- **Type II Wild Card: high-probability, high-impact, low-credibility.**

Two more archetypal wild card categories are useful to distinguish as well: a Type III Wild Card, defined as being a Type II wild card that has come into enough public awareness as to engender heated dispute about its causal credibility (and derivatively, its assumed probability); and a Type IV Wild Card category for a far-out forecast that has gained general credibility about it being a highly likely event with huge impacts if current trends continue, and therefore a public policy priority.

Thus, the following additional archetypes of wild cards is proposed:

1. *Recently I discovered that a similar approach was earlier described by Van der Helm (2006), cited by Ebsan (2014).*

- **Type III Wild Card: high probability, high-impact, disputed-credibility**
- **Type IV (legitimated) Wild Card: high-probability, high-impact, high-credibility.**

The whole Global Warming hypothesis is probably the most well known contemporary example of what (for scientific thinkers at least), was originally a Type I Wild Card (i.e., there was general acceptance of the science involved, just no recognition of it becoming much of a problem).

It became a Type II Wild Card when futurists and climatologists showed that a continuation of long-range trends for fossil fuel use would likely lead to disruptively high levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide, global warming, and climate change—an hypothesis whose merit was not yet established for most scientists and was seen as too far out for concern by most non-scientists.

When industry-sponsored propaganda did what it could to discredit the science behind it, this wild card forecast clearly moved into the Type III phase as the debate heated up. Now, for most informed observers, it has attained the legitimacy of a credible, but ‘wild’ forecast with catastrophic impacts if current trends continue unabated (i.e., high probability, high impact, and high credibility).—Global warming-deniers, of course, would argue that this forecast could never reach the Type IV stage because it is simply *wrong*, never mind the evidence.

In general, the lack of credibility that characterizes a Type II Wild Card can

This is an expanded version of “A New Typology of Wildcards” in the APF’s Future of Futures digital publication edited by Andrew Curry, which was based on a Type II Wild Card pilot test reported in Q4 of the APF Compass (Markley, 2009). John Petersen was an early co-author of this work.

stem from any of at least seven sources:

- **Passive Disbelief** (a.k.a. Ignorance)—wherein a given wild card isn’t seen as credible more or less simply due to a lack of knowledge, rather than from some competing point of view.
- **Discounting** (a.k.a. denial)—where the relevant knowledge is simply ignored or repressed.
- **Active Disbelief**—where the occurrence of the given wild card is asserted to be impossible, due to it contradicting other beliefs held dear (which, in turn, can result from establishment positions that involve disinformation and/or censorship).
- **Disinformation**—where the relevant knowledge about the wild card has been convincingly camouflaged by propagandistic distortion.
- **Taboo**—where there is an “Elephant in the Living Room” that will severely undermine your legitimacy as a credible actor if you even talk publicly about the given wild card being credible.
- **Censorship**—where the relevant knowledge is suppressed by prevailing authorities in power over public policy and/or the mass media.
- **Disrepute**—where the dubious reputation of the “prophet” prevents a credible hearing.

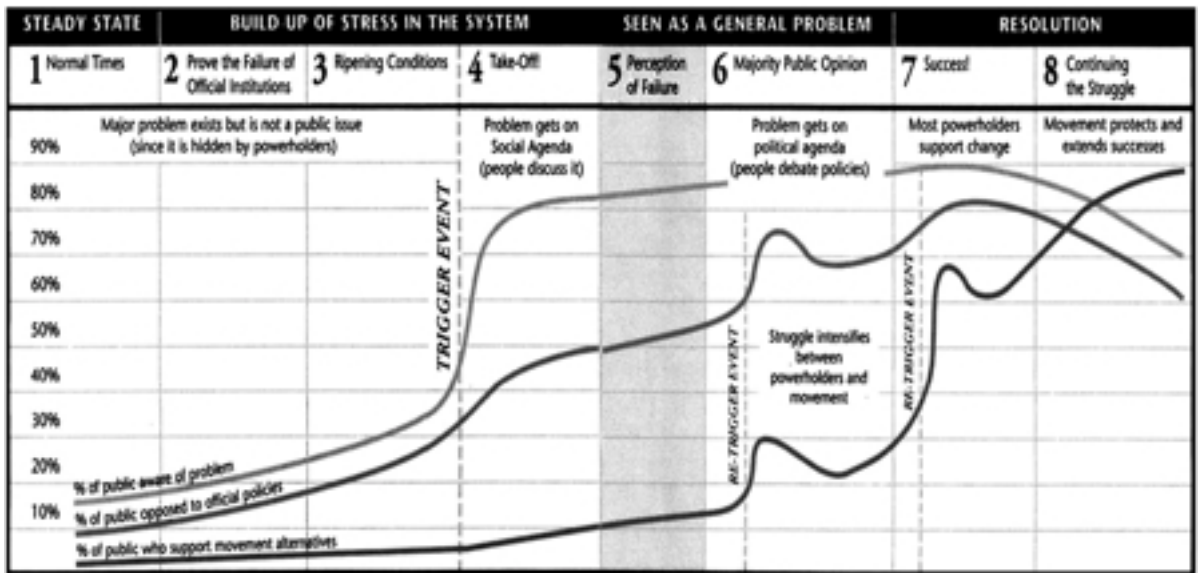
At least one Type II wild card illustrating each of these sources is presented in Table 1 of “A new methodology for anticipating STEEP surprises” (Markley, 2011a).

A social change application

It should be emphasized that the methodological significance of this approach is less about the typological categories than about their importance in guiding the monitoring of shifts in the credibility of a given wildcard forecast by thought leaders in science, the media and activist communities, and derivatively politicians. To greatly oversimplify, when the evolution of a given Type II wild card achieves Type IV status, it becomes something that conventional wisdom would suggest that politicians must act on. But “realpolitik” can dictate otherwise, as is currently the case in the U.S.A., where large self-serving lobbying contributions by global warming deniers have prevented politicians from taking effective action on climate change.

By way of illustrating how the above ideas could be applied to the task of crowd-sourcing pro-social change, consider the Movement Action Plan (MAP) of the book *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements* (Moyer et al. 2001). As shown by the three lines graphing public perception in Figure 1,

Figure 1. Winning the Public Three Ways Across Eight Stages of Social Change



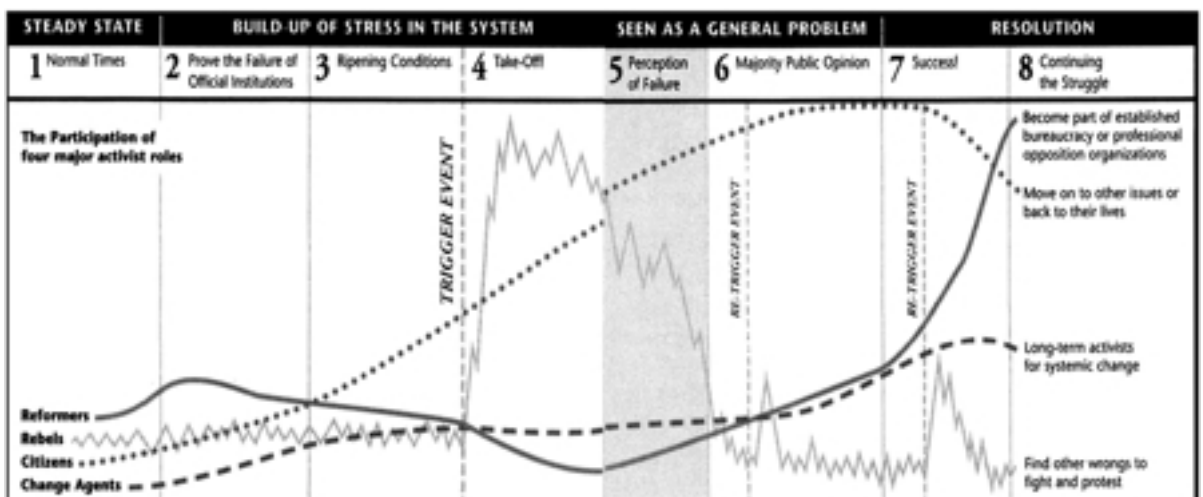
Source: Figure 2 in *Democracy Now: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements* (Moyer, et al., 2001), created by Tom Atlee.

the shift in percentages of the public holding various perceptions on the issue is very much like that codified into the four-level wild card typology. “Take-off!” in Stage 4 is where things shift from Type II to Type III in the wild card typology defined above. Figure 2, below, displays four key roles of social change movement in relation to the eight stages of social movements: reformers, rebels, citizens and change agents—each of which have specific definitions given on p. 22ff of Moyer et al. (2001).

As regards the detection/tracking of specific wild cards as they emerge from Type II to Type IV across the eight stages portrayed above, it seems evident that a key element to monitor is differential stakeholder perceptions of credibility, and how these change over time. Three categories of thought leaders are proposed as being particularly informative in this regard:

- **Professional Futurists** (particularly those who promulgate their views in ways that are highly visible and relatively credible to both

Figure 2. The four roles in relation to the eight stages.



Source: Figure 3 in *Democracy Now: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements*, By Bill Moyer, et al. (2001), created by Tom Atlee. Note that the “citizen” curve should be continuous.

establishment opinion leaders and citizen activists)

- **Forward-looking Citizen Activists** and their opinion leaders (leading activist authors, bloggers, etc.)
- **Establishment Opinion Leaders** (pundits, c-level media executives, etc.).

Although perhaps a bit too detailed for some applications, a robust way to do this type issue monitoring would be to do periodic surveys of these three stakeholder types about their views of a given wild card issue on each of the following dimensions:

- a) Time Horizon (in which it is seen as likely to happen)
- b) Probability of Occurrence (your personal view, or your estimate of a truly knowledgeable expert's view)
- c) Likely Range of Impacts (High Magnitude is Assumed)
- d) Credibility of Forecast for You and/or other Futurists
- e) Estimated Credibility for Establishment Opinion Leaders
- f) Estimated Credibility for Forward-Looking Citizen Activists
- g) Causal Category Most Responsible for Low Credibility

Oliver Markley is Professor Emeritus and formerly Chair of the graduate program in Studies of the Future at the University of Houston-Clear Lake (UHCL), and Principal of Inward Bound and ImaginalVisioning.com. Before UHCL, he was a principal investigator and consultant with the Management and Social Systems Group at Stanford Research Institute (now SRI International).

h) Importance of this wild card (for a balanced view of alternative futures).

You can explore a free online survey frame demonstrating how this approach could be implemented with a data set such as the [APF pilot experiment](#).

A further application is demonstrated in “Aspirational Guidance for Wiser Futures” (Markley, 2015) where a set of Type II Wild Card Scenarios is presented that include citation of numerous specific expert writings supporting the credibility of each Type II Wildcard scenario. The themes of these scenarios are:

- **VUCA**:² A present trends extended (PTE) future involving continued technological progress and economic inequality but not regime change.
- **STEEP Disintegration**: A worst-case future beyond hard landing in which “ego-centric” protectionism prevents systemic recovery before civilizational collapse.
- **Reformative Recovery**: Aspirational open-source “eco-centric” rebuilding from a hard landing future in which a critical mass of open-source thought-leaders facilitate a crowd-sourced “regime reformation” leading toward eco-centrally sustainable human communities soon enough to prevent civilizational collapse.
- **Proactive Transformation**: A best-case, audaciously aspirational soft landing future involving pre-megacrisis emergence of open-sourced regimes based on eco-centric worldviews, institutions and technologies, leading toward further evolution of socio-spiritual maturity. ◀

2. VUCA is an acronym for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous.

References

- Ehsan, M. (2014), “Wild cards applications in futures studies”, *International Journal of Modern Management & Foresight*, Vol. 1 No. 8, pp. 255-263.
- Markley, O. (2009), Type II wild cards: Results of an APF pilot experiment in wild card scanning, *APF Compass*, Q4 (2009) 8-17.
- Markley, O. (2011a), “[A new methodology for anticipating STEEP surprises](#)”, *Technology Forecasting & Social Change*, Vol. 78 No. 6, pp. 1079-1097.
- Markley, O. (2011b), “[Research and action toward the upside of down](#)”, *Journal of Futures Studies*, Vol. 15 No. 3.
- Markley, O. (2015), “Aspirational Guidance for Wiser Futures”, *Foresight* (Vol. 17 No. 1 pp. 1-34). [Expanded preprint](#).
- Moyer, B., J. McAllister, M. Finley, S. Soifer, *Doing democracy: the MAP model for organizing social movements*, New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC, 2001.
- Petersen, J. (1997), *Out of the Blue: Wild Cards and Other Big Future Surprises: How to Anticipate and Respond to Profound Change*, Arlington Institute, Arlington, VA.
- Taleb, N. (2007), *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, Random House, New York, NY.
- Van der Helm, R. (2006), “Towards a clarification of probability, possibility and plausibility: how semantics could help futures practice to improve”, *Foresight*, Vol. 8 No. 3, pp. 17-27.