

Wildcards –
Signals from a future near you

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A Preview of a Future near you

Nestled snugly into the high backed leather chair, you are only marginally aware of the thousands of people around you, their faces oddly lit by the light shining from the screen. The sounds echoing from the Dolby THX™ surround sound system only helps to draw you deeper, ever deeper into the flickering images playing out before your eyes. You are aware of your own heartbeat increasing its tempo, ‘tha-thump’ ‘tha-thump’ ‘tha-thump’ ‘tha-thump’ ‘tha-thump’ and your field of vision shrinks to notice only the film playing in front of you.

On the screen, from within a large fluffy grey cloud, two massive hands appear, shuffling a deck of strange, unfamiliar speckled-backed cards. As the light catches each speckled flash your pulse kicks up a notch and now you are mesmerised, unable to focus on anything but the screen and those cards.

Suddenly without warning, the hands toss the pack into the air and you snatch a breath. Your focus now is so intent that the film appears to move in double-slow time. As you watch the floating, tumbling, spinning deck in ‘slo-mo’, your attention is drawn to one of the cards as it drifts in space – back, face, back, face, back, face, incomplete glimpses, it tumbles falling ever surely to the ground.

Unconsciously you already know what will be on the face of that card, your own Wildcard, and a jolt of adrenalin surges through your body activating your ‘fight or flight’ instinct. Somewhere in the distance you hear a alarm ringing as your sub-conscious begins to grapple with something that was inconceivable only moments before –

But the question is, do you wake up before the alarm or do you try to snooze through it?

Overview

The intent of this paper is to provide greater insight to the concept of Wildcards, assess how they may benefit the foresight practitioner, to identify their limitations as a foresight tool and to suggest an enhanced process for their use.

I’ll also assess Wildcards alongside a number of other foresight processes to determine if they can be used in conjunction with, as part of or separate from those tools & methods. Should the reader desire a fuller understanding of other foresight tools mentioned, I suggest they access any of the literature available reviewing the particular foresight tool or method.

Where I use the term ‘Client(s)’ the reader may also take that to include them.

Introduction –

“...sleepwalking into the new century” (1)

Whilst sleepwalking is not of itself a dangerous activity, choosing to adopt a similar modus operandi with regard to ones own future is fraught with peril. Wildcards, and specifically *thinking about* nominated Wildcards and *potential actions* to deal with them, may provide a useful wake up call.

People familiar with the card game ‘Poker’ or familiar with Information Technology software design have a particular understanding of what the term ‘Wildcard’ means.

In the card game 'Poker', particular card types may be nominated as being 'wild'. This simply refers to the nominated card as being able to take on any particular format as deemed advantageous to the player holding the card. The nominated Wildcard is given a degree of flexibility not available to other cards or seen in normal play. Wildcards in this sense are something that can be controlled and either 'good' for you and 'bad' for someone else or 'bad' for you and 'good' for someone else.

In IT Software design, a 'Wildcard' refers to any character that can replace another when designing within the software, a particular instruction for what the software should do. Most often the IT 'Wildcard' is used to enable a 'search' function when the software user provided insufficient information. The software can then interpret the instruction in a number of ways and find a near match or most appropriate matches. Wildcards in this sense are a very useful tool.

There is also a third reference that is becoming more common in everyday (English) language that suggests an inherent understanding of 'Wildcard' – "She's a bit of a Wildcard" may be used in the same way as someone saying, "He's a bit of a loose cannon". The standard inference in these instances is that a person has a large degree of unpredictability. Further the connotations often added to the unpredictability are of a 'negative' or 'unwelcome' nature.

For the futurist, (or anyone wanting a more thorough understanding of the various futures methods), the term 'Wildcard' is likely to be (come) an often cited, used and recognisable tool designed to enhance the depth at which thinking about the future occurs. The foresight practitioner understands that as a 'futures tool' a Wildcard draws on aspects of each of the aforementioned Wildcards in that they are not 'seen in normal play', they produce a result despite a lack of sufficient information being available and finally, have a large degree of unpredictability.

What is a Wildcard?

For a label that is becoming part of every day (English) language, there is little information available to help a foresight practitioner make an informed decision about what Wildcards are. In regards to foresight, the definition that seems to have the greatest clarity is -

'Low Probability, High Impact Events that happen quickly' (2)

This key definition from John Petersen at The Arlington Institute, forms a basis for his book 'Out of the Blue - How to Anticipate Big Future Surprises' (3) and appears to be fundamental to the consulting work of The Arlington Institute. Petersen's simplified definition is 'Big Surprises' (4)

He provides three further points to identify what could be considered a Wildcard. The 'event' (5)

- Has a direct impact on the human condition
- Has broad, large, important and sometimes fundamental implications
- Moves too fast for the whole of the system to adjust to the shock

If you take a moment to consider these three points along with the initial definition of 'Low Probability, High Impact...' you may readily identify a number of things that you consider would meet the listed criteria, and therefore qualify as a 'Wildcard'. Any event that is completely unexpected and a major shock to the system could be another interpretation that encapsulates the essence of a Wildcard.

An asteroid colliding with earth has been a recent theme in science fiction movies and would certainly qualify as a Wildcard event. Alien contact may rate highly for some as a Wildcard. Major earthquakes or cyclones (depending on where they occur) could well meet the criteria. And as you begin thinking about the nominated criteria, you may be able to list a dozen or more events that were they to occur, would be defined as Wildcards. But why take the time to consider them at all? Surely these events have no bearing on how we plan for, help create and adapt to, the future?

Petersen provides three rules about anticipating with Wildcards - (6)

1. 'If you don't think about a Wildcard before it happens, all of the value of thinking about it is lost'.

In layman's terms we can safely refer to this approach to a Wildcard as trying to shut the gate after the horse has bolted.

2. 'Accessing and understanding information is key'

In layman's terms, 'if you don't know, find someone who does'. Experts in a broad array of fields and those on the perimeter of the mainstream can be a vital information resource for the provision, gathering and interpretation of data. As Sandy Teagle identified – “When the best information is available, a new understanding of the potential problem is much more likely to suggest a new direction of action.” (7)

3. 'Extraordinary events will require extraordinary approaches'

Petersen's own words here provide a succinct understanding of the challenge – “...the most commonly used tools – political, economic and military, to name a few – will not be equal to the task.” (8)

Another concept worthy of mention is by Jim Dator at the University of Hawaii. I perceive Jim Dator's concept of 'The Tsunamis of Change' (9) as another appropriate means of interpreting potential Wildcards in particular given the lack of 'readiness Dator alludes to. Seen through Dator's lens we identify an event whose upswing is so large, sudden and widespread that there is little that can be done to change or stop it. In Dator's own words - “...I see the future approaching us in the form of huge tsunamis for which we are wholly unprepared as a society and largely unprepared individually.”

In either case what can be readily accepted is that a Wildcard event is likely to be sudden, have a major affect on anyone (or thing) and prior to its 'arrival' be considered improbable in the light of current thinking paradigms, resulting in our unpreparedness for their impact. Wildcards could be positive or negative though a common use of Wildcards is to improve risk management and as such the 'what if (negative event)?' is more widespread.

Why use Wildcards?

According to the Institute for the Future, 'the point of Wildcards is not to predict an outcome but to expand peripheral vision regarding the total range of possibilities, offer a larger context with which to consider mainstream forecasts, and prepare for surprises in the event that they do come to pass'. (10)

It would seem that the most common purpose for the use of Wildcards is within scenario development and to enable people to consider alternatives beyond the framework of their current thinking. It should be noted that Wildcards are not a method or process of themselves. Instead they are a tool that adds to the method or process being used and, in my view, have 3 main functions when introduced to the thinking process –

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1. To 'Stretch' the thinking paradigm
2. To 'Expand' the thinking paradigm
3. To 'Crack' the thinking paradigm

Each of these three functions provides the foresight practitioner with a varying degree of 'leverage' to enhance the existing paradigm of a person's approach to thinking about the future.

The paradigm 'Stretch' -

In this process, the introduction of a Wildcard is used to stretch the thinking beyond the current paradigm in an attempt to enable the consideration of alternative points of views. When faced with a particularly rigid thinking process, the foresight practitioner may need to provide their client with an idea that will enable their client to at least consider alternative perspectives.

The Wildcard used to 'Stretch' is unlikely to lead to any permanent or long-term change in the client's thinking processes. It is probable that when introduced, the Wildcard will be dismissed as unworthy of consideration, too far fetched to be considered an important factor in the thinking process. *In fact it will be dismissed for the very reason it fits part of the definition of being a Wildcard – It is a Low Probability event.* If the client chooses to dismiss out of hand, the worthiness of the Wildcard's place in the thinking processes that is their right. However it is incumbent upon the foresight practitioner to do whatever they can to enable their client to expand the range of views of the potential futures available to them.

Any foresight practitioner worth their salt will insist (at least to themselves) that part of their role is to enable their client to understand that in Richard Slaughter's words "...foresight is an active principal which can supply part of the motivation to initiate a series of adaptive changes. Without these insights there is little, short of direct, crude experience, to initiate system wide change." (11)

That the client has a rigid view of the future increases the worthiness of Wildcards being introduced to the foresight process. The resultant 'stretch' may not dramatically change the client's consideration of forward views and yet may have enough influence to have the client consider additional steps or seek further information, even if only to confirm their own set views of the future. It is at this point that a small window of opportunity has been created for the client to expand their foresight thinking.

The paradigm 'Expand' -

A Wildcard may be introduced in order to 'Expand' the thinking process. This differs considerably from the 'Stretch'. Where as no permanent change to a client's thinking process was made during a 'Stretch', using a Wildcard to expand a client's thinking processes does lead to an acceptance for the need to consider a wider range of alternatives and perspectives.

Here the change is likely to be immediate, BUT there is no guarantee of 'permanency'. Whilst the foresight practitioner is undertaking a foresight process with the client, an expanded range of alternatives is likely to be considered and introducing Wildcards will be a beneficial and essential element of the foresight process. Wildcard introduction will lead to a much wider acceptance of alternative views, broader number of factors added to the melting pot of ideas and possible changes in time frames for events unfolding. Unfortunately, once the foresight activities are completed and the foresight practitioner has departed (or returned to their permanent roles) it is quite possible that the

ingrained thinking paradigms again takeover. The key then is to encourage your client to maintain their expanded paradigm by encouraging them to look wider and more deeply at future possibilities.

Using a Wildcard to 'Expand' will lead to an immediate take up of the consideration of additional or alternative forward views however an ongoing enhancement of a client's foresight capacity or Foresight Quotient (FtQ) ⁽¹²⁾ may rely on the presence of the foresight practitioner. For the foresight practitioner, designing a Wildcard that expands the client's perspectives will provide an essentially framework that will enable many other foresight methods and tools to be leveraged beneficially.

The paradigm 'Crack' -

Here the introduction of a Wildcard has one immediate result – the breakdown of the thinking paradigm being used by the client and the initiation of a search for a new one.

It is in this stage that the Wildcard as a concept provides the most dramatic benefit. It is also the process that hands to the foresight practitioner, the greatest level of responsibility and presents them with the highest level of danger when dealing with a client. The result is a likely change in your client's thinking and one that will be long lasting, and as such the practitioner must fulfil their obligation by assisting their clients to sort through simultaneously confronting & exciting information.

Referring back to our initial quote that the majority of people are 'sleepwalking into the future', what we can readily accept is that the great majority of people are also comfortable with how they approach the future. For the majority, whether consciously or unconsciously, not thinking about the future in any deep and meaningful way actually provides a sense of comfort, a reliance on the saying 'What you don't know can't hurt you'.

Introducing a Wildcard in order to 'crack' your client's 'futures thinking' paradigm is going to set the alarm bells ringing. You would want to be both willing and skilful enough to be able to handle the potential chaos of waking your client up to a pending reality they may not have wanted to consider. This is the realm of 'real' Wildcard event. Commonly it will be in the form of some sort of weather phenomenon resulting in both infrastructure damage and bodily harm.

It may be difficult to consider a Wildcard that you could introduce that would lead to such a dramatic and sudden shift in the thinking of your client. Where their view(s) of the world are changed so suddenly and without warning, that they greet the Wildcard with a combination of disbelief, anger and despair, or even excitement, and a willingness to accept possible alternatives. Later in this paper I provide a tool that helps the foresight practitioner see that this is possible.

Wildcards and Vulnerability – The Law of Requisite Variety

The Law of Requisite Variety states that within any given system, the component with the greatest adaptability to, and reliant for, other components of a system, controls that system ⁽¹³⁾. In other words, the component that is relied upon by the majority of other components for them to be able to perform their roles becomes the most critical component for that system. The Law of Requisite Variety evolved from the electronics field where closed systems, and variety of functions of a component are critical aspects of identifying the 'core' parts critical to the success of the system.

So the more reliant a system is on a single component to be able to function, the more likely that it will be open to impact from a Wildcard incident and therefore, the more vulnerable that system.

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If we take the example of the Internet we can easily understand how the Law of Requisite Variety works. The Internet is a global structure made up of millions of separate components, from individual users and their desktop computers, through to cables in the ground, telecommunication companies, satellites and software. These, along with a myriad of other components, form the World Wide Web. In this instance, what component has the most requisite variety? Which one of the components within the system is relied upon by a majority of other components within the system?

If an event occurred that removed from the system, all of the satellite links, would the system cease to function? Whilst an initial nightmare for some, the answer is No, as the vast network of underground cables and copper wire connections would mean that the system would continue. Would it be a lot more cumbersome? Certainly, but the system could still continue.

Software viruses have created a temporary setback but nothing lasting, as the Y2K 'bug' clearly attested. Individual computer crashes make no impact at all and an IT or a Telecommunications company going under would create a blip but the slack would soon be picked up. What component then could be nominated as having the most requisite variety for the system known as the World Wide Web? How about 'electricity' as a component with requisite variety? Satellites rely upon electricity, as do the software programmes, individual computers, networking computers, home users and so on. For a Wildcard to impact upon the World Wide Web, it would probably need to impact upon the electricity sources that enable the majority of components within the Internet system to function.

What about a more 'human' example? Can the Law of Requisite Variety work on a human system?

Company XYZ has 7 departments (components). The passion of the business is its founder. She is the driving force, the motivator and the go-getter. She brings in the clients, delivers the training programmes, sells the products and is the known 'face' of the company. The other employees perform the functions of 'Warehouse management', 'Reception', 'Accounting', 'Administration', 'Research & Development' and 'Manufacturing'. Within this system, she is the component with the greatest requisite variety as her role is relied upon by each of the other roles within the system (company). A Wildcard event would need to remove her from the system (company) for it to no longer function. Removal of any of the other components may slow the system but would not see the system collapse.

On an even more personal level, lack of oxygen might be a Wildcard few of us could deal with.

You can see that this process has similarities regardless of the scale of the system. The more reliant the system is upon one component, the more vulnerable that system is to a Wildcard event that impacts upon that component. In the realm of Risk Management, Wildcards and Requisite Variety go hand in hand and the tool I introduce provides an effective means of improving the quality and scope of risk management assessment.

The Law of Requisite Variety is an essential fulcrum for the foresight practitioner to consider when assessing the subject of a Wildcard. When using the Reference-Impact Grid (RIG) (see below) it can provide leverage to assess an issue from various perspectives, those Wildcards that would have the greatest scope of impact. Some Wildcard events may impact across the board or hit a specific and vital component. Using the RIG literally enables organisations to begin to think about more effective strategic choices and development of effective contingencies plans.

What types of Wildcards are useful?

The main source for locating a quality collection of Wildcards to consider is John Petersen's 'Out of the Blue – How to Anticipate Big Future Surprises' (14)

This is not a critique of the book and I recommend that foresight practitioners obtain a copy in order to understand how Petersen moves through the process of identifying and then rating, a variety of nominated 'Wildcards'. He provides us with six Wildcard categories - Earth & Sky, Biomedical Developments, Geopolitical & Sociological Changes, Technology & Infrastructure upheaval, Surprise Attack, and Spiritual & Paranormal. Their potential influence is determined by a range of factors that determine what areas of 'life' are most likely to be affected.

The success of this collection lies in the fact that someone has actually undertaken the 'leg work' to provide a collection of potential Wildcards that can be used during a foresight process.

Given the audience for whom the book appears to be written and from what worldview, one may consider that on reading the book, Wildcards may be summarised as having **one or more** of the following four factors -

- a) Come from out of space
- b) Involve lots of technology
- c) Be considered 'Global' in scale
- d) Are Wildcards because they will impact in particular, North America and therein, the world.

Jim Dator's Tsunamis of Change also contain a similar theme in that the waves of influence are large and widespread impacting many people simultaneously though there is less of the 'all American' flavour in Dator's writings on the subject. (15)

And therein lays the main limitation in using Wildcards as they are presented in their existing format. One of the questions that often goes unasked and therefore unanswered by the foresight practitioner, is the following - 'This event is considered a Wildcard for whom?' The event you determine to be a worthy Wildcard may provide no benefit to your foresight process if it fails, at some level, to have a degree of relevance to your client.

A Wildcard you introduce may be considered too far-fetched to engage your client. It may be deemed to have an impact on a worldview that does not exist for your client; or may seem to describe an event on so large a scale, that future thought on any subject is deemed by your client to be worthless due to their inability to be able to influence the outcome.

As a result, your client may **disengage** from the foresight process due to insufficient pre existing information about the Wildcard. They may **dismiss** the process as unworthy as the Wildcard fails to have relevance to your client's existing worldview or they may **derail** the process due to their belief that they personally can no longer play an active role to influence their future.

In other words if your client disengages, dismisses or derails the foresight process, then you have failed the LUV principle – Legitimacy, Urgency & Viability (16). As part of the process you must be able to show your client that the actions you propose are legitimate based on available information; that the need to take action NOW rather than later is imperative; and that your proposed course of action has a realistic chance of success. Do that and you will LUV your client!

What will be of great benefit to you as a Foresight Practitioner will be to make the Wildcards more relevant to your client. As your client becomes comfortable with their thinking paradigm being challenged, it would be possible then to ‘ramp up’ the extent to which a Wildcard has more reach in its Scope of Impact, thereby requiring a more expansive forward view.

As a means to improve the use of Wildcards in a foresight process, I have created the following tool dubbed the ‘Reference-Impact Grid’⁽¹⁷⁾. The Reference-Impact Grid can be used to assess just about any particular topic and provides a quick and effective way to consider multiple perspectives and multiple outcomes. In order to use the grid, all the foresight practitioner needs to do is consider the topic at hand, select a ‘Frame of Reference’ and then identify the event (or variety of events) most likely to be considered significant at each stage of the ‘Scope of Impact’.

By using the Reference-Impact Grid it is possible to identify that what may be considered to be a Global Wildcard by some worldviews is in fact nothing more than a Trans National event at best.

Further it is possible that the Scope of Influence identifies that whilst a Wildcard has influence in some worldviews at a Global level, the scope of impact DOES NOT affect people at a personal level. An example of this may be the complete breakdown of the Internet. Whilst millions would be affected globally and the financial considerations immense, the loss of personal data enormous and so on, those living within the Amazonian jungle or parts of Africa, Asia and the Pacific are unlikely to be touched yet alone be aware of such an event.

This then provides the next key advantage of the Reference-Impact Grid. The foresight practitioner can nominate the worldview from which they are considering the nominated event or information, and then ask, “From within this worldview, what would be considered a global perspective? Or a local view?” The next step is to determine the Scope of Impact for the nominated event - ‘Who’ & ‘How far’?

Frame of Reference Worldview of:

| | | | | | | |
|--------|---------------|-------|----------|---------------|---------------|--------|
| ↑ ↓ | Global | | | | | |
| | International | | | | | |
| | Transnational | | | | | |
| | National | | | | | |
| | Local | | | | | |
| | Personal | | | | | |
| | Personal | Local | National | Transnational | International | Global |

←————— Scope of Impact —————→

Table 1

What the grid provides are six ‘Frame of Reference’ fields from personal through to global. These are the perspectives from which the ‘event’ or information shall be considered or in other words ‘where a bouts or on what scale is this event playing out?’ Or ‘where is the event physically occurring?’ Then there are six corresponding ‘Scope of Impact’ fields. These fields provide a ‘measurement’ of the extent to which the considered event has a sphere of influence. It could be possible to include additional classifications such as ‘trans global’ or even ‘regional’ or ‘rural’ and I suggest that unless

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there is a specific requirement to include these in your foresight process, you keep the grid as simplified as possible. Finally a nominated Worldview perspective can be chosen and is used to remind us that we bring certain biases to our views.

In Table 2 below, I have suggested potential Wildcards, the worldview from which these may be considered as being a Wildcard and then identified the Scope of Impact (the degree and span of influence) of the nominated event. The list is not conclusive by any means.

You will have the ability to create your own Wildcards and use them with your clients to enhance the foresight process. When using the Reference-Impact Grid you may find it easier to select just one potential Wildcard and complete the grid as fully as possible to assess its full scope from the wide perspectives available.

Frame of Reference

Worldview of: 'Western' Society

| | | | | | | |
|---------------|---|--|--|--|--|------------------------------------|
| Global | | | | Communications Satellites breakdown | Shut down of Internet | Major asteroid impact |
| International | Food & energy import embargoes | | | | Global war hostilities | US defaults on overseas debt |
| Transnational | Food shortage | | International trade sanctions | Sudden War hostilities/ damming of 'shared' rivers | Terrorism cells target western countries | |
| National | | Telecommunications system breakdown | Water shortage/ Pollution disaster/ disease epidemic | Food disease imports/exports | End of cross border hostilities | Threat to detonate nuclear weapons |
| Local | School shootings/ Company opens new factory | Major chemical spill | Natural disaster | | | |
| Personal | Winning a lottery/ sudden redundancy | Bus crash at local school/ big company opens new factory | Natural Disaster | Natural disaster/ disease epidemic | Disease epidemic/ Food shortage | Food shortage |
| | Personal | Local | National | Transnational | International | Global |

← Scope of Impact →

Table 2

The grid above lists a series of possibilities. At a quick glance it is easy to recognise that a Wildcard at a personal level is unlikely to have an impact at a Global level and the reverse is also a possibility. **However many of the Wildcards listed above would quite easily expand beyond the scope listed above to include any number of the preceding and following Scope of Impact fields.**

We must remember that the benefit of using Wildcards in a foresight process is to ‘stretch’, ‘expand’ or ‘crack’ the existing thinking paradigm to enable the consideration of alternatives. When we also consider making the nominated Wildcard more relevant for the client, we improve the chances by which there will be an acceptance of a need for the thinking process to adjust and hopefully move the thinking process from a ‘Stretch’ to at the least ‘Expand’.

‘A Wildcard for Whom?’ – The Significance of the ‘Worldview’ Perspective

The RIG provides a number of leverage points that enable a foresight practitioner to ‘stretch’ ‘expand’ or ‘crack’ their client’s thinking paradigms.

By bringing to the conscious awareness the understanding that Wildcards can have a range of impact from the Personal through to the Global, we begin to highlight the breadth and depth of the potential impact of any chosen Wildcard event.

The degree of openness and understanding of your client in regards to factors of influence that they may both contribute to and be affected by, will in all likelihood highlight how far up the left hand side of the RIG their initial starting point will be found. For practitioners then the approach is straight forward – if you have a client with limited understanding of their place in the world, the impact of their choices and the various factors that contribute to their ‘state of being’, you’d be best placed to start with Wildcards that impact no broader than the ‘National’ level. Clients with Trans-national or Global operations might better understand impacts at that scale and will be more comfortable with Wildcards targeted at that level of breadth. Note however that they may have lost site of the notion of ‘Personal’ Wildcards and these could be useful ways to introduce a ‘stretch’ ‘expand’ or ‘crack’.

But the RIG goes one step further by asking the user to nominate the dominant ‘worldview’ from which they wish to assess a potential Wildcard event. This step alone might be met with a question “what do you mean, ‘worldview’?” It is at this point that we enable the client to become aware of the potential biases that they inherently hold to in their assessment and decision making process.

For instance ‘White Anglo Saxon’ worldviews are typically quite different from those of the ‘Eastern Hindu’ worldview. Go one step further and add ‘male’ to the worldview modifier and we discover that a ‘white Anglo Saxon male’ could well have a very different perspective to a ‘white Anglo Saxon female’. Imagine then the possibilities when we use the RIG to design Wildcards from within different worldviews that might compare a ‘White Anglo Saxon Male’ to that of a ‘Middle Eastern Muslim Female’. The process can also include ‘Economic Rationalist’ worldviews or ‘Agrarian Community’ worldviews. In fact just about any perspective can be considered and in so doing, biases, perceptual filters, unquestioned assumptions and unrealistic expectations are likely to be brought into conscious awareness. From within this expanded awareness, much richer assessments of potential Wildcards and coping strategies are likely to emerge and a more qualitative foresight process is thus created.

By way of illustration, the following is an example of a Personal and Local Scope of Impact Wildcard that I used with a client. ⁽¹⁸⁾ The owner of the business had hired me to determine how to improve the working processes of the business having been unsuccessful on two previous occasions to create an internal thinking ‘shift’ for all staff. Initial research indicated that the established thinking was no longer assisting the business to achieve its aims and that possibility for change was not viable without a major shift in the openness to potential for change.

Creating a new Strategic Plan would not have been successful if the behaviours supporting the plan were those that already existed. What was required from the client's point of view was the opportunity for new ideas to be considered. To enable that process I created my very own Wildcard and used the worldview of 'The Consultant' which forced everyone outside of their own worldviews. Having taken that position I then targeted a Local Wildcard directly at the 'Personal' and 'Local' scope of impact zones as this is what would best match the present thinking of the staff.

I advised the staff that having assessed how the business was performing, my initial advice to the business owner was to sack everyone and start again. This 'impact' event was sudden and unexpected. I then advised the staff that the suggestion was 'on hold' and that I had been asked to find a way to improve the business whilst retaining all staff. This led to a 'cracking' of the existing thinking paradigm and enabled us to move forward to design processes to improve the business.

In the end about 8% of the then current workforce left voluntary and were replaced by others more in tune to the overall aims of the business. What was needed was a Wildcard that was sudden, required a major shift in thinking about possibilities for the future, and was relevant at a personal level. Having them consider 'an asteroid impact hitting your business' would have had little relevance or value.

Selecting the right level and right type of Wildcard improves the chances of enhancing the foresight process. It can take some skill and requires experience and the Reference-Impact Grid will assist practitioners in the appropriate selection of relevant Wildcards for their clients. For those who feel that 'big' Wildcard events are beyond the scope of their clients, the following may assist.

Discontinuities as Wildcard Events

Another development in making Wildcards more useful as a planning and strategy development tool is to identify the difference and links between a Wildcard and a Discontinuity.

Whilst we might consider Wildcard events, we will typically receive no advanced warning of the event (sufficient time to adequately prepare) and therefore impacts are sudden and widespread. As such, the end result of a Wildcard is likely to be a dramatic change in life as we know it.

Typically Discontinuities are events that are also going to change 'life as we know it'. Even though Wildcards and Discontinuities share the same end destination (paradigm changing) the journey in how their impact unfolds shares a different morphology and understanding the differences provides valuable clues in how to utilise Wildcards and Discontinuities in strategic decision making.

I suggest that unlike Wildcard events, Discontinuities CAN be anticipated and can be seen emerging and that like Dator's 'Tsunamis of Change' represent significant shifts away from the present paradigmatic approach, to one new more or less desirable paradigm. Because we can see the emergence of Discontinuities we do have a greater ability to prepare for them, adapt our approach or attempt to change course if required. The issue of Global Warming could be seen as an example of a Discontinuity for we can see the change occurring, accept that its impact will be significant and lead to a dramatic change in life as we know it. The reader will no doubt be able to identify other examples of Discontinuities. The link between Wildcards and Discontinuities can be more deeply positioned (than just via the notion of paradigmatic change) through what I refer to as a 'Cascading Discontinuity set'.

The Cascading Discontinuity Set

Because Discontinuities can be anticipated and can be seen emerging we have greater opportunity to prepare, unlike Wildcard events that land on our doorstep unannounced. The critical difference then is 'degree of warning'. The idea of Cascading Discontinuity Sets (CD sets) is what builds the bridge between the totally unexpected Wildcard event and the more readily anticipated Discontinuity.

CD sets are groups of high impact events that merge together to form a larger more significant impact event. The vital thing to understand with CD sets is that if you can identify and begin to prepare for a series of Discontinuities you will always have time to 'move to safer ground'. The flip side of the coin is that if you haven't been paying attention, CD sets may turn into a Wildcard event for you!

Using the RIG below we can begin to see that as localised high impact events (not traditionally viewed as Wildcard events) begin to merge they form a Cascading Discontinuity set. Here we again see the importance of understanding the idea of 'Worldview of...' in the top right hand corner of the RIG.

Taking the Shell Scenarios of the 1970s as the example, the RIG shows some of the high impact but potentially random events occurring. Each event represents a Discontinuity and depending on the lens through which you choose to view the world, these events will be a collection of independent Discontinuities or in fact form a CD set. For Royal Dutch Shell, the random events morphed into a Cascading Discontinuity set which they were able to prepare for through more effective strategy development. However for other oil companies (whose worldviews blinded them to the potential for change), the CD set turned out to be a far more damaging Wildcard event of which many had little preparedness to deal with. For Shell and other oil companies, the events were representative of the same end state – life as they knew it was changed for ever. The difference – Shell's awareness meant they had time to prepare and then take action.

Worldview of: Royal Dutch Shell

| | | | | | | |
|---------------------------|---------------|--|-----------------------|----------------|--------------------|---------------|
| Frame of Reference | | | | | | |
| ↑ | Global | | | | | |
| | International | | | | | |
| | Transnational | Arab states forming closer relationships | | | | |
| ↓ | National | | Higher demand for oil | | Lower Oil Supplies | |
| | Local | | | Yom Kippur war | | |
| | Personal | | | | | |
| | | Personal | Local | National | Transnational | International |
| | | | | | | Global |
| | | ← Scope of Impact → | | | | |

Table 3

The link between Wildcards and Discontinuities is established through the idea of a CD set. Whilst all Wildcard events are likely to be Discontinuities, Discontinuities need not be Wildcard events. Practitioners faced with disbelieving or cynical clients may be able to lead their client to consider much broader potential futures by stepping them through smaller but high impact events that form a Cascading Discontinuity Set and then onto the idea of Wildcard events.

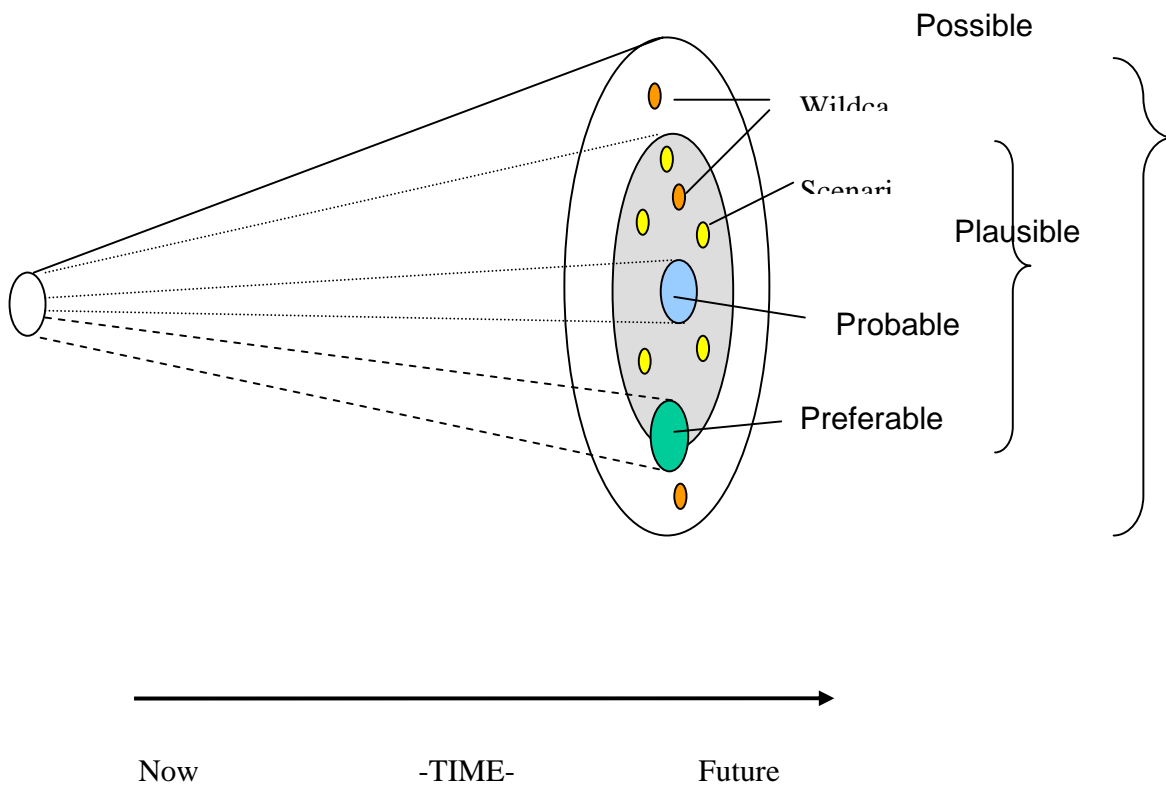
Wildcards and other foresight tools and methods

Wildcards & Scenarios -

The most popular use of Wildcards is within the development of 'Scenarios'. In this instance a scenario is a potential view of the future that your client can consider. This 'view' is often built up in the form of a story and may include pictures and points likely to be relevant to the scenario. Scenarios are not predictions of what will happen but are developed to enable the client to consider a potential future and determine what may be appropriate responses to prepare for events nominated within the 'story of the future'.

In this sense they improve a client's Foresight Quotient (FtQ) (22) by building up the ability to critically contemplate the future.

Below is an image referred to as a Futures Cone (19). You can see that there are 4 layers of futures – probable, preferable, plausible and possible.



As time expands from 'today' so too the number of potential futures increases as there exists a greater range of potential outcomes.

Wildcards often fit within the 'possible' band and occasionally within the 'plausible' band. They may be determined to have a low degree of probability and so are considered as 'worthy of consideration but unlikely' or 'plausible at best'. A Wildcard may also have such a low degree of probability that they are considered 'unlikely and not worthy of consideration' or 'possible at best'.

So within a scenario construction, the introduction of a Wildcard may assist the foresight practitioner to achieve one of the shifts in thinking, 'Stretch' 'Expand' or 'Crack'.

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Those familiar with the GIGO (20) concept in IT understand the importance of effective input of data. A scenario can only be as good as the factors that are 'entered' as the story commences and begins to take shape. GIGO stands for 'Garbage In, Garbage Out'. So a scenario built on limited inputs (possible futures considerations) cannot possibly lead to a quality scenario output or provide a positive outcome for planning and strategy development. The Wildcard may assist in ensuring that a wider number of perspectives and possibilities are considered and so help formulate a more thorough scenario development that in turn provides a more effective foresight planning tool for the organisation.

Wildcards and CLA (21)

Causal Layered Analysis is a method of assessing the depth or quality of discourse of a particular subject. There are four levels - *Litany* (the unquestioned, taken for granted statements) this is often the realm of automatic response, even glib commentary; *Social Causes* (the drivers of the process reflected by the Litany level) seen as nominated systems or processes; *Worldview* (the accepted social structures that exists within a system) such as 'Western world view' or 'AfroAmerican worldview' that may nominate a collected similarity; and finally, *Myth & Metaphor* (the deep embedded stories of the past that shape beliefs of the now & future) are the underlying belief systems that may create a 'self image' or icon embedded within the psyche.

It may be possible to consider summarising the four stages of CLA as - What we do, How we act, What we believe, and Who we are. As you develop your own list of Wildcards, CLA may provide an additional approach to help decide what level of discourse you'd like to challenge through the introduction of a Wildcard and it is probable that true Wildcards will challenge at the Worldview (What we believe) and the Myth & Metaphor Level (Who we are) levels. It is why the conscious application and use of the 'Worldview of...' label in the RIG is so critical

Wildcards and the Foresight Matrix (22)

The Foresight Matrix is a process that enables a foresight practitioner to assess the strength of an organisational Foresight Quotient (FtQ). It identifies the relative strength of the seven components that combine to determine a FtQ by identifying the strength of that component and the strength of the links between each of the components. The seven aspects that combine to make up an organisational FtQ are,

- Skills & Personnel
- Tools and Applications
- Time and Resources
- Future
- Support & Protection
- Implementation & Desire
- History and Present

Through a series of questions and observations it is possible to determine the strength of each component within the organisation. For the foresight practitioner it will not be uncommon to have clients whose main strengths lie with their ability to understand and accept the past and the present but whose abilities in assessing the future is sorely lacking. Introducing a Wildcard to their thinking and teaching your client about how to use Wildcards effectively, may build skills within the components of 'Tools & Applications, 'Future' and 'Skills & Personnel' leading to an enhanced organisational FtQ.

Wildcards and Trends

Petersen clearly defines a difference between Trends and Wildcards. Trends are ‘...shifting attitudes... (that) can be measured and projected’ (23). Whereas Wildcards are ‘big surprises’ and ‘...materialise so quickly that the underlying social systems cannot effectively respond to them’ (24).

The foresight practitioner might do well to consider the difference. Trends have a degree of acceptance and ‘legitimation’ whereas a Wildcard (usually unconsidered) might well blow a trend right out of the water with its sudden arrival.

It is unlikely that identifying a trend will lead to the consideration of the impact a Wildcard event may have on that trend. Whereas trends deal with the appearance of linear and consistent patterns of behaviour (that may be able to be extrapolated into the future), and are therein assigned a degree of predictability, Wildcards are beyond the conceptual scope of a trend analysis.

Wildcards and Environmental Scanning (ES)

Environmental Scanning is a process whereby an individual or an organisation deliberately attempts to gather as much information as is available that may be relevant to them. The scanning process is likely to be broad and extend far beyond the normal boundaries of the organisation’s operating sphere in order to expand the organisation’s breadth of knowledge.

Effective ES can play a critical role in laying a foundation for the organisation to prepare for change by ‘upskilling’ and broadening the existing bank of knowledge. By being better informed the organisation (or individual) is likely to be more effectively prepared for potential shifts in the ‘playing field’. As a process prior to the commencement of Scenario development, qualitative ES plays a vital function in addressing the GIGO trap mentioned earlier.

Though possible, it is unlikely that a Wildcard would be introduced into the Environmental Scanning process unless the quality of the scanning was too restricted and a change in thinking was required. What is more likely is that effective ES would uncover potential Wildcards worthy of consideration for the organisation and therefore enable the organisation to better prepare for a potential event.

Wildcards and Backcasting

Backcasting is a process by which a nominated (often preferred) future is selected and then a series of questions asked to identify the preceding step before reaching the nominated future. Then the preceding step before that step and so on until the process arrives back at the ‘present’.

Backcasting has similarities to a process from the cognitive science of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) called ‘Future Pacing’. In each of the processes the client is asked to assume they already have their desired outcome and imagine it at some point in the future. Future Pacing through a step called anchoring, locks the outcome of the assumed future (usually a set of preferred behavioural options) into the present behaviour of the client. Backcasting takes a desired outcome in the future and creates an identifiable step by step ‘map’ to the present, thus proposing a way forward from the present to the preferred ‘future’. High quality Backcasting may of itself lead to identification of potential Wildcard events that would need to occur to ‘trigger’ a future end state.

In each instance, a Wildcard may provide a useful tool to enable a ‘what if...’ questions to be posed. In Backcasting the question may be ‘If (Wildcard) occurred, what would that mean for your business?’ A future image may then be determined. Then the series of questions developing the preceding steps

would be asked. 'What would be the indicators at which we would know for certain that 'X' was about to occur?' 'What would be the indicators that would identify that X (-1) was a certainty?' and so on.

Wildcards and the Transformative Cycle (25)

The Transformative Cycle or T-Cycle (also known as the Change Cycle) is an ongoing 4-stage process that deals with a change of an outward appearance or inner nature. The four stages are 'Breakdown of meaning', 'Reconceptualisation', 'Conflicts & Negotiations' and 'Selective Legitimation' with this step potentially feeding into the initial step.

Each stage provides an important phase in the evolving nature of the cycle. During the Breakdown of Meaning there is a raising of awareness and openness for consideration of options. In Reconceptualisation there is an exploration of possibilities leading to the next phase, a negotiation and conflict as to the more suitable alternatives. Finally, acceptance and approval occurs when the cycle reaches the Selective Legitimation stage.

We can readily see that a Wildcard could be introduced between two stages of the T-Cycle. Legitimation of a way of knowing or paradigm, may be restricting the consideration of other potentials. Before the existing paradigm can be changed effectively, there needs to be a 'challenge' and a Wildcard may be just the thing to throw into the mix. If a Wildcard does in fact occur and has not been previously considered, it is likely that the T-Cycle would immediately move into the 'Breakdown of Meaning' phase'. As coping mechanisms come into play, options would be sought and then selected plans created and carried through, completing the cycle.

Summary

The preceding snapshots are but a handful of the vast array of methodologies and tools available to the foresight practitioner and the ways that Wildcards may be used in conjunction to, or alongside the chosen methodology. Wildcards are the 'Court Jesters' of the foresight process. They care not for the 'proper way', don't care who takes offence at the message they bring or whether they are taken seriously or summarily dismissed. As a tool they may prove suitable for use at any stage of the process and the practitioner of foresight ought be mindful of their overall benefits – to 'Stretch', 'Expand' or 'Crack' the existing thinking paradigm of their clients.

Arguably the greatest result of Petersen's work on Wildcards is bringing their use into a more mainstream acceptance. The flow on effect has been to enhance the overall understanding of thinking critically about the future. Whilst his compilation of Wildcards may seem an arbitrary selection, there is significant value in expanding our ability to consider potential futures across a range of topics.

The degree to which the Wildcard is accepted as worthy of consideration (and therefore its value to the foresight process) will rely on the perception of the degree of relevancy that the Wildcard has to the client. The Reference-Impact Grid and the LUV principle will assist the practitioner in selecting an appropriate level of Wildcard to be added to the foresight process.

It could be argued that Wildcards represent the one foresight tool that crosses all boundaries, from the cultural and worldview through to income and environment and beyond. As such, they may provide for the foresight practitioner, the fundamental tool that can be introduced to enhance their client's ability to think and prepare for, possible futures. They are simple enough for the person in the street to understand and can lead to a depth of critique that the more scholarly appreciate. The foresight practitioner would be well advised to know when to 'pull a Wildcard out of the hat'.



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