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THE COUNTERFACTUAL BUREAU

A field guide to possible selves, irreversible costs, missing evidence, and the small freedom to change a question.

FOUR POSSIBLE CORRESPONDENTS · ONE REAL PRESENT

This guide accompanies bureau.sahilverse.online. It can also be read independently. The website is a small deterministic narrative instrument; this guide is a set of arguments and worksheets for examining uncertainty without pretending to resolve it.

The compact rule: do the best you can with what is currently knowable; when better evidence arrives, give yourself permission to do better. This is an editorial principle, not a quote attributed to an external authority.

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REGISTRY SHEET / 01

An instruction that fits inside an envelope

Three sentences for the whole experience

File one decision and name what you fear losing. Read letters from the selves who sought safety, expanded, delayed, and changed the question. Before leaving, distinguish observation from interpretation, write what evidence would matter, and consider whether a small, consensual test is possible.

The contract with the visitor

We cannot: tell the future, assess your personality, grade your judgment, know someone else's motives, or infer the full context of your situation from a paragraph.

We can: stage contrasting viewpoints, expose neglected values, slow down an alluring story, and supply a worksheet for investigating assumptions.

We will not: claim the fictional story is research data. Published psychology offers conceptual vocabulary, not coefficients for our four written characters.

A map of this booklet

- 02 — Why four letters?
- 03 — Anatomy of a branch
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- 05 — Evidence ledger
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REGISTRY SHEET / 02

Why four letters?

A useful fiction has to know its limits.

An imagined self compresses a tangle of values into a voice. That compression can be helpful. It may reveal that security is not cowardice, exploration is not guaranteed happiness, waiting is not free, and changing the question is not a universal escape hatch.

But fiction can persuade by sounding intimate. The imagined correspondent has no special evidence about an actual future. If a letter feels uncanny or exact, that is a cue to inspect your assumptions—not a reason to trust the text as foresight.

Four fixed vantage points

SAFETY / THE KEEPER. Protects continuity and reliability; may underfund discovery.

EXPANSION / THE VOYAGER. Protects learning and autonomy; may incur instability and obligations.

DELAY / THE CLERK OF LATER. Protects time for information; can allow deadlines to decide.

REFRAME / THE QUESTIONER. Protects creative agency; can consume time or strain coordination.

Why they disagree

The Bureau authors each branch with a protected value, a neglected value, a plausible cost and a provisional reversal. Their disagreements are built into the editorial design. They are not competing predictions and do not have probabilities.

The correction on the envelope

Ask: Which part of this letter sounds true because I know it? Which part merely sounds good because it is written well? Which important person or circumstance never appears?

REGISTRY SHEET / 03

Anatomy of a branch

How the browser constructs correspondence.

The engine has no AI model and does not contact a server. A public hash function (FNV-1a, 32-bit) combines a replay seed, the whitespace-normalised decision text and a branch-specific key. The resulting number selects one of three authored openings, one of two calendar fragments, one of two objects, and one of six incidental marks. The decision, feared loss and optional constraint are inserted as text.

The seed changes the *form* of the letter, not the user's underlying values, psychology or likelihood of success. Identical text and seed reproduce identical correspondents. Changing punctuation can change a variant; it cannot make the model more accurate.

Where the apparent insights come from

The Keeper speaks in continuity language because its values and consequences were explicitly written that way. The Voyager voices learning and the cost of instability by editorial choice. The Clerk of Later addresses deferred information. The Questioner looks for missing alternatives. No traits are inferred from your wording.

A practical skepticism checklist

- Does the letter reveal a fact you did not provide? No: it cannot.
- Does a vivid object prove an outcome? No: the object is fiction.
- Does choosing "Observed" in the evidence desk validate the claim? No: that label records your interpretation.
- Do different branches have hidden scores? No: there is no winner, latent preference or weighting.
- Can a replay be audited? Yes: the templates and selection rule are described on the website.

Privacy: Private entries live only in the open tab until navigation/reload and in exports you explicitly download. The only optional browser preference retained is motion on/off. The service worker may cache static site files, not typed case information.

REGISTRY SHEET / 04

Reversibility is granular

Try to name what comes back—and what does not.

A decision may be legally reversible and socially costly, or financially reversible but demanding in time. The word “reversible” should not stand in for an inventory of consequences.

DIMENSION	WHAT TO ASK
Time	Can I recover the hours or only change the next step?
Resources	Which costs are sunk, recurring or negotiable?
Relationships	Whose expectations or consent are implicated?
Identity	Is my self-description doing more work than the facts?
Opportunity	Does this option close another door while I test it?
Institutional	Are deadlines, contracts or gatekeepers involved?

Fill the narrowest possible reversal

A specific action I could undo or renegotiate:

A cost I might not be able to recover:

REGISTRY SHEET / 05

Evidence before eloquence

A ledger, not an intuition score.

An appealing future narrative can make an assumed fact feel observed. The Bureau asks visitors to mark claims as **Observed** (directly witnessed or documented), **Inferred** (a reasoned interpretation), or **Unknown** (not checked or unavailable). These categories track the visitor's judgment, not externally verified truth.

Four claims the desk asks you to classify

Claim 1. Changing course has a known and manageable cost.

Observed ☐ Inferred ☐ Unknown ☐

Claim 2. The loss I fear is inevitable if I change direction.

Observed ☐ Inferred ☐ Unknown ☐

Claim 3. The reversal I named is actually available under real constraints.

Observed ☐ Inferred ☐ Unknown ☐

Claim 4. People affected by the decision would consent to any proposed trial.

Observed ☐ Inferred ☐ Unknown ☐

When you have to mark “Unknown”

That label is not a deficiency. It is an honest boundary. It may be more useful to name who could answer a question, what record could verify a cost, or what future observation would alter the choice. Some information cannot be ethically obtained, and that limitation matters.

One further correction

Even a directly witnessed event needs interpretation. “I observed that the meeting was cancelled” does not automatically establish why somebody cancelled it.

REGISTRY SHEET / 06

A fictional case from the registry

The society for borrowed instruments.

An invented community workshop lends tools to neighbourhood residents. Its volunteer committee is considering extending hours. More hours might help people who work late, yet might increase volunteer fatigue or noise for neighbours. The committee is fictional; no real institution or person is described.

The four letters, compressed

Keeper: Preserve current hours. Existing volunteers know the routine, but some residents remain excluded.

Voyager: Extend evenings immediately. More visitors might attend, while staffing and trust become vulnerable to exhaustion.

Clerk of Later: Postpone for further consultation. New constraints may be discovered; meanwhile the existing exclusion remains.

Questioner: Offer a limited, rotating late-opening pilot. The compromise is not magic: it still requires volunteers, consent and a stop condition.

The correction from evidence

A persuasive narrative might assume that demand for evening hours exists. The actual evidence could be missing. Before acting, the committee could ask participants about access needs and volunteers about real capacity. It should not infer that silence means consent.

The non-verdict

No branch is automatically preferable. The right question may depend on resources, noise limits, accessibility, and whether the people affected can participate in the decision. The simulation cannot collect or weigh that evidence.

REGISTRY SHEET / 07

A modest experiment

An experiment must be possible, proportionate and voluntary.

A small trial is useful only if it can produce information without imposing an unacceptable cost. Some decisions cannot be trialled safely, and the absence of a safe experiment is itself a finding—not a challenge to be overcome through cleverness.

A four-part test

1. **Scope.** What is the smallest component that can be observed? A factual inquiry is often a more modest first step than an irreversible change.
2. **Consent.** Who else is affected? Have they agreed to the relevant action, not merely been assumed agreeable?
3. **Stop condition.** What fact, boundary, or harm would tell you to stop and reassess?
4. **Interpretation.** What would the result establish, and what would it leave unknown? A brief pilot can reveal friction without proving what a whole future would be like.

Write without promising yourself an outcome

The information that would change my mind:

An ethically acceptable action or reason not to test:

A review trigger (not a fake certainty):

REGISTRY SHEET / 08

Cross-examine equally

Do not ask the Voyager only about courage and the Keeper only about fear.

A narrative can win unfairly if it gets kinder questions. The Bureau therefore gives every correspondent the same three questions, in the same order.

01 / What did you protect? Listen for protected commitments without declaring them universally good.

02 / What did it quietly cost? Notice resources, relationships and opportunities that disappear from the heroic storyline.

03 / What would change your mind? Make each position answerable to some present or future evidence.

A fourth question for the visitor

Which branch's costs would I excuse if I were secretly rooting for it? This is a check on attachment to a story, not a claim that you have a hidden bias the Bureau detected.

The no-winner rule

The final case file compares protected values, neglected values, reversibility and missing information side by side. The interface does not total them up. You are permitted to leave more uncertain and more precise at the same time.

One-sentence disposition

Before I decide, I want to distinguish _____ from

_____.

REGISTRY SHEET / 09

Blank correspondence sheet

Write outside the machine, if you prefer.

A / The Keeper: what continuity matters?

B / The Voyager: what might be learned?

C / The Clerk of Later: what arrives with time?

D / The Questioner: what alternative is excluded?

Small objects, honest costs

A calendar fragment from one possible future:

An object left on the desk, with no claimed predictive meaning:

The cost that makes this story less comfortable:

REGISTRY SHEET / 10

Further reading: identity and alternatives

Sources are here to be questioned, not worshipped.

Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius (1986). Possible selves.

American Psychologist 41(9), 954–969. Introduces possible selves as imagined hopes, fears and possibilities. It does not authorize predictions about a particular visitor.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.41.9.954>

Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being.

American Psychologist 55(1), 68–78. Motivational framing around autonomy, competence and relatedness; not a scoring rubric for the Bureau.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11392867/>

Neal J. Roese (1997). Counterfactual thinking.

Psychological Bulletin 121(1), 133–148. Synthesises the study of mentally constructing alternatives to reality; the website takes inspiration from that question, not predictive validity.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/9000895/>

James G. March (1991). Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning.

Organization Science 2(1), 71–87. The tension between exploiting existing knowledge and exploring possibilities has genuine time-related costs. The Bureau turns that tension into literary voices.

<https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2.1.71>

REGISTRY SHEET / 11

Further reading: imagination and action

The distinction between a compelling story and usable evidence.

Daniel L. Schacter, Donna Rose Addis and Randy L. Buckner (2007). Remembering the past to imagine the future: the prospective brain.

Nature Reviews Neuroscience 8, 657–661. Examines connections between autobiographical memory and future imagination. Vividness alone is not evidence of future accuracy.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn2213>

Peter M. Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran (2006). Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes.

Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 38, 69–119. Examines how if–then plans can aid goal pursuit. Plans cannot remove every constraint or override consent.

[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(06\)38002-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(06)38002-1)

Gary Klein (2007). Performing a project premortem.

Harvard Business Review, September 2007. Suggests imagining how a plan failed in order to elicit overlooked risks. A premortem is not a claim that a feared failure will occur.

<https://hbr.org/2007/09/performing-a-project-premortem>

Two cautions before leaving the library

First: citing research for a general construct does not validate a particular interactive product. Second: reading psychology can improve vocabulary without substituting for lived circumstances or the consent of others.

REGISTRY SHEET / 12

Explore related Sahilverse works

Follow an actual connection rather than a list of trophies.

Parallel Selves — original theatre — LIVE · An earlier branching-fiction method.

The Decision Observatory — LIVE · A counterpoint emphasising present costs and reversibility.

Still Becoming — LIVE · Revisable identity; no permanent version.

The Identity–Action Gap — LIVE · The world may obstruct a sincere intention.

Ordinary Tuesday — LIVE · Fictional environmental friction and action.

The Process and the Point — LIVE · The danger of postponing life for outcomes.

The Last Lantern — LIVE · Guidance without control.

Many Windows of One Mind — ARCHIVE DOSSIER · Not claimed as live.

Build Myself — ARCHIVE DOSSIER · Not claimed as live.

Small Freedoms — ARCHIVE DOSSIER · Not claimed as live.

Editorial link check: 26 October 2026. Archive anchor routing inside COMPLETE is client-side and subject to future changes. Links are conceptually related works, not supporting research evidence.

REGISTRY SHEET / 13

Provenance and the exit chamber

The file can close without a verdict.

Archive material: three named coordinates point to catalogue dossiers at COMPLETE. Their independent public existence is not asserted.

Remix interpretation: the older Parallel Selves decision theatre motivated a new bureaucratic correspondence format. No original page text has been reproduced here as an academic finding.

New writing: the letter voices, marginalia, evidence prompts, explanations, reflection exercises and this booklet were written for the Bureau.

Simulation rules: deterministic hash selection across a small finite authored set; stable branch priorities; no fitted research parameters, scoring, psychology diagnosis, probability, recommendation or generated AI responses.

What just happened?

You visited several imagined selves, each paying an honest cost. You inspected the gap between a story and evidence. You can leave the case unresolved until the world gives you a reason to revise it.

Choose another door

[COMPLETE — the Sahilverse field atlas](#)

[Sahil Tayal — the canonical universe](#)

[The Counterfactual Bureau — return to the correspondence desk](#)

The goal is not to achieve perfect foresight. It is to make the next judgment more answerable to evidence, people and changing conditions.

DO THE BEST YOU KNOW. WHEN YOU KNOW BETTER, DO BETTER.