

PARALLEL SELVES

FIELD GUIDE / A counterfactual decision theatre

Sahilverse · Creative project by Sahil Tayal · 2026

A decision is a door, not a destiny. This guide accompanies the interactive theatre. It is a field manual for considering alternatives without pretending to know the future. All protagonists and plot outcomes in the theatre are fictional. Neither the game nor this document performs psychological profiling, diagnoses, or personalised forecasting.

01 / What is counterfactual thinking?

A counterfactual asks what might have happened if a particular part of a past or imagined situation had changed. It is useful for explaining mechanisms, exploring regrets and imagining alternatives, yet it comes with a fundamental problem: for a particular person and moment, only one historical path was observed. The others are not directly available for comparison.

The theatre uses four **narrative strategies** rather than moral rankings: Commit, Preserve, Experiment, Consult. A story shows a possible trajectory; it does not show the probability of that trajectory. Even richly described consequences remain illustrations.

Three labels to keep separate

- **Fiction:** written characters, moments and outcomes invented for exploration.
- **Reasoned possibility:** a plausible mechanism or trade-off, such as time spent studying reducing available leisure. Plausibility is not evidence that a particular outcome will happen.
- **Empirical evidence:** observations from an appropriate research design. This theatre does not estimate effects from data and does not assign probabilities to branches.

02 / The invisible ingredients of a decision

Outcomes depend on context: economic resources, support, timing, other people's decisions, institutional rules and chance. A tempting story sometimes smuggles these conditions into the background. The assumption laboratory invites you to expose three of them. Its responses are prewritten interpretations, not a causal simulation.

Reversibility should be treated as a practical question: Which costs cannot be recovered? Which obligations survive a change of mind? Could a short experiment gather information before a larger commitment? The site's High/Medium labels are illustrative judgments about its fictional situations, not general truths.

EXPERIMENTS

Use a notebook; seek clearer questions, not a perfect prediction.

03 / Guided experiment A: hold the fork still

1. Open one scene and read the Commit branch. Write down one immediate benefit and one delayed cost. 2. Repeat for Preserve, Experiment and Consult. 3. Compare two branches in the interface. 4. Ask: Which trade-off did the first vivid story hide? What value did I implicitly prioritise?

Interpretation: multiple coherent stories can counter tunnel vision. They cannot identify the correct action. A branch that feels emotionally attractive may still rely on unusually favourable background conditions.

04 / Guided experiment B: change one assumption

1. Keep the same fictional branch selected. 2. Set Support to scarce; read the interpretive note. 3. Set it to abundant. 4. Identify what you would have to observe to assess support in the real world: a written agreement, a reliable schedule, a budget, or prior follow-through. 5. Record what remains unknowable.

Interpretation: an assumption is not a lever that guarantees an outcome. The activity illustrates model sensitivity: changing the frame can change your reading even if the narrated event remains the same.

05 / Guided experiment C: map reversibility

For one fictional choice, draw three columns: reversible now, reversible with cost, and difficult to reverse. Place commitments in the columns: money, public promises, working hours, emotional exposure, legal agreements and reputation. Then propose a small information-gathering experiment that avoids irreversible stakes when possible.

Interpretation: exploring reversibility may increase useful options. Some relationships and commitments do not reset like software; respect other people's boundaries and autonomy.

06 / Reflection prompts

- Which missing variable could reverse my preferred interpretation?
- What outcome am I treating as certain merely because I can imagine it vividly?
- Where am I confusing a story about another person with observable behaviour?
- What can I choose, what can I influence, and what remains outside my control?

- What evidence would actually update my view?

THE LIMITS

A small epistemic contract for people with large imaginations.

07 / What this instrument cannot do

It cannot recover unlived outcomes, calculate your personal odds, determine whether a relationship would have worked, estimate a career return or infer stable traits from interaction. It has no population sample, validated measurement instrument or prediction model. Its paths are not exhaustive, and the order and writing style of options may influence which stories resonate.

Counterfactuals also invite hindsight bias: once an ending is known, we may feel it was always inevitable. In the theatre, even the endings are author choices. An alternate turn is included to unsettle the illusion that one decision must unfold in one straight line.

08 / Why this can still be useful

The exercise can help articulate values, hidden assumptions, opportunity costs, second-order effects and small reversible tests. These are **thinking aids**, not prescriptions. A good decision process sometimes leads to an unfavourable outcome because luck and systems matter. An appealing outcome does not prove the preceding decision was wise.

09 / Reading pathways

For accessible, foundational discussions, explore these works in their original editions or library catalogues:

- Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1982), “The Simulation Heuristic,” in *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* — mental simulation and judgment.
- Judea Pearl and Dana Mackenzie (2018), *The Book of Why* — causal questions and counterfactuals.
- Philip E. Tetlock and Dan Gardner (2015), *Superforecasting* — uncertainty, updating and calibrated judgment.
- Herbert A. Simon (1955), “A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice” — bounded rationality and satisficing.

These are suggested further reading, not research validations of the theatre's fictional branches.

10 / Practical closing ritual

Before making a meaningful real decision, try finishing these three sentences: “**I know...**” (observable facts), “**I assume...**” (uncertain premises), and “**I could learn by...**” (a bounded,

ethical action). Keep other people's agency in view. Leave room for surprise.

Credits: Parallel Selves — an original creative research experience by Sahil Tayal / Sahilverse.
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