

Futures

That time we borked causality

It's a bit of a gamble. By Jamie Wahls

"The odds are slim. But if we're very, very lucky, we might get them as low as one in a million." The pilot nodded, and began to drink.

"Still not enough," said the navigator. She was holding one of the ubiquitous military PROBCON boxes and aiming it at the pilot. "You're still at about one in a quarter of a million. Can you get more impaired, somehow?"

The pilot was barely recognizable beneath his standard-issue blinders and leg shackles. He gave her a reproachful look – or, at least, he pivoted his body towards her and made a frown – and took a long drag from the standard-issue bourbon that the probability navigators provided for occasions such as these.

"Buh' how?" he slurred. "M already flyin' drunk, blin', wi' irons on, in a plane tha's held together wi' tape, while listenin' to Christmas music tha' remin's me a' my absen' father. Tha's still not a million?"

The navigator shook her head grimly. "There's too many safety margins built into the plane, I'm afraid. We could try to up your drunkenness more, but I'm worried about you sobering up mid-flight. Can you think of anything else?"

"We coul' ..." the pilot paused for a long moment. "Can we fill the cockpit wi' chickens?"

On 21 February 1947, Private North became the first man to successfully capture an enemy aircraft carrier while drunk, blindfolded, hobbled, covered in feathers and weeping about Santa's broken promise.

It really was a one-in-a-million thing.

The physicists had warned them, but no one ever listened to physicists.

The physicists had cautioned that detonating a nuclear bomb jacketed in everettium ore might well cause permanent and unpredictable changes to causality, but, well. America had really wanted to win that war ...

The infinite branches of the multiverse had been hopelessly tangled, and what were previously probability distributions became more like probability lumps – fortune was redistributed as though an eccentric billionaire had died and left it all to a favourite nephew.



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

This universe was the nephew in question.

The societal changes were immediate and catastrophic.

Safe bets were suddenly a sucker's game. Fiscal responsibility and quiet living were abandoned as societal pressures selected for the most outlandish strategies. Skill and expertise fell by the wayside, neglected in favour of those who had an intuitive sense of when they were just *precisely* unqualified enough.

Lotteries remained popular.

President Hoover was president again. He had, on the advice of his aides, put his name in for re-election, despite being 73 and legally barred from the presidency because he had already done it.

They had campaigned on the slogan "Hoover's Victory Lap! *Two* Chickens In Every Pot!" Opposition pundits had rather *nervously* speculated that his odds of victory might be

one in ten million, or as high as one in eight hundred thousand.

President Hoover was now seated behind his desk, pretending to listen to some physicists. But of course, no one ever listened to physicists.

"We're not sure it will *stay*," said one.

"I see," nodded Hoover gravely.

"Everettium has a half-life of about 25 years," said a physicist. "*Usually*."

"But we're actually a little bit, ah, hoist by our own petard, here," said the second one.

"Very troubling," agreed Hoover.

"You see, there's a very small chance – about a one in a million chance, which is, uh, *currently extremely relevant* – there's a very small chance that the charged everettium isotopes will decay faster than that. Meaningfully faster."

"So this whole ... *improbability cloud* may well pass us by within, ah, well ... we don't know for sure, but we actually expected

Futures

it to end sometime last week.”

“Incredible,” nodded Hoover.

The two physicists looked at each other, sighed, and left to go do boring, reasonable things like stockpile food.

“You ready to go?” the navigator asked.

Private North looked up from his preflight preparations. He wiped the honey out of his eyes and signalled for the flight crew to stop beating him with sagebrush.

He didn’t respond in words, because he had recently bathed in LSD. He did, however, subtly change his stance and attempt to broadcast the thoughts, TIME IS AN ILLUSION, and also BUT YES, I AM.

The navigator nodded in satisfied acknowledgement.

It’s not correct to anthropomorphize luck, or the universe, although quantum mechanics does strongly suggest that, somewhere, the dice are indeed being played.

The rate of everettium decay ticked incrementally down, second after second. The odds that the system might *spontaneously reset* could be concisely expressed as:

1:1,000,002

1:1,000,001

1:1,000,000.

It’s not correct to anthropomorphize luck. But as the universe reset itself, there was,

everywhere, a very faint sense of ‘*whoops*’.

Private North’s plane took off, heading for another ambitious target. He was attempting to control the plane using only his mind and knees, he had barely enough fuel for the mission, and the flight crew had filled his cockpit to the brim with ants.

He crashed immediately, of course.

I mean, come on, what are the odds?

Jamie Wahls is, among other things, a writer. His short fictions have appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons* and on the Nebula ballot. He cares a lot about neuroethics.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Jamie Wahls reveals the inspiration behind *That time we borked causality*.

By the fourth time my co-workers blew my mind talking about Everett branches, I needed to write about it.

This, then, is my attempt to play with the many-worlds interpretation by way of Terry Pratchett.

And although many-worlds is only one interpretation, and many physicists still hold to Copenhagen, I assure you — I am not remotely qualified to have an opinion on this.

