

The governments who called on sci-fi writers to predict the future

For years, militaries have called upon the sharpest minds in science fiction. At a time of drone warfare and AI it's more valuable than ever

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This past March, the Ministry of Defence in the UK announced they had hired science fiction writers PW Singer and August Cole to write eight short stories about how developing technologies could shape warfare over the next 20 years.

Surprising? Hardly. This is far from the first time governments have reached out to the world of fiction for help imagining the future. Most famously, authors Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle directly lobbied for and influenced Ronald Reagan's decision to create the Strategic Defense Initiative in 1983 (aka the "Star Wars" missile defence programme).

In 2005, the Canadian Army hired Karl Schroeder to write *Crisis in Zefra*, a "dramatised future military scenario," that examined the challenges a Canadian peacekeeping force might face when dealing with a 2025 urban insurgency using drones, cell phones, and other modern information systems. (Not so different from the current conflict in Ukraine.)

In 2019, the French army announced it was creating a "Red Team" of science fiction writers to help figure out how countries and terrorists might exploit future tech. And after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the US military solicited ideas from various Hollywood screenwriters in an attempt to ensure they were never again caught by surprise.

It's not a bad practice. Although the future is impossible to predict with any granularity, broad trends can often be observed. Moreover, sci-fi writers tend to spend their careers thinking about the development and application of technology. Sometimes they manage to anticipate actual inventions, such as Arthur C Clarke and the concept of geostationary satellites or Neal Stephenson and digital currency. And sometimes authors manage to inspire the creation of real devices, such as cell phones, which were based upon the communicators in *Star Trek: The Original Series*.

One of the more interesting—and as-yet unrealised—ideas come, again, from Jerry Pournelle. While conducting operations research at Boeing in the late 1950s, he developed the concept of lifting massive tungsten rods into orbit. When dropped onto a target on the ground, they would deliver a massive amount of energy sans radioactive fallout. These are colloquially known as 'Rods from God'. To date, no country is known to have used them, but it's entirely possible the US or other countries have already placed some in space.

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As for myself, I see enormous changes continuing to arise from the use of drones in combat. The role of fighter pilot is already terminally endangered. Not only that, but the risks of fully autonomous ground vehicles have yet to be reckoned with. Imagine if

someone with hostile intent could hack your car and drive it off a cliff with you trapped inside.

The hot topic of the day, of course, is artificial intelligence. With the rise of ChatGPT, Dall-E, Midjourney, and countless other services, advanced machine learning has finally fallen into the hands of the common consumer. The implications are hard to overstate. Whether you're an advertising firm using AI to generate stock images, or a journalist knocking out quick articles via ChatGPT, or the military using AI to model various combat scenarios, AI has the potential to become an indispensable, all-use tool.

But there are problems. The AI we have isn't sentient. It does not understand the *meaning* of things. And it will happily invent answers to serious questions, inventions that can be incredibly hard to detect. I would argue that what we have right now is actually better described with the term *pseudo-intelligence*. It's an approximation of genuine human cognition, and all the more dangerous for how real it can seem.

What does it mean to live in a world where you can't easily determine if an image, an audio recording, or a video is real? Imagine an Instagram where the majority of accounts are filled with AI-generated pictures. We're not so far off from that. Elections will become perilous things indeed when you can't trust anything you see or hear of your candidates.

It's enough to make one a Luddite.

And yet, I remain optimistic about the future. Despite their risks, these potential technologies have as many benefits as drawbacks, and humans are – if nothing else – adaptable.

Moreover, science fiction has done a wonderful job laying the groundwork for how our species might proceed. (Something like Covid-19 is hardly surprising if you grew up reading and watching stories like *The Andromeda Strain*.)

So as both an author and a reader... I can't wait to see what comes next.

Fractal Noise by Christopher Paolini is out now (Tor, £20). You can buy it from The Big Issue shop on Bookshop.org, which helps to support The Big Issue and independent bookshops.

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