

Thinking the Future through 'Stapledon Timelines'

by Will Slocombe

The banner of the Olaf Stapledon Centre for Speculative Futures presents Stapledon's own method for conceptualising the future:

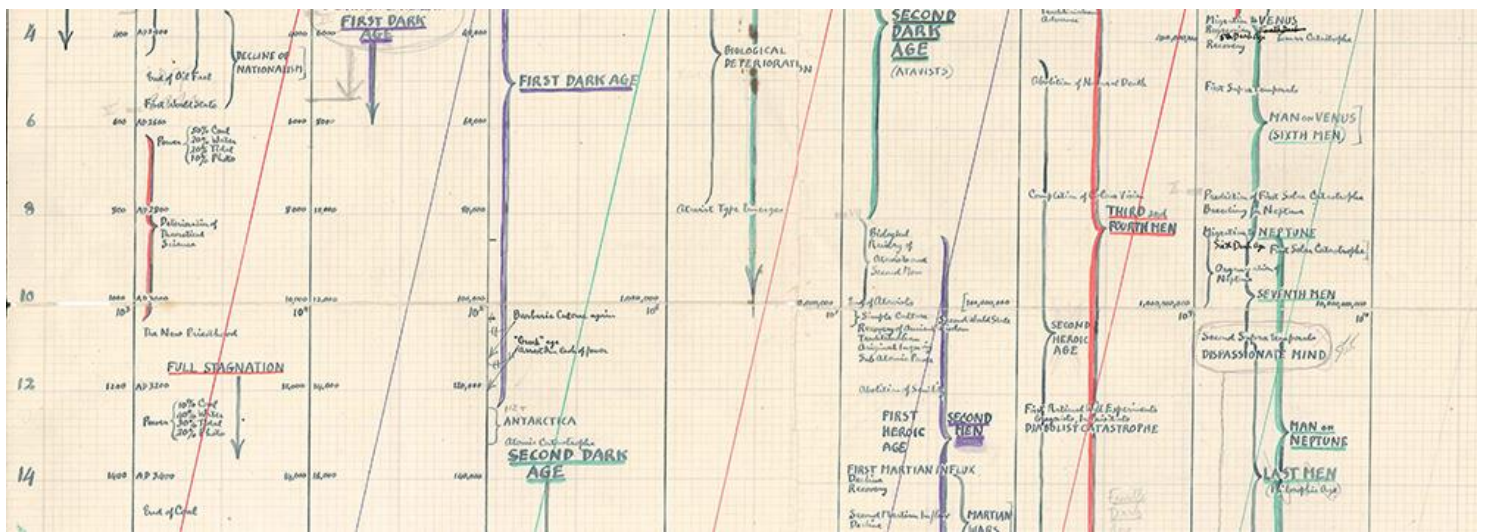


Fig 1: Scan of a Stapledon 'Timeline'

At first glance, the diagram is confusing—a series of lines of different colours and occasionally scrawled down notes of 'what happened'—but it is actually a simple and powerful tool for thinking about one's present context in relation to the future. Stapledon used these timelines as a way of map out the events of his novels, to 'think through' the diagram in order to hypothesise about possible futures and what might be called 'deep time'.

Creating 'Stapledon Timelines'

The easiest way to understand Stapledon Timelines is to construct your own, approaching the future from the ground up. You start with a blank piece of graph paper and draw a vertical line on the left. Label the middle of the line with the current year, the top of the line as ten years ago, and the bottom of the line as ten years into the future (1). Label the line with brief details of important events that happened in the past and imagine some of the equally important events that might happen in the future.

About two or three sections over, draw a line parallel to the first one. Again, label the centre of the line with the current year, but this time label the top of the line one hundred years into the past and the bottom of the line one hundred years into the future (2). Again, fill in some relevant historical events and imagine some that might happen in the future.

You've now constructed two parallel axes of a Stapledon timeline, one labelled ± 10 years and the next ± 100 years. Now here's the trick: using a different colour pen, join together the top of the ± 10 -year line with the same year on the ± 100 -year line, and do the same with the bottom of the ± 10 -year line and the same year on the ± 100 -year line (3). All the events that were added on the first line (the ± 10 -year line) 'happen' in a very small part of the second line (the ± 100 -year line).

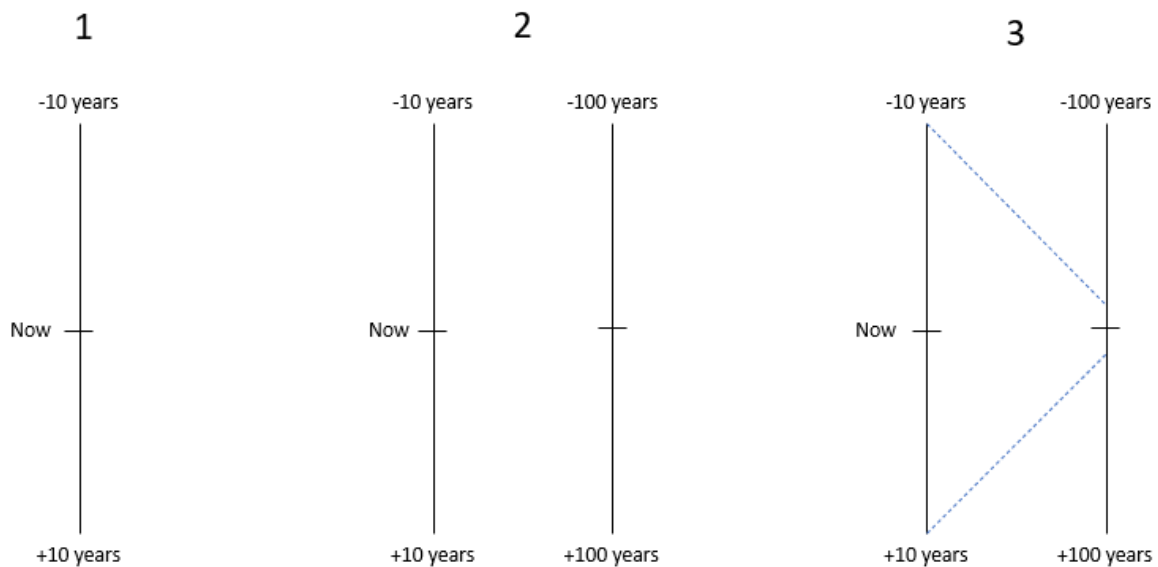


Fig 2: Steps to constructing a Stapledon 'Timeline'

This procedure can be repeated: parallel to the ± 100 -year line, draw a third line and label it $\pm 1,000$ years; parallel to that line, draw a fourth line and label it $\pm 10,000$ years; and so on. For each individual timeline, show how it fits into the line next to it via those diagonal lines.

Understanding 'Stapledon Timelines'

The conceptual power of Stapledon Timelines is that they show the relative importance of events, moments, and periods in terms of broader historical perspectives. *When* you stand (the central year of each timeline) remains constant on

each individual timeline, but the context in which that given year is placed becomes a smaller fraction of the overall timeline as the duration represented by the lines increases. On a ± 10 -year line, what happened five years ago seems quite important, but placed on a $\pm 10,000$ -year line it barely registers, if at all, unless the event is ascribed a significant impact on the course of national and/or human history.

These timelines can therefore help to determine what we perceive to be of importance on particular scales, not only through the events we elect to add, but also through whether those events recur across multiple timelines, or the broader contexts (periods on longer duration timelines) in which individual events (events on a shorter duration timeline) are likely to happen. They enabled Stapledon to try to move outside of what he saw as a narrow historical context to think millions of years into the future, and across multiple 'versions' of humanity; speculative, yes, but a fantastic thought experiment to understand how we might approach the future 'taking the long view'.

There is a flip-side to this elongated perspective, however, and that is the loss of awareness of individual human experience in such vast stretches of time. A 'world war' such as the 1914-1918 war, for example, would take up five years on any timeline, but if the relative importance of that event is measured by how much of a line it takes up this is 25% of a twenty-year timeline (± 10 years), but only 2.5% of a two-hundred-year timeline (± 100 years), and only 0.25% of a two-thousand-year timeline ($\pm 1,000$ years). In terms of the number of human lives lost in such events, does it seem fair that so many lives amount to so little in a supposed wider perspective?

In terms of a perceptual effect (or perhaps affect), therefore, Stapledon Timelines can produce a fatalism about the future akin to the Persian adage about what can make a happy man sad and an unhappy man happy: the phrase 'this too shall pass'. They show how 'good' things and 'bad' things happen, but that even the most momentous of contemporary events might be insignificant on wider scales of time.

Using 'Stapledon Timelines' as a Futures Tool

For futures work, Stapledon Timelines are primarily concerned with relating the importance of any given event or vision of the future and evaluating it in different contexts. They enable a viewer to switch between temporal perspectives (such as short-term and long-term thinking) merely through what appears on a given timeline as being of importance. The durations of timelines themselves can be adapted (starting at one year, or even one day or month) and they enable a very clear visualisation of

the relationship between different sets of priorities. Stapledon Timelines will never enable the development of a predictive or extrapolative model, or be related to developing specific scenarios, but they can be used to 'plot' those models and scenarios in different (temporal) contexts.

Stapledon Timelines can also be used as a procedural futures tool in order to think about how events slot together on a given timeline, what events people think are likely to happen, and how 'past' events or developments influence those in the 'future'. In so doing, they become a framing device for other futures activities. Having participants in a futures group construct their own can be a useful way of gathering projections and predictions that can then serve as discussion points for refinement in subsequent activities.

© Will Slocombe, August 2021

About the Author

[Will Slocombe](#) is one of the Co-Directors of the Olaf Stapledon Centre for Speculative Futures and a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Liverpool. He is interested in the ways in which science fictions and speculative fictions help us to think about the future in terms of novel technologies, ideas of change, and new paradigms and contexts. His main research area is representations of Artificial Intelligence. He is also one of the co-founders of [FLiNT \(Futures Literacy through Narrative\)](#).