



by Christopher L'Heureux

Innovation is the lifeblood of success. It feeds our ability to adapt and conquer our environment whether on a battlefield or in a boardroom. The aircraft carrier began its life as an auxiliary scout for the fleet. By the twentieth century, it had evolved into the centerpiece of naval strength through a series of progressive changes. Likewise, Netflix began as a mail-order DVD service that revolutionized itself into a digital streaming empire as the internet

expanded. These changes required someone with the ability to see potential and create something new. This begs a question: how can we develop innovators to make our organizations more successful?

Innovation comes from a creative and inquisitive mind. If we intend to become more innovative, [we should start there](#). One approach is to read more science-fiction. I'm taking a leap here, but bear with me. Science fiction, or just "sci-fi" for us nerdy types, gives the reader a future fraught with problems to ponder. Therein lies its power. Through its conflict, sci-fi shows old things used in new ways; it lays out what has changed and what has remained the same; and finally, it leads us to ask how we got here. When we think critically about these characteristics, we find a method to improve our ability to innovate.

Many books in the sci-fi genre show how technology and concepts of today are used differently in some future dystopian world. These are evolutionary and revolutionary handrails to innovation showing us a new way to use something. [Burn-In: A Novel of the Real Robotic Revolution](#) by August Cole and Peter Singer provides examples of both. The evolution comes in the form of hundreds of drones zipping around Washington, D.C. delivering packages. Amazon is already field-testing this concept, so it's not a huge leap from where we are today. Another evolutionary theme found in *Burn-In* is the upending of society due to massive unemployment, the result of the replacement of people with technology in the workplace. The revolutionary jump comes in the form of social discontent. We have seen extremist religious and ecological terrorists in our history, but have we considered anti-technological terrorism? Luddites of the future? Using technology and concepts in unintended ways is the bedrock of innovation. We want the ability to think creatively about how to use a piece of equipment, a process, or an idea differently to further our goal. Science fiction has the uncanny ability to lead us directly there.

In addition to showing us how to use things and ideas in new ways, sci-fi displays themes pulled from the present and cast into the future to show continuity and change. [*The Forever War*](#) by Joe Haldeman gives us an example of continuity. Beyond their futuristic armored-fighting suits, we see soldiers struggling to reintegrate into a society changed beyond their comprehension while they were away. It's a familiar story. In [*The Windup Girl*](#), Paolo Bacigalupi describes a world of blight, disease, and starvation changed by ecological disaster. The series of events that led to this change aren't completely explained but it is clear humanity did not do enough to prevent environmental catastrophe. Underlying the continuity and change exists a logic of cause and effect that we can examine and question. Thinking about and judging these storylines is also a hedge against surprise as any eventuality we consider is no longer completely unfamiliar. In this, science fiction invites reflection which, in turn, fuels the inquisitive mind.

The final benefit of reading sci-fi impacts both our creativity and our inquisitiveness. Sometimes sci-fi presents an unexplained gap between the future world and the present which only our imagination can fill. It causes us to ask ourselves what might have happened. Frank Herbert's [*Dune*](#) supplies such an example set in a high-technology world without artificial intelligence. We find the only mention of the Butlerian Jihad, a 10,000 year-old war against thinking machines and conscious robots, in the glossary of the novel. The reason for this crusade is left to our imagination. Did the machines revolt? Did they lead us into a moral quagmire? What series of events could have led to such an outcome? It is the context of the novel that sets the boundaries of this mental exercise. We can only ponder explanations, but the exercise stretches our imagination by posing something new and allowing us to fill the blank using both our creativity and inquisitiveness.

Burn-In, *The Windup Girl*, *The Forever War*, and *Dune* give us fodder to exercise our minds. While not all sci-fi will do this, we can use much of it to develop innovative thinking. Considering something new is the basis for innovation and sci-fi can supply us with at least three ways to practice. First, it gives us old things to consider in new ways. Second, it puts

forward themes of stability and change that we can dissect to look for the logic of cause and effect. Finally, it offers a chance to imagine and wonder what events could have preceded some situation. However, the reader must be wary. It's not the author's ideas that are critical but thinking through those ideas that build an ability to think innovatively.

For the military professional or business executive, this is more than an interesting endeavor. Our goal is to make our organizations more successful and innovation is one way in which we can do it. Whether trying to dominate the national security environment or the economic marketplace, innovation is what improves effectiveness and efficiency. The more creative and inquisitive we are, the more likely we will find new ways to use what we have, solve our problems, and achieve our goals.

Lieutenant Colonel Christopher L'Heureux is an Armor Officer who likes to write, drink bourbon, and think big thoughts.

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