Tempo: Timing, Tactics and Strategy in Narrative-Driven Decision-Making

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Tempo: Timing, Tactics and Strategy in Narrative-Driven Decision-Making Venkatesh G. Rao Tempo is a modern treatment of decision-making that weaves together concepts and principles from the mathematical decision sciences, cognitive psychology, philosophy and theories of narrative and metaphor. Drawing on examples from familiar domains such as the kitchen and the office, the author, Venkatesh Rao, illustrates the subtleties underlying everyday behavior, and explains how you can strengthen the foundations of your decision-making skills."TEMPO is one of the most insightful and original books on decision-making I've ever read..." -- Daniel H. Pink, author of DRIVE and A WHOLE NEW MIND"An uncannily accurate analysis of our choice-making behaviors" -- David Allen, author of GETTING THINGS DONE"Tempo is a highly original and engaging book...In a world where timing is increasingly central to success, this is an essential read, not just for executives, but for everyone."-- John Hagel, co-author of THE POWER OF PULL

Tempo: Timing, Tactics and Strategy in Narrative-Driven Decision-Making Details

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From Reader Review Tempo: Timing, Tactics and Strategy in Narrative-Driven Decision-Making for online ebook

Keshav Zodey says

I am not sure about the timing of my reading of this book. The book is more like a reference manual where you get many references to great books from varied streams. The author builds on a these various topics and introduces a completely new lexicon which might take time to get used to. Before giving it a try, reading at least 3-4 blogs on ribbonfarm is must. Only if you make sense of or connect with his unusual style, you should give this a try.

Ensure you have some light fiction running in parallel to this book to keep company, might make the journey a little bit easier.

Maxwell Foley says

This was a very strange book. I read it because I have seen a lot of interesting-looking content emerging from the scene around this guy's blog, ribbonfarm.com. However I have never known where to begin when it comes to reading him. After reading this book, I am more confused than ever.

The book essentially reads as if a middle-aged consultant took LSD and went to a board meeting. Suddenly, the inner workings of the office is revealed to him as an elegant dance of information. The Q3 financial report PowerPoint projected in the front of the room comes alive as a lattice of interconnected channels of possibilities stretching deeply into the past and extending infinitely into the future. The room inhales and exhales, and a series of energy flows emanate from each human being in the room, transmitting information about their hypothetical future productivity into the author's third eye. Filled with a euphoric energy, the author scribbles down notes about the nature of time, space, consciousness and how it all interacts with the synergistic possibilities for collaboration in the modern workplace. Diagrams, charts, and graphs all emerge from the author's pen, as if channelling some unknown force. The author has uncovered some truly deeper wisdom, and he knows he will never see the mundane office the same way again, for he has uncovered the secrets to eternal maximization of productivity.

Anyway, I guess all you can say about this book is that it's like viewing the inner workings of an extremely intelligent, analytical, and creative person's mind. I'm glad something like this exists in the world, but it doesn't really seem like it conveys much that will stick with me, or anyone. A lot of very complex concepts are introduced but I'm not sure if any meaning is ever transmitted.

Chris says

"1. You cannot win. 2. You cannot break even. 3. You cannot quit the game."

Reviews for Tempo are mixed, a phenomenon (iirc) the author himself noted in the years since publication. It's a very high variance book, leaving people with the "what did I just read?" of a life-altering experience or the "what did I just read?" of someone reading an Internet comments section -- seemingly, nothing in

between. And I -- spoiler, I liked it, not sure if the star rating tipped my hand? -- I totally see it being contentious.

Tempo bills itself as an entirely new framework for decision making. Its most explicit tie-in post on the author's blog, ribbonfarm, is an opinionated lecture on the strategy/tactics/operations/doctrine tetrachotomy. The intro cites everything from cooking to control theory to military tactics, promising to tie it all together. And it's true to the letter of that promise. As to the spirit, well, depends who you ask.

Above all else, Tempo is not prescriptive. It doesn't offer you a brighter, shinier version of Black-Scholes. It doesn't tell you the "real" meaning of The Art of War. Tempo gives you a new way of seeing (and more importantly, feeling) the world, and effectively nothing else. At one point, Rao snarkily compares the search for a universal decision-making formula to perpetual motion machines. By contrast, the framework in Tempo is as disappointingly interpretive as .

The concept of "narrative rationality" marks a fascinating counterpoint to (everyday) "calculative rationality", the world of martingales and decision trees and formally circumscribed logics. It feels alluringly *intuitive*. It draws upon analogies and metaphors both as its supports and its tools of trade. It is everything the cognitive-bias behavioural economics school (Taleb, Kahneman, etc.) ever warned you about. And, let's be honest, it's a relief to see such a positive and non-judgemental account of human thought.
But this book has to be understood as a counterpoint, an antidote, a textbook you hide from the undergrads. This thing is as dangerous without a grounding in decision theory and cognitive bias as postmodernism is without any faith in grand schemes. This book would have been a delightful but unfortunate read for me five years ago. As it stands, I think I hit it at the right time in my own life, where I can see it as what it is -- a glorious "cheap trick".

Michael Rubin says

I was very hopeful about this book. It came from a friend. Also the first two chapters are very gripping. The writing style and the deep narrative tone raised my expectations. What I liked a lot was the ideas on how to diagram a conversation. Also the of appreciation of John Boyd and brief explanation of OODA was good.

But overall not a lot of content. More of a "common sense" tome mixed in with a plethora of academic quotes. Very high level and not a book that I think will help anyone learn how to deal with situations they have not before.

It made me to want to learn about the many folks the author references. It also made me want to put the book down several times.

Rich says

Venkatesh Rao's book is a brilliant read that incorporates learning theory, real-time assessment of uncertainty, and most importantly conceptual models that allow one to see and understand their surroundings faster (and perceptively randomly) than others.

While Rao does struggle with being too prescriptive (an approach akin to a self-help cookbook), he

successfully strains to point out to the reader that learning and conceptual recognition (and the tempo by which that is accomplished) is not possible by rote recognition and tool application. Rao's concepts of perception being emotionally based rather than cognitive, the "cheap-trick," and the Double-Freitag are quite descriptive models for fruitful thinking (in the terms that "all models are wrong, but some are useful").

As a prescriptive tome the book is not very useful, but if you are seeking a self-help silver bullet your search will go on endlessly. The value in Rao's concepts, the ultimate value of this text, is the mental provocations that it makes in the mind of the reader.

Highly recommend.

Ben Ide says

Tempo explores narrative rationality, as opposed to usual calcative rationality. From a calculative rational perspective, this book offers another way to explore how the world works in a neat package, ready for use. From a narrative perspective, you will gain even more. Well worth a read.

Kars says

I have to say I had high expectations after all the excellent articles I'd read at Venkat's blog Ribbonfarm. I am afraid I was slightly disappointed, ultimately. A lot of the wit and cultural references that make his blog posts so enjoyable are absent here. Venkat seems to be catering to a broader audience here and has taken a safer route.

Comparisons aside, this is a pretty dense, challenging but welcome antidote to the typical way of thinking about strategy, tactics and decision making, which is highly divorced from situated practice and does not account for the fundamental unpredictability of physical reality.

Richard Kemp says

The author of this book has a PhD in Engineering, which as an Engineer of lesser qualifications I have great respect for. His career is inspiring. His blog is well written, insightful, and compelling.

Unfortunately, this book is trash. My best guess (to reconcile this with the above) is that the concepts he describes make perfect sense *to him* but they are either not universally compatible with other people's modes other thinking (like mine), or he did a terrible job of explaining himself. As much less likely alternatives, I'm being stupid or just lack the necessary context to grasp his meaning.

That for me was the real problem with this book: meaning. Actual substance and content. I didn't see any of it. Comparing the writing style to other (better) books on similar topics is strongly reminiscent of the way pseudoscience sounds compared to the way real science sounds. Devoid of content, causal relationships between elements, etc..

About 1/4 of the way through the book I was not getting anything out of it and starting to get suspicious. By

a third of the way I was ready to quit, but in light of my first paragraph and the fact that the book is rather short, I resolved to continue. By half way I saw a GLARING typo/grammar error and couldn't take it any more.

Jonathan says

Has some good ideas, but I found it quite jumbled and a little hard to follow. That's obviously my bad, not the author's.

Santino Maguire says

I bought this book on the strength of one article I read and really liked on ribbonfarm.

I made a huge mistake, but I *did* learn something from this book -- how not to write one. It's almost a textbook example: front-load with lots and lots of definitions without any motivation. I found myself continually *not* trusting the author, who would make wild claims with no substantiation or citation.

All in all, I got about 50% through this book but finally decided to sink the cost. That being said, I'm still going to try to get a refund.

Vikrant Varma says

Packed with insights but hard to comprehend. Rao's style is to take you through dozens of models for every idea, but when he does give examples they illustrate wonderfully. I'll be digesting this for a while.

Chris says

Fun read and some cool mental concepts to play around with. If you've ever wondered about rhythm/timing and how it might apply in different contexts, you'll love this book.

Loved the part on narrative structure, somewhat like the mythological Heroes journey of Jung/Campbbell, applied to tempo.

Rao notes 'narrative rationality' is a powerful and dangerous approach to decision making. Thinking in terms of stories leads to all sorts of biases. But it provides a quick 'true enough' summary of our current mental models. It can help us look at where we are, where we are going, and where we hope to get to. It can structure our behaviours in a meaningful way.

Different periods of your life or 'epochs' have a different feeling of momentum or tempo. These stories are rhythmic, and identifying the tempo changes can help identify where you are (on the "Freytag staircase" or narrative space-timeline). Thinking in this way you can frame "decisions against the backdrop of an appropriate narrative time, measured by an appropriate narrative clock".

Stories typically follow a rise fall structure. We live through our enactments in th frm of a 'deep story' - "an episode of creativee destruction that is significant enough to transform you...Deep stories represent the largest scale at which we enact meaning. Liminal passages chop up our lives into deep stories, creating the fundamental tempo of life".

Rao lays out a canonical 'deep story' structure in the following way to distinguise between different epochs each with their own characteristic tempo:

Liminal passage - stillness. Caught between rich narratives. Existential musing.
Exploration - Volatile, dissipative. Accumulation of info. Increasing disorder/entropy
Cheap trick - Crescendo. Timing is critical. Entropy reaches a point - discover exploitable pattern - draw relevance boundary with an organising (partial) insight and extract rewards - chaos transformed into meaningful order. Want it compelling and elegant.
Sense making - decrescendo with emotional relief - reflect and test against reality. Useful or not?
Valley - Steady with slowing momentum, ^ing depression. Diminishing returns from trick. Feature - decisive action without reward or validation - leap of faith. Longest and most difficult phase.
Heavy lift - High effort, low-coherence ^ in momentum. Valley becomes unbearable - trigger for final push out of valley.
Separation event - Crescendo - Mental model externalised into environment. Out of your control.
Retrospective - Decrescendo, mix of joy/sorrow. Attempt to put story behind us, return to 'normalcy'.
Success/failure of separation and ability to make sense of it determines ability to return to low entropy state.
Liminal passage - as retrospective tapers off, tempo slows to near standstill.

This section was some of the most enjoyable reading in a while. It helped put some structure to my personal narrative.

Jordan Peacock says

Tempo is a library in a book. For good and/or ill, it demands a lot of the reader. Concepts are covered in 3 pages that deserve 30, and many are outsourced to the admirable bibliography for fuller treatment. Tempo is best approached as a map - intentionally bringing to the fore enough information to provide directionality and context while leaving the specifics to be encountered or sought.

It's a dense book, as a result - high information, in the Shannon sense, but maintaining consilience. The main idea is presented nearly three fourths of the way through the book, and a couple key definitions appear later still, as much of the lead-up is preparatory, appropriately priming the reader conceptually.

This is a book to be read once quickly, in an afternoon or a weekend, and then again over weeks or months, ideally with someone willing to share the experience and wrestle with the concepts alongside.

Johann says

The book, as many point out, is almost too compact, giving you so much to chew on that you'll be busy for

months, even years, in understanding and applying its ideas to your reality.

Not exactly the "theory of everything", but somehow close. At least when it comes to decision making. The fascinating thing a out this book, for me, are parallels and similarities to other, seemingly unrelated books and ideas, like, for example, "Finite and Infinite Games", or "The Information". Too much to outline it here, but worth keeping in mind.

Suhrob says

I'm a big fan of Venkat's writing at ribbonfarm. However, often I feel reading him is a guilty pleasure. Venkat is a good writer, and even better reader. He connects many distant concepts into broader frameworks.

Why guilty pleasure then? Well I think, these frameworks very, very rarely do any actual work - the new viewpoints, do not yield any practical benefits, insight or understanding. They reparametrize usually simple, often overlooked, concepts with much more complex constructions. While the new formalisms are very impressive, they rarely bring anything actually actionable.

And you know, that is completely fine and highly enjoyable.

But in a book format it was much harder to stomach. Venkat takes one overlooked aspect of decision making, the tempo, and spins around it an extended conceptual framework that includes extending the standard narrative triangle to a double Freytag triangle and then linking it to a 'staircase' including reparametrization from wall-clock time to entropy. Differential geometry is name-dropped on the way, for good measure.

This is not Deepak Chopra hullabaloo. Venkat understands the concepts, uses them coherently and the metaphorical link is there. He just forgets to tell you WHY FOR GOD'S SAKE should you care. You read about 100 pages of theory without having a clue, with no reason or motivation stated at all. Sure, it's a nice observation that there is something like a tempo in decision making. But is this book help you to make better decisions? Or what? A huge, huge failure here is doing a lot of work without any statement of motivation.

Eventually one can see that being more sensitive to the tempo might be beneficial, but there is not much practical advice here (tempo doodling? please!).

The narrative focus is very dangerous. I agree with Venkat that there is no narrative neutral decision making, but he ignores most of learnings of the Kahneman/Tversky school (bar a short mention of Taleb). I think his method of embracing the narratives can bring some benefits, but is much, much more vulnerable to the slew of biases. The net benefit is questionable, and never discussed in the book.

Standard decision making theory (of the expected values/decision tree kind) is also cheaply slandered and straw-maned, something unusual for Venkat, who is usually more intellectually honest.

So overall, there is something to tempo, and I'll try to keep thinking/noticing it, but the book is a deep disappointment.