

Visualizing the Existential Risk Landscape

The neglect of the risk that humanity could destroy itself in governmental, academic, and social spheres is a shocking oversight. Yet even those who are committed to understanding and preventing forms of this risk struggle to fully grasp, both cognitively and emotionally, the enormity of these risks and their consequences. I set out to understand the cognitive biases that may be preventing people from grasping GCRs and exercising effective judgement, and to explore the potential of data visualization to counteract them and communicate compelling GCR-scale arguments.

Two of the most relevant cognitive biases I learned about were scope neglect, which prevents people from comprehending risks at a very large scale and proportionately grasping their magnitude, and optimism bias, which makes people more likely to live with a very low-probability but incredibly high-risk loss (such as a GCR) than they are to opt for an almost-definite small loss (such as concessions to prevent GCRs). While reading up on worst-case scenario risk communication, I learned one great way to counteract optimism bias is to evoke outrage. This makes people put more weight on the magnitude of the risk than its probability, and can be effectively done through emotional appeal, placing emphasis on the humanity and personal significance of an issue.

These observations, along with the image of humanity in its adolescence, the time period in which we have the advanced capabilities to destroy ourselves and have not yet developed the maturity to prevent such disaster, led me to the thought experiment that became my main deliverable:

If humanity were one human...

[HTTPS://ODELIALORCH.GITHUB.IO/IFHUMANITY/INDEX.HTML](https://odelialorch.github.io/IFHUMANITY/INDEX.HTML)

We're each aware of our own mortality, and grapple with this awareness throughout our lives. Yet as much as we may struggle to grasp our personal fates, it's even harder to grasp the mortality of humanity. This project is a multi-page web visualization that prompts viewers to think about the future of humanity by asking the question, "what if humanity were one human?"

With more time, I'd like to work on a section that demonstrates how the percent risks are reduced by various preventative measures. I hope to interview experts in GCR fields to prompt these estimations. Another section I'd like to add is an uplifting display of humanity's potential, made by crowdsourcing responses to the question "What do you believe humanity can achieve?" I'd also like to more generally continue the conversation about effectively communicating GCRs with whomever in the field (or outside of it) is interested.

Beyond this visualization, I hope to explore and work on other ideas for visualizations that came up over the course of the SERI program. The next one I'm starting to think about is a project that connects Hollywood movies about the end of the world to reality.

[Link to final powerpoint presentation](#)