

February 15, 2018

A Non-Comprehensive List of Curses

A little while ago I was reading some papers and stumbled across the phrase "Curse of Dimensionality". I was already aware of the term, but it got me thinking about the use of the word "curse". It just seemed a little *medieval* for modern scientific language. I liked it.

I also started to wonder what other notable curses are out there, so I started to do some research. This article is a short, non-comprehensive list of some of the interesting curses I found.

First, a definition. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "curse" in a [couple of related ways](#). The most relevant for the purposes of this article are:

1. "A prayer or invocation for harm or injury to come upon one."
2. "A cause of great harm or misfortune."

I'm going to describe six different curses that more or less satisfy one of the two definitions given above.

Curse of Dimensionality

The phrase "curse of dimensionality" was coined by Richard Bellman in his 1957 book, [Dynamic Programming](#). The curse refers to the fact that the volume of a space increases exponentially as the dimensionality increases. This quickly makes available data become sparse as dimensions are added. A list of domains that are affected by

this curse and some illustrative examples can be found on [Wikipedia](#).

Tecumseh's Curse

Also known as the zero-year curse, Tecumseh's curse refers to the tendency of presidents elected or re-elected in years divisible by 20 to die in office. This started in 1840 with William Henry Harrison and continued through to 1960 with John F. Kennedy. Ronald Reagan (elected 1980) and George W. Bush (elected 2000) both survived their presidencies, though assassination attempts were made.

The curse arises from William Henry Harrison's time as governor of the Indiana Territory, when he used dubious tactics while negotiating a treaty with Native Americans. A Shawnee leader named Tecumseh organized a group of Native American tribes to resist American expansion, resulting in what has become known as Tecumseh's War. Harrison defeated the Native American forces in the Battle of Tippecanoe, after which Tecumseh cursed Harrison and subsequent presidents elected in years ending with the same number as him.

The origin story of the curse varies slightly depending on the source, but the gist is the same. The version I presented here borrows elements from an article entitled "The zero-year curse" by William Connery that appeared in *World and I* magazine in 2001, as well as [Wikipedia's account](#), which is based on a 1931 edition of *Ripley's Believe It or Not*.

The presidents who have supposedly fallen victim to this curse are:

- **William Henry Harrison** - Elected in 1840; died of pneumonia on April 4, 1841, after serving only 31 days as president. He was the first president to die in office and served the shortest term of any president to date.
- **Abraham Lincoln** - Elected in 1860; died on April 15, 1865, after being shot by John Wilkes Booth.
- **James A. Garfield** - Elected in 1880; died on September 19, 1881, from an

infected gunshot wound. He had been shot on July 2 by Charles J. Guiteau.

- **William McKinley** - Elected in 1896, re-elected in 1900; died on September 14, 1901, after having been shot by anarchist Leon Czolgosz on September 6.
- **Warren G. Harding** - Elected in 1920; died August 2, 1923 of a heart attack.
- **Franklin D. Roosevelt** - Elected in 1932 and re-elected three subsequent times, including in 1940; died on April 12, 1945 of a cerebral hemorrhage, shortly after having been re-elected to his fourth term.
- **John F. Kennedy** - Elected in 1960; died on November 22, 1963 after being shot. Lee Harvey Oswald was charged with the crime, but was himself murdered two days later by Jack Ruby. Conspiracy theories abound.

Curse of Ham

The curse of Ham is a biblical curse described in the [Book of Genesis, Chapter 9](#).

Ham was the son of Noah and had two brothers, Shem and Japheth. After the business with the ark, Noah became a husbandman and planted a vineyard, from which he made wine. One day he drank too much and became drunk, leading to him sleeping "uncovered", or naked, in his tent.

Ham went into his father's tent and saw him naked, then told Shem and Japheth about it. Shem and Japheth entered Noah's tent while averting their eyes, so they didn't see his nakedness, and covered him.

When Noah awoke, he somehow knew that Ham had seen him naked and was very angry about it. Thus he cursed Ham's son, Canaan, to be the servant of Ham's brothers Shem and Japheth.

This seems pretty harsh, and also pretty unfair to Canaan since he gets punished for his father's transgression. It's especially unfair when we take into account that Ham had other sons whom apparently got off scot-free. Poor Canaan.

The point of the curse was apparently to justify the subjugation of the Canaanites to

the Israelites, as the Israelites are descendants of Shem through Jacob. [This book](#) provides a helpful commentary on all of the five books of Moses.

The curse of Ham has been used in the past to justify the enslavement of African people, which can be read about in [this book](#).

Curse of Resources

The curse of resources is described in [this article](#). It refers to the observation that most countries possessing an abundance of natural resources have experienced relatively slow economic growth in the post-WWII period. Examples given in the article include a number of Latin American and African countries, as well as the oil-rich Gulf states.

Explanations for the curse are generally built around the idea that a disproportionately large focus on natural resources results in too little focus on other economic activities that drive growth.

Curse of Aid

The curse of aid is similar to the curse of resources, but refers instead to the negative impact of foreign aid on developing countries, as described in [this paper](#). The paper claims that there is a negative correlation between foreign aid and democratic institutions, and that such institutions are in turn correlated with growth.

Curse of Knowledge

Consider a seemingly reasonable assumption in economics: more information is always better than less information. Better-informed agents should be able to predict the actions of less-informed agents, and thus outperform them.

[This journal article](#) claims that this is in fact not the case: more information can

actually be detrimental. The reason for this is that an individual may not be able to ignore information they possess, even when it may actually be beneficial to do so. The article refers to this phenomenon as the curse of knowledge.

An example of the curse is provided by [this paper](#), which discusses the curse in the context of teaching. The paper discusses how it can be very difficult for a teacher to put themselves in the mindset of a student who does not possess the same expertise. The teacher is unable to ignore their own larger set of knowledge and approach the material from the same perspective as the student.

[This paper](#) neatly summarizes the curse as the inability of individuals "to ignore knowledge they have that others do not."