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Execs place bets on tech's future

Tags: Stefanie Olsen, Hardware

By Stefanie Olsen
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SCOTTSDALE, Ariz.--In 28 years, commercial airline passengers will routinely fly in pilotless airplanes. Sound ludicrous?

Not to Microsoft Chief Technology Officer Craig Mundie, who recently bet Google Chief Executive Eric Schmidt $2,000 that the prediction would come true.

The wager will be made public Tuesday evening at PCForum, where a group of Silicon Valley futurists plan to take the wraps off of their latest quirky enterprise aimed at twisting humanity's gaze from the rearview mirror to the road ahead.

Called the Long Bets Foundation, the nonprofit plans to collect highbrow predictions about what the world will be like years, decades and even centuries hence. In the spirit of sportsmanship, prognosticators must put their money where their mouths are--all for the sake of charity, of course, in observance of U.S. antigambling laws.

The group has already lined up a who's who of the technology world to donate their thoughts--and a small chunk of money--to posterity. Along with Mundie and Schmidt, a $20,000 bet has been registered between tech pioneer Ray Kurzweil (for) and Lotus founder Mitch Kapor (against) the proposition that "a computer--or 'machine intelligence'--will pass the Turing Test by 2029."

Actor Ted Danson, meanwhile, is pretty confident that the U.S. men's soccer team will not win the World Cup before the Red Sox win the World Series. He's staked $2,000 on the outcome with *Time* magazine editor-at-large Mike Elliot, according to the Long Bets Web site.

The site is more than a simple lark, according to Long Bets and *Wired* magazine co-founder Kevin Kelly.

"The project was born out of a desire to create a responsibility roster," he said. "It's the logic that's important. Over time we'll accumulate this caseload of thinking. We'll have a mechanism for how to think long-term better and be more responsible about making predictions."

Wagers have held a long and distinguished history in the sciences. In 1991, the theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking took on Kip Thorne and John Preskill over the proposition that physical singularities can occur only inside black holes where they cannot be seen--a bet he conceded six years later on a technicality after a supercomputer successfully simulated the phenomenon.

Long Bets was inspired by a famous bet between Stanford University biologist Paul Erlich, the author of a series of sensational books on the effects of overpopulation, and University of Maryland economist Julian Simon. Erlich paid $576 in 1990 to settle the decade-old wager after his predictions about a looming scarcity of natural resources failed to materialize. Although the amount of money paid out was paltry, the bet was a black eye for Erlich's views in the court of public opinion.

Long Bets is just one of several projects created by Kelly in partnership with a cadre of like-minded futurists such as WholeEarth Catalogue founder Stewart Brand and PCForum host and Internet guru Esther Dyson.

The foundation stems from an organization created by supercomputer pioneer Danny Hillis in 1996, called the Long Now Foundation, which is working to build a clock that will run for the next 10,000 years, among other things. Kelly and Brand are also behind the recently launched All Species Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to documenting a complete inventory of all species of life on Earth within the next 25 years.

It remains to be seen how much staying power Long Bets will have. But the concept created waves at the PCForum, where the techno-elite lobbed a barrage of betting

opportunities at one another.

One conference-goer egged Microsoft President Rick Belluzzo to take up an open bet from Marc Sokol, a partner at JK&B Capital, who predicted that in 10 years 75 percent of all revenue from enterprise software companies will be from subscriptions rather than license fees.

"I'm on your side," Belluzzo said.

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