<< Back to Article

Making a Bet You Can Sleep In

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Will a computer ever successfully impersonate a human?

Ray Kurzweil thinks so. In fact, the prominent technologist placed $10,000 on a bet that predicts a machine will pass the "Turing Test" by 2029.

Microsoft's Craig Mundie has bet $1,000 that by 2030, commercial passengers will routinely fly in pilotless planes.

Supercomputer pioneer Danny Hillis has wagered $1,000 that the universe will eventually stop expanding.

These are just some of the bets put down by high-profile technologists, futurists and entrepreneurs on a new nonprofit website, The Long Bets Foundation.

Long Bets is a spinoff of the Long Now Foundation, which is undertaking a variety of very long-term projects such as the 10,000-year clock and the Rosetta Project.

Former *Wired* magazine editor Kevin Kelly started up Long Bets, with *The Well* founder Stewart Brand, as a mechanism to make socially responsible predictions. Wired magazine has devoted comprehensive coverage to the venture in its May issue.

"I long have wanted to have a 'responsibility record,' which would keep track of contemporary debates in detail and revisit them critically over later decades and centuries, to see who was right and why," Brand said.

Long Bets offers a mechanism for that to occur, with a way to pay for the record-keeping, Brand said.

"This is a platform in which to get serious," Kelly agreed.

Since the project was announced at the PC Forum conference last week, the long bet process "became successful right away because it immediately began to foster long-term responsibility to think beyond one to two years, which is the normal horizon," Kelly said.

Anyone can place a bet in an open forum where skeptics can challenge pundits' claims.

There are some rules, however. Bets must be "of societal or scientific importance." The minimum bet is $1,000, with no maximum amount. The minimum period is two years, with no maximum period. Bettors must present an argument why their bet is important and why they think they will win.

"Long Bets are about something consequential," Brand said. "They're not guesses or a matter of playing the odds."

All proceeds must go to the winner's charity of choice.

"Winners are not gaining anything themselves," Kelly said. "This is a way to raise charitable contributions and make bets public."

The bet money goes into the Farsight Fund, a long-term investment portfolio. Half of the fund's growth is drawn to maintain the Long Bets service; the other half accrues so that payment to the winner's charity will eventually be larger than the original bet stakes.

At the end of the bet period, if the bettors agree on the outcome, then the result will be publicized and winnings will be distributed to the bettor's charity of choice. If not, then committees of impartial, third-party experts will examine both sides' original arguments to see if they match with reality.

"We hope that seeing these predictions through to completion publicly, with public discussion all along the way, may generally improve thinking about how to deal with predictions and how to make them," Brand said.

Technologists and scientists have long placed high-profile bets on future discoveries.

In 1980, Paul Ehrlich, a Stanford University biologist and author, made a bet with University of Maryland economist Julian Simon that the price of mineral commodities would rise in 10 years. A decade later, Ehrlich paid Simon $576 after prices of commodities had plummeted and his predictions that the world was heading toward an era of scarcity never materialized.

"That changed the entire conversation about the environment," Kelly said. "It removed (resource scarcity) from the environmental agenda."

Like the Ehrlich bet, Kelly hopes that bets placed on the Long Bets site will have a significant effect on long-term thinking.

"Proper bets can have a tremendous influence on how things shake out," Kelly said.

So far, recorded bets range from $1,000 bets to Kurzweil's $10,000 wager.

Some, such as actor Ted Danson's $1,000 wager against the prediction that the U.S. men's soccer team will win the World Cup before the Red Sox win the World Series, rivals Hillis' universe-expansion bet as one that may never be settled.

Weblogger Dave Winer has bet against *The New York Times* Digital CEO Martin Nisenholtz that weblogs will rank higher than *The New York Times*' website in the top five news stories of 2007.

But that's assuming that Google is still around.

"If not Google, then it will be something like Google," Winer said. "It will be whatever is authoritative at that time. Maybe Google won't be around in five years."

Even if some bets aren't resolved, the foundation may help to observe long-term trends.

"We could benefit from thinking long-term," Winer said. "The questions we have about how we use technology now seem to be more focused on the past than on the future."

It's unforeseeable whether the winner's charity of choice will still exist, or if the winner will still be alive to stake their claim by the time many of these wagers come to an end.

"We can't predict anything," Kelly said. Long-term bets "are difficult because we're very much locked into this time. It's very hard to escape our time."

But founders insist that the group will be around for the next few hundred years.

"We want to be the place where people think about the long-term past and the long-term future," Kelly said.