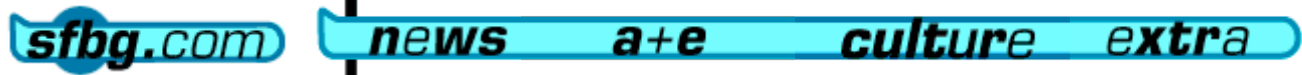


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No futurism

WHERE DID "the future" come from? It feels to me like such a 19th-century idea, the future, a miraculous thing that science promises us we can have if we work hard and make technological progress. About 200 years ago, when rationalism was all the rage, people began to believe that life was a linear progression, like a curve sweeping upward on a graph. Civilization forged bravely ahead toward a more enlightened future.

That idea was quite different from many religious worldviews, in which life turns in an endless, repetitive cycle of birth, death, rebirth. Sometimes rebirth takes place in heaven, and sometimes on earth. Either way, there is no urgency about this future. The future is just more of what's happened in the past. Before science and its obsession with progress, there were no societies plotted out like lines on graphs; there were only graceful circles.

But now we live in a world of linear time: instead of reaching toward heaven or utopia or Valhalla, our neurotically industrial culture looks forward to temporal progress, the moment that comes next.

Sometimes the future looks bright. We think of it as a time when people will be smarter, better able to manage conflict and resources. And sometimes it seems inevitably ugly, gutted by corporate greed and ecological decay, populated by starving slaves. Obsessing about the future also creates a rebellious nihilism, a refusal to participate in somebody else's manufactured dreams of a possible tomorrow. That's the spirit that made the Sex Pistols howl, "NO FUTURE!," and it's what fuels the mortal courage of so many soldiers who'd rather die than live in a future ruled by their enemies.

Thinking about the future drives people mad with possibilities and power. The concept is so potent that we rush to own it. We trade in futures on the stock market; corporations vie to

convince consumers that their products are truly the most futuristic. Our future seems so concrete, despite its ineffability, that adults often nervously wonder about what the next generation will do with the future we build for them – as if it were a toy that could be broken.

I recently attended a public discussion where digerati elders Kevin Kelly and Stuart Brand talked about studying the future with their new idea, the Long Bets Foundation (www.longbet.org). Their concern is that people don't think clearly about the future – they make grandiose claims about it but take no responsibility for those claims later, when their imagined future has led to present-day disasters.

Think, for example, how our lives would be different if fiscal conservatives could be held responsible for a future in which there is no social security. Perhaps if conservatives' role in creating that future is remembered, people will learn better from the past. The economic errors that will lead to a huge population of starving, disenfranchised elderly people can be attributed to a set of ideas that originated with wonky 1990s futurists who said, "Oh yeah, these tax cuts will be good for the future!" And perhaps, remembering that, voters will change the future by picking leaders who create a better fiscal policy.

Of course, Kelly and Brand's foundation isn't quite as coherent as all that. I'm really projecting my own wishes about the future onto their concept, which is a simple one. They ask people to place large bets – no less than \$1,000 – on future predictions, and every bet must be matched by another player. So, for example, one person bets \$1,000 that cars will be illegal by 2020, and another person bets \$1,000 they won't. The bets get posted to the Web site, and the public comments on them. If a bettor "wins," the money goes to a charitable organization of his or her choice.

Bigwigs like Esther Dyson and Mitch Kapor are already betting on various issues. And of course, somebody from Microsoft (anti-open source VP Craig Mundie, to be exact) is already abusing the service by using his bet to promote Microsoft's "trustworthy computing" campaign.

Jim Home, who helped design the Long Bets Web site, says he got involved in the project because it was a way to preserve the past. "The message boards are the most important part of the site," he says, "because they'll allow us to look back at how people were debating various issues years ago." Home's point

seemed to me the most persuasive argument I could imagine for such a project.

As for my bet? Futurism has no future. These long bettors with their buckets of cash want to buy the years ahead. But social transformation is not something you bet on; it's something you work for.

Annalee Newitz (nobets@techsploitation.com) is a surly media nerd who predicts the future will involve dinner. Her column also appears in Metro, Silicon Valley's weekly newspaper.