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No instant winners at Longbets.org

Promoting patience through wagering

From Andy Jordan
CNN

(CNN) --Stewart Brand is betting that time is on his side.

As co-creator of a foundation dedicated to long-term thinking, Brand doesn't believe in wristwatches. He prefers a clock that measures time in 10,000-year increments.

The clock is a project of the "Longnow Foundation," the Web site of which, [Longbets.org](#), is sort of a bulletin board for futurists. The clock has become a mascot for the site, representing the patience usually required to cash in.

"It forces people who are making a prediction to put it in falsifiable terms, just as if it were a scientific hypothesis," says Brand.

But the site is also partly a Vegas betting pit. You don't just make far-out predictions -- you also have to back them up with a minimum of \$1,000.

Of course, the payout could take a very, very long time.

Some wagers are more whimsical than others; actor Ted Danson is betting that the Boston Red Sox will win the World Series before the United States soccer team takes the World Cup.

On the more serious side, author and futurist Ray Kurzweil put up \$10,000 betting that a computer will receive human-level intelligence by 2029. He's not sure whether the new age of computers will resemble the emotive replicants in the movie "Blade Runner" or the deceptive HAL 9000 from "2001: A Space Odyssey," but Kurzweil believes projects to model the human brain will make the smart PCs possible.

"It's only a matter of software development and modeling the computer after the human brain," he says.

Kurzweil says while the hardware requirements will be there much sooner, "speed and memory alone are not sufficient." The obstacle, he notes, is to figure out how to assign the subtleties of human language and pattern recognition. He touts new projects intended to model the human brain.

On the other side of the bet is futurist and founder of the Lotus Corporation, Mitch Kapur, who takes issue with the "brain as computer" metaphor.

"It's only a metaphor, much like the heart is a pump," says Kapur. "We're undervaluing and underappreciating ourselves if we think a computer is going to pass us."

Fostering dialogue

Regardless, both Kapur and Kurzweil agree that the Web site is just the kind of venue needed to foster dialogue, something Brand likes to hear.

The three of them say they agree that society in general isn't good at looking at long-term issues. While Kapor thinks attention spans are getting shorter, Brand goes a step further, and says people living in a post-September 11 world are purposefully trying to make things short-term.

"When you have two or three serious changes piled on top of one another," he says, "the world looks so different, you can't plan for it."

Still, Brand says people can protect their options, for themselves and future generations.

The money goes to charity

As for future bets, Brand says he hopes to see some wagering on how soon humans might get out of the solar system.

"It's either a severe barrier -- 'we're stuck here' -- or an incredible release into at least the rest of the galaxy," he says.


In an age in which businesses are consumed with next quarter's profits and short-term survivability, long-term thinking has taken a hit, Brand asserts. And he believes that putting money on predictions makes them legitimate matters of public conversation.

He's hoping the discussion section of his Web site, along with a sequential record of those dialogues, will help shape public awareness and policy.

As for the money won on a bet, it all goes to the winner's charity of choice -- assuming that charity, and even the bettor, is still around when that happens.

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