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Wanna Bet?

By AMY HARMON

WITH the de facto end of summer upon us, there is a natural tendency for the pulse to quicken, for the mind to snap out of repose and for debate to begin on the immediate burning questions of the fall. Will an invasion of Iraq come before Christmas? Which fashion fad will we succumb to first? pencil skirts or rugby shirts?

The Web site Longbets.org urges a longer and less idle view. Designed to sharpen long-term thinking on issues of social or scientific significance, the nonprofit site (a spinoff of the Long Now Foundation, headed by veteran Silicon Valley pundits Stewart Brand and Kevin Kelly), solicits prophecy backed by currency. To divert gamblers and kibitzers from the mesmerizing press of the next five minutes, the minimum bet is \$1,000 and the minimum period is two years. Bets are tax deductible and winnings (all in good time) go to a charity of the victor's choice.

Since its debut in April, Longbets has published 11 bets on topics ranging from where alien life will be discovered to when commercial planes will regularly fly without pilots. The prognosticators with deep pockets include technology executives, scientists, writers, philosophers and the actor Ted Danson. Both sides must post a defense of their position, and anyone can participate in the ensuing online discussion.

Before the short-range seduction of September kicks in, then, here are excerpts from conflicting visions of a more distant future, and some wagers still in search of a taker.

The biggest bet (so far)

"A computer or 'machine intelligence' will pass the Turing test by 2029"

Most Longbettors stick to the minimum stake of \$1,000 each. Here Mitchell Kapur, the founder of Lotus Development, explains why he was confident enough to wager a \$10,000 that no computer in the next 27 years will be able to impersonate a human well enough to fool a human judge (the Turing test):

While it is possible to imagine a machine obtaining a perfect score on the SAT or winning Jeopardy? since these rely on retained facts and the ability to recall them? it seems far less possible that a machine can weave things together in new ways or to have true imagination in a way that matches everything people can do, especially if we have a full appreciation of the creativity people are capable of. . . . Computers look relatively smarter in theory when those making the estimate judge people to be dumber and more limited than they are.

Ray Kurzweil, an artificial intelligence pioneer and entrepreneur, on why he is equally sure Mr. Kapur is wrong (and why he believes the \$20,000 total will go to his selected charity, the Kurzweil Foundation):

The brain is self-organizing, which means that it is created with relatively little innate knowledge. Most of its complexity comes from its own interaction with a complex world. Thus it will be necessary to provide an artificial intelligence with an education just as we do with a natural intelligence. But here the powers of machine intelligence can be brought to bear. Once we are able to master a process in a machine, it can perform its operations at a much faster speed than biological systems. As I mentioned,

contemporary electronics is already more than 10 million times faster than the human nervous system's electrochemical information processing. Once an AI masters human basic language skills, it will be in a position to expand its language skills and general knowledge by rapidly reading all human literature and by absorbing the knowledge contained on millions of Web sites. . . .

The longest bet (so far)

"At least one human alive in the year 2000 will still be alive in 2150"

Unless one of the bettors turns out to be the human in question, they'll never know who won. But according to the rules of the service, which is set up to be administered for several centuries, Longbets will award the winnings in 148 years "with great fanfare." Peter Schwartz, a futurist, makes a case for scientific progress:

If one simply looks at the historical trend, one finds that over the last century, we have nearly doubled human life span. The average lifespan of human beings (average, not maximum) has gone from about 45 to about 85. With the advances in microbiology and molecular biology, there's no reason to imagine that we won't do at least as much in the next century. . . .

Melody K. Haller replies with her own unique interpretation of Darwin:

Humans may succeed in overcoming self-limiting life spans but the result is likely to be contra-indicatory to the continued success of humans and other life. . . . I am betting money against his prediction purely because I believe that the further radical prolonging of human (and pet) longevity would not benefit the human species. . . .

The sports bet

"The U.S. men's soccer team will win the World Cup before the Red Sox win the World Series."

Nestled in among propositions on the fate of the universe and the likely future Nobel Prize, this bet might seem to flout the "social or scientific significance" rule, but Mike Elliot, an editor-at-large for Time magazine, somehow manages to wrap in globalization and metaphysics:

As immigration and technology continue to make the U.S. a more international nation, so the quality of its soccer team will continue to increase. Already, American teenagers can hold their own with players from more established countries, while players like Claudio Reyna and Kasey Keller have become acknowledged international stars. The Curse of the Bambino, on the other hand, is one of those mystical truths that are beyond the reach of human intervention. Cheers, Ted.

Perhaps not one for intellectual pretense, Ted Danson, who played a retired Red Sox pitcher on the sitcom "Cheers" for 11 seasons, grounds his reply in pragmatism:

The Red Sox have had such bad luck in the 20th century, I have to believe that in the new millennium it can only get better. Besides, statistically, scoring goals is harder than hitting a home run, and in the World Cup, you have the whole WORLD against you, but in baseball, the Red Sox only really have to beat the Yankees.

Count on a discussion group participant, "micromike" to return to more sober astronomical postulation. In a post titled "I feel bad for Danson," he writes:

It must be hard living a delusional life thinking that Boston will ever win the World Series!!! A team from outer space will win the series before Boston does. . . .

Tired of the future? Ready to embrace back-to-school shopping for things you can use, say, next week? But wait, before deliberations begin on what's for dinner, say, tonight, here's a sampling of the more than 20 bets that remain open. Any can be joined with \$1,000 and a few clicks at Longbets.org .

? By 2100 a world government will be in place and in control of: business law, environmental law and weapons of mass destruction.

? By 2020, bioterror or bioerror will lead to one million casualties in a single event.

? By the year 2015 solar electricity will be as cheap or cheaper than that produced by fossil fuels.

? By 2030 all surgical anesthesia will be administered and monitored by computers, with no need for professional medical supervision beyond the surgeon.

? By 2050, we will receive intelligent signals from outside our solar system.

? By 2070, at least six countries will have officially implemented a 4-day working week.

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