

VOICES

## He wants in on the action

### Intellectual wagering? Bring it on, and bring your wallet.

By Alex Beam, Globe Columnist | April 2, 2010

I want to bet against the iPad, and I am trying to figure out how. I could short Apple stock, but short selling is best left to the pros. Happily, on the Internet all things are possible. At the website [YouWager.com](http://YouWager.com), their bettors predict the iPad will sell a million units within about two months of its on-sale date. You could make decent money betting the “under,” or the contrary proposition, that fewer than a million will be sold. That seems like a tricky bet to me, given Apple’s fanatical control of sales data and masterful manipulation of the press.

I should explain my reasoning. The iPad doesn’t really cost \$500, if you want anything like real connectivity. That will cost you between \$629 and \$829, plus monthly fees. The cool kids all have \$800 rattling around in their pockets for a new toy — the iPad has no keyboard, which makes it a toy — but the rest of us are not so lucky. Earlier this week, Newsweek declared that “The iPad Will Change Everything,” and if there is a more reliable contrary indicator, I don’t know what it is.

But this is a column about interesting bets, not about pricey gewgaws for finger-in-the-wind spendthrifts. At YouWager, you can also bet on future unemployment rates, for instance. Right now, they place even odds that the Greater Boston jobless tally will hold steady until May 10. Good bet for the governor, no? For the record, they seem convinced that Crystal Bowersox, whoever she is, will win this season’s “American Idol.”

At the website of London-based Ladbrokes, you can bet on this fall’s Swedish election, in which a bewildering array of Lefts, Greens, and Social Democrats face off against the four-party coalition Borgerliga Alliansen. Ladbrokes thinks the bewildering array will win. They also think Barack Obama will be reelected president in 2012. In fact, they deem it a sure thing.

Are you a sporting fellow? If you wager one euro on the outside possibility that Lou Dobbs or Appalachian Trail through-hiker Mark Warner wins the presidency in 2012, Ladbrokes will pay you 200 euros, or about \$270. If they win.

I am told betting is bad. All my right-thinking friends oppose casino gambling in Massachusetts, for instance. But betting can be an interesting way to think about the future, perhaps nowhere quite so interesting as at the website of the Long Now Foundation, [longbets.org](http://longbets.org). A passel of West Coast worthies, including Stewart Brand, former Wired magazine editor Kevin Kelly, and [Amazon](http://Amazon) founder Jeff Bezos, have poured time and money into Long Bets, and not in vain.

Here is how it works. Their members bet on issues of societal importance, with a minimum outcome window of two years. The winner donates his or her proceeds to charity. Example: In 2002, Web guru Dave Winer bet Martin Nisenholtz of The New York Times that within five years, a [Google](http://Google) news search would return more references to blog entries than to the Times’s website. Winer won \$2,000, which he donated to the World Wide Web Consortium.

There are other great bets on the site. Kevin Kelly bet Brand that most primatologists will acknowledge the existence of a yeti/Bigfoot by 2025. (Yes!) Warren Buffett bet a million dollars that the S&P 500 will outperform a portfolio of hedge funds for the decade starting Jan. 1, 2008. In 2002, venerable Random House editor Jason Epstein bet computer scientist Vincent Cerf that “by 2010, more than 50 percent of books sold worldwide will be printed on demand at the point of sale in the form of library-quality paperbacks.”

Epstein is a cofounder of the company that developed the print-on-demand Espresso machine — there is one at the Harvard Book Store — and it looks as if he will lose this bet, big time.

I proposed a long bet in a column two years ago, daring readers to wager that oceanfront real estate prices in Truro, Annisquam, and the Hamptons would decline by 2040. I bet that prices would remain constant, in 2007 dollars, or rise. (If you follow your global warming hysteria, you know that these towns will supposedly be underwater 30 years from now.) Curiously, only one reader, a ninth-grade friend, took me up on this.

Want a piece of this action? You know where to find me.

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