

April 1, 2002

On a Futurists' Forum, Money Backs Up Predictions

By ANDREW ZIPERN

When it comes to predicting the future, even the sharpest thinkers routinely have it wrong. In 1943, Thomas J. Watson, then chairman of I.B.M. ([news/quote](#)), predicted a world market for "about five computers." In 1966, Arthur C. Clarke guessed that "houses will be able to fly" by the year 2000. Realist cynics say the problem stems from a lack of accountability. Bill Gates may be ridiculed for his 1981 declaration about computer memory, that "640K ought to be enough for anybody," but he is unlikely to be held publicly responsible for it.

The Long Bets Foundation, a nonprofit group founded by two longtime Silicon Valley gadflies, Stewart Brand and Kevin Kelly, started an online forum last week for those willing to put their money, and reputations, behind their speculation. "An arena for competitive, accountable predictions," the LongBets.org Web site has already accepted several high-concept wagers from prominent technologists.

"The universe will eventually stop expanding," contends Danny Hillis, a leading computer designer, in a \$1,000 bet taken up by Nathan Myhrvold, the former chief technology officer for Microsoft ([news/quote](#)). Mr. Hillis argued that "cosmology is subject to fads."

Ray Kurzweil, an artificial intelligence expert, bet Mitchell D. Kapor, the founder of Lotus Development, that by 2029 "a computer ? or `machine intelligence' " will pass the Turing test, which states that artificial intelligence will be proved when a machine's conversation can be mistaken for a person's. Each man wagered \$10,000 of his own money.

But the money, for these already wealthy and accomplished idea gamblers, is hardly the issue. (Winnings must be donated to a charity of the victor's choice.)

"The whole point really is that you're on the record, and the record remembers," Mr. Brand said in an interview.

Alexander Rose, the foundation's executive director, said: "These are things that will be hugely consequential to the world, and this is a place for debating what could happen."

But Laura Lee, the author of "Bad Predictions," a book that compiles "2000 years of the best minds making the worst forecasts," said that the site better reflected the present than the future. "We'll be seeing lots of computer, communications and security bets, and they will say more about 2002 than 2032," she said.

Though some of the wagers may never be settled, Mr. Brand is nothing if not a long-term optimist. "The heavy promise," he said, "is that we will be around in 2125."

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