Emergent Futures

What's Emerging December 2007

www.emergentfutures.com

Welcome to our final edition for 2007. We hope you have enjoyed the newsletter over the year and found it of value in your business. We will be back with the next edition in January. Meanwhile, if you are looking for some reading material over the holidays, check out our list of recommended books under What We Are Writing About.

Wishing you all a very happy and safe Christmas and prosperous New Year.

Cheers

Paul Higgins, Sandy Teagle, Syed Ahmed Muqthar, Kim Stewart and Samantha Kyle-Little

Business Tips

SkypePhone

Those of you that have followed our emails and blogs for a while will know that we are a user of and fan of Skype. There is now a combined mobile and SkypePhone available through 3. We have no commercial interest or advertising interest in this offer.

3 Mobile offers cut price wireless mobile plans

3 Mobile has halved the price of its mobile broadband plans over 24 months as it attempts to fend off new rivals. The one gigabyte monthly package would cost $14.50, and scale up to $49.50 for 5GB. We use a 3 mobile wireless card and it works pretty well although coverage is largely limited to the capital cities.

Smart desktop

Using machine intelligence technology, Smart Desktop automatically organizes your information by project so you can find it instantly. The program is currently in Beta and you can register to download it when it becomes available.

What's Emerging

Elf yourself

If you haven't already seen this amusing alternative to the usual Christmas card and you fancy yourself in a pair of tights then this is the site for you.

Why pets hate christmas

Some people go overboard with the Christmas decorations including costumes for their [cats](#) and [dogs](#). Some of the pet's expressions here are priceless.

Feeling cancer cells

A multidisciplinary team of UCLA scientists were able to differentiate metastatic cancer cells from normal cells in patient samples using leading-edge nanotechnology that measures the softness of the cells. The technique may lead to a new diagnostic tool for cancer.

Satlav

London's Westminster City council has launched a toilet-finding service to help relieve visitor's bloated bladders and prevent public urination. When a user texts "toilet" (at a cost of 50 cents) the service will pinpoint their location by measuring the strength of the phone signal. It will then guide the user to one of 40 public toilets entered into the system thus far. Another example of ubiquitous information and hand held devices changing the way we live.

Measuring brain responses

EmSense claims to have created a system that can measure people's responses to commercials and games through a sensor head set that measures brain activity. These and other neuroscience based techniques are finding use US in political campaigns.

Trojan horse for tumors

One of the most difficult feats to accomplish with today's anticancer therapies is getting drug into the oxygen- and nutrient-deprived cores of solid tumors. These inaccessible regions may be the source of drug-resistant tumors that can recur years after a patient has completed therapy. A team of investigators has developed methods for loading gold nanoshells into precursor cells known as monocytes which, in essence, become nanoparticle-loaded Trojan horses. Once inside the tumor core, the gold nanoshells can be activated using near-infrared light, turning them into miniature thermal scalpels that kill tumors from the inside out.

Fast charge battery

Toshiba will begin shipping in March a quick-charging new battery for forklifts, construction machinery and other industrial use. Toshiba Corp's Super Charge ion Battery, or SCiB, can recharge to 90 percent of its full capacity in less than five minutes and has a life cycle of more than 10 years. Toshiba, a newcomer in rechargeable batteries, said the new lithium-ion battery will eventually be used in hybrid and electric cars.

Virtual training worlds

Businesses are discovering real-world things to do with Web 2.0 interactive technology, such as the virtual world, Second Life. Westpac, for example, has just completed a three-month trial of the 3D online digital world created by its residents and has tested use of Second Life for training induction purposes.

Mobile phone payment system

The Commonwealth Bank has joined the race to allow shoppers to buy anything from snacks to sports tickets with just a flash of their mobile phone. The CBA is vying with the National Australia Bank to be among the first Australian financial services firms to offer so-called near field communication (NFC) contactless payment technology to its customers.

Google exposes pollution

A new application based on Google Maps reveals what toxins are pouring out of the innocuous-looking factory next door, exposing the big polluters.

Does what we eat change how much we trust?

As you sink into your post-Christmas food coma, the name of an amino acid might pop into your mind: tryptophan, a molecule found in high levels in turkey that's known to induce drowsiness. While scientists say that the tryptophan in turkey is probably not the source of holiday fatigue, a possible new role for tryptophan has recently been uncovered. It appears to affect our sense of trust.

Wireless reading device

The era of electronic books seems set to explode with new technology like the Kindle from Amazon. This article from initial skeptic, Mike Elgan of Computerworld, talks about [why e-books will thrive](#).

Sub-prime major financial disruption

It appears that the world in general and the United States in particular are on the edge of a major disruption in the global financial system. Here's a summary as seen by global futures research group, The Arlington Institute.

Text ads in shopping trolleys

Modstream is a dynamic text based advertising system that delivers short text based ads to shopping trolleys via a wireless system. Because it is a text based system instead of video it is lower cost and easier to maintain. The messages can be changed to suit hourly or daily specials making the system very adaptable. Just one of the many changes where information flows are going to change how companies deal with their customers.

 ## What We Are Writing About

Future in the Palm of the Consumer

This article by Paul published in the Melbourne Age on 14 December, looks at how the spread of mobile hand-held devices is transforming how we live and how business operates.

Holiday Reading

Below are some of our suggestions for general holiday reading or thought-provoking books to inspire a new approach in 2008. For more, check out our [book reviews](#) on our website.

Cultural Amnesia, by Clive James

The Time Travelers Wife, by Audrey Niffenegger

The Lovely Bones, by Alice Sebold

Everything is Miscellaneous, by David Weinberger

Best Business Books 2007 - list of books and detailed reviews from Strategy+Business

It may seem strange for futurists to (favourably) review a book about the fact that we cannot forecast/predict the future, but when it comes to matters that are in any way complex and involve the free will of a number of individuals, the impossibility of accurate prediction is exactly my view.

Many methods of forecasting involve looking at trends or historical patterns. Aside from inaccuracies caused by the fact that we interpret history through a need for retrospective certainty about what happened, the best story in this book illustrates the fallacy of relying on such information. The story is about the Thanksgiving (or in Australia, Christmas) turkey (p40). Every day of the turkey's existence until the fateful day would give the turkey the view that humans are benevolent creatures who bring food. Extrapolating the dataset gives the view of a long, well fed life. How many times have we all operated under such a fallacy?

Another amazing story is that if people spin a spinning wheel like the ones that you see on a game show, then their answer to the next question is influenced by the result of the spin of the wheel, which was completely random. For example, if you get a low number on the spin of the wheel you are more likely to give a low answer to a question that requires a number as the answer. If you get a high number from the spin of the wheel you are more likely to give a high number as the answer (p158). How scary is that – when we think that we think rationally!

A third illustration is that if asked to predict the motion of a billiard ball on a billiard table of a known rolling resistance we can easily compute that for the first hit (p178). If we need a prediction for the ninth impact, to be accurate you need to add in the calculation of the gravitational pull of anyone standing next to the table. To calculate the motion after the 56th impact, you need to add in the state of every particle in the universe.

As the author would say, these stories are merely illustrative and human behaviour is not ruled by physics alone. However, we need to think that when we add in all the variations in behaviour that come from involving hundreds or millions of people, the complexity is even larger. Hence the view that we cannot predict the future in such situations, even though we believe that we can and seem to instinctively rely on such predictions.

As the author's background is in investment and trading the ideas and views are often put in this context. He worries that many commercial organisations that are making "good returns" are in fact doing so because they have created a business model or investment strategy that ignores the "black swan" or big negative event. Therefore they appear to be making good returns but in the context of long term risk this is an illusion. Lots of people are being paid bonuses and being hired for huge salaries on this basis.

The majority of the book is about convincing the reader that we cannot predict the future, and that large "black swan" events will affect the future more than we can ever know. In some ways this could be seen as relatively useless – where does it get us in the real world? In Chapter 13 (p201) the author addresses some of these issues – I will not spoil the story (it would be like revealing who murdered the butler) but there are ways that we can deal with what is real rather than continuing of operate in a fantasy constructed by our own ideas and how we think.

From about page 87-130 the arguments get a bit repetitive and in my view the book could have been considerably shortened and still achieved its aim. However, this is a minor criticism. Anyone who has an interest in strategy, planning, critical thinking, or thinking in any way about the future, should read and re-read this book and absorb its lessons.

A cautionary note – when my brother handed me this book he said it was a must read for every futurist but that the author would be a pain in real life. I do not know if that is the case, but certainly the book will irritate people tied to a

certain world view because the author is meticulous and detailed in his arguments and point of view to the level of pedantry. If you are irritated by these issues I would suggest you are the very person that should read it more than once.

Paul Higgins