

Exercise: Imagine likely unlikely possibilities and their effects

This exercise is adapted from one that Kevin Kelly, founding editor of Wired magazine and respected futurist, shared on his website, <http://www.kk.org>.

Imagine how improbable things we see as typical today would be to people who lived just a decade or two ago: Homeless people in Africa with their own cell phones? Obesity a contagious disease? A trusted global encyclopedia with entries written by anyone and everyone?

PART I: Can you predict how unpredictable the future will be? Open your mind to the vast realm of possibilities, believe in the improbable, and list five likely unlikely future possibilities that could become reality in the next five, 10 or 20 years.

PART II: Select one of your proposed scenarios and write five possible related consequences that might unfold if this scenario really happens.

Here are some predictions Kelly and his friend Brian Eno made when doing the same exercise in the summer of 1993 for an issue of *Whole Earth Review*:

Unthinkable Futures

KEVIN KELLY:

- * A new plague seizes the world. As fatal as AIDS, but transmitted on a sneeze, and spread by airplane travelers, the virus touches billions.
- * Nobody wants to be a doctor. It becomes an overwhelming bureaucratic job with low status. Women and minorities become working doctors; men do medical research.
- * Third World nukes become commonplace. Everybody has one, because everyone has nuclear power plants.
- * People begin leaving the U.S. Many arrivals to the US keep resident status but choose not to adopt citizenship. The world sees more people without allegiance.
- * No more employees. Everybody is hired as a consultant, each negotiates a deal with various goodies (benefits, insurance, perks). Even factory workers are treated as "consultants."
- * Revitalized cities squeeze out the urban poor to squatters' suburbs. Inner cities flourish. The poor take over the nearest suburbs, between edge cities and downtowns. With little transportation in the suburbs, the poor are really downtrodden.
- * In a series of science papers, biologists prove that humans are weakening their gene stock with such artifices as eyeglasses and medical care, since "biologically inferior" stock now breeds. This sets off religious and scientific eugenics cults and social weirdness around "healthy" genes.

BRIAN ENO:

- * Everybody becomes so completely cynical about the election process that voter turnout drops to 2 percent (families and relatives of prospective politicians) until finally the "democratic process" is abandoned in favour of a lottery system. Everything immediately improves.
- * Genetic research shows that it is possible to create gifted scientists, great artists, sublime linguists and supreme athletes. Everyone starves to death through lack of farmers, cooks and waiters.
- * It becomes clear that there are significant racial differences between people -- that the stereotypes were right after all.
- * Ordinary people routinely employ publicists.
- * Video phones inspire a new sexual revolution whereby everybody sits at home doing rude things electronically with everyone else. Productivity slumps; video screens get bigger and bigger.
- * A new profession -- cosmetic psychiatry -- is born. People visit "plastic psychiatrists" to get interesting neuroses and obsessions added into their makeup.
- * Meanwhile, as the cult of youth fades away, plastic surgeons find a profitable new market in making people look interestingly wrinkled, wisely aged, and experientially weatherbeaten.
- * Mass outbreaks of allergies unexpectedly solve all our transportation problems by confining almost everyone to their sealed residences. Telecommunications stocks soar.
- * A new concept of "global Darwinism" takes root: people argue for the right of the human species to rid itself of weak specimens. Aid to developing countries ceases. Hospitals become "viability assessment centres" and turn away or terminate poor specimens.
- * In reaction, a new definition of viability (based on memes rather than genes) is invoked. People are subjected to exhaustive tests (occupying large amounts of their time) to check the originality and scope of their ideas.
- * A new profession, meme-inspector, comes into being.
- * The first Bio-Olympics, where athletes can have anything added to or subtracted from their bodies, take place in 2004.
- * News is understood to be a creation of our attention and interests (rather than "the truth") and news shows are redesigned as "thinktanks," where four interesting minds from different disciplines are asked the question, "So what do YOU think happened today?"
- * Later, four uninteresting minds (chosen from the pages of Ordinary People magazine) are asked the same questions.

KEVIN KELLY:

- * GLOBAL COOLING -- After a steady increase in mean temperature, the Earth starts cooling off. Dire warnings are issued; no one pays any attention.
- * TEPID WAR -- America and Europe devise a new style of dynamic socialism, which they try to export against the wishes of a thoroughly free-market Russia.
- * BARBECUES OUTLAWED -- Because of high carcinogenic content, nothing barbecued or burnt may be sold, nor barbecue paraphernalia. Private barbecues (cannot be seen from street, etc.) become hip underground.
- * DIRECTED TAXES -- Software gains allow a certain portion of taxes to fall to the discretion of the payer. John Public can assign X amount of his taxes toward one service, to the exclusion of another. It's a second vote that politicians watch closely.

BRIAN ENO:

- * The set of Terminator 9 is wrecked by a pressure group of offended industrial robots.
- * As scenario projections become more accurate and convincing, people become increasingly aware of the unwelcome results of their actions. All social action becomes paralysed, or is evaluated in purely negative language: "Is this course of action less harmful than that?"
- * Traveling as a process enjoys a revival. People abandon the idea of "getting from A to B" and begin to develop (or re-discover) a culture of traveling: semi-nomadism. Lots of people acquire super new faxed-and-modemed versions of the mobile home. It becomes distinctly "lower-class" to live in a fixed location. Fast forms of transport come to be viewed like fast food is viewed now -- tacky, undesirable, fake.
- * Underwear manufacturers finally realize men have different-sized balls.
- * Big changes in education: A combination of monetarism and liberalism creates a new paradigm wherein schools are expected to be profitable manufacturing and research enterprises. This leads to:
 - * The infant think-tank, where the innocent genius of children is routinely tapped by captains of industry for large sums of money . . .
 - * Schools completely abandon divisions based on age. People of all ages turn up and sort themselves into effective and profitable groups . . .
 - * The commonly held notion that it is correct to surround children with love, security and affection suffers a serious decline in credibility when it becomes apparent that kids reared thus are entirely unequipped for a world that is cruel, dangerous and insecure. Enlightened parents begin experimenting with new forms of toys: teddies with sharp teeth, building bricks with abrasive surfaces, mildly toxic crayons, unsafe play areas.