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Emergent Futures

What's Emerging August 2007

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Welcome to a nanotech-free August edition of What's Emerging.

Paul has been away skiing so, without our resident nano-enthusiast, we have been able to squeeze in some alternative links. We hope you enjoy this edition.

Cheers

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Business Tips

Reading books on the go

This link to a NY Times page showcases some of the ways to read books on your mobile phone or PDA. Apparently quite a good method once you get used to it.

Social networking for business

Companies are looking at ways to improve their knowledge management systems by using social network systems after seeing the popularity of services like FaceBook. This link leads to an interesting article on how this might work in one case.

RFID security

We are rapidly moving to a world where RFID chips will carry a variety of information including security access data, passport data and supply chain data. How secure are these systems? This link leads to an article from Wired about hacking these systems. Scary stuff.

What's Emerging

Virtual worlds culture

If you want to know more about the realm of online virtual worlds and the culture emerging in them then this playlist of clips from virtual world sites is a good snapshot.

Super sense me

An emerging trend is augmentation and exploitation of human senses, dubbed 'Senseploitation'. Everyday objects such as clothing and furnishings are being embedded with technologies that deliver sensory experiences, like the Hug Shirt. Food, apparel, travel and other industries are prime targets for senseploitation.

IT pollution

An audit of carbon output of Australia's IT and communications systems used by the commercial sector are on a par with the aviation and steel industries. Use of information and communications technology used 7.94 million tonnes of carbon dioxide in 2005 – equivalent to 1.52% of total national emissions. Desktop computers are among the biggest contributors as many are never turned off.

Unsustainable vanity - fight for the hills hoist

Clotheslines are banned in some parts of the USA for aesthetic reasons but a grassroots movement concerned about energy consumption of clothes dryers is fighting for the 'right to dry'. California also passed the Solar Right Act to prevent local governments from denying solar energy permits on the basis of aesthetics alone.

Zero emission homes

All new homes in the UK will be zero emission on heating and cooling by 2016. A new Code for Sustainable Homes legislates staggered targets for energy and water efficiency.

World wisdom

People in the world exist with different life conditions and values which affect overall capacity for global change. This article shows what percentage of the global population are at various stages and the changing wisdom needed for success (click on 'World Wisdom in Action' under the GVN Articles tab).

Build your own video game

This article from MIT technology review describes a number of companies that are supplying tools for people to build their own video games. Perhaps an early indicator of a direction in the user creation movement – just like the gold rush, the money will be made by people who supply the tools.

New internal combustion engine design

A new design for the internal combustion engine may allow petrol engines to operate with efficiency close to diesel engines but also to burn much more cleanly.

Stem cell burgers

Scientists believe that we will have commercial meat products grown from stem cells by 2012. This could result in one of the most revolutionary human adaptations in history. Interesting implications for us all.

Changes to thinking on our genes

The $73.5 billion global biotech business may soon have to grapple with a discovery that calls into question the scientific principles on which it was founded. Last month, a consortium of scientists published findings that challenge the traditional view of the way genes function. The exhaustive four-year effort was organized by the United States National Human Genome Research Institute and carried out by 35 groups from 80 organizations around the world. To their surprise, researchers found that the human genome might not be a "tidy collection of independent genes" after all.

Wireless eye implant to monitor glaucoma

A sensor for implanting in the eye to monitor glaucoma by measuring pressure in the eye's interior has been developed by researchers at Purdue University. The pressure sensor, which is placed between two layers of tissue in the eye, measures the intraocular pressure and transmits the information to an external receiver so pressure can be continuously monitored.

New system to capture wave energy

Researchers from SRI International, based in Menlo Park, CA, recently completed the first ocean tests of a system that uses a so-called artificial muscle to generate power from the motion of a buoy riding up and down on the waves. Although the prototype produces very little electricity, the researchers say that wave farms based on the technology could eventually rival wind turbines in power output, providing a significant source of clean energy.

What We Are Writing About

Book Review - The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins

This month's book review may seem slightly removed from a futurist perspective but in reality it is not. Richard Dawkins' book on why we tend to believe in God and the flaws in the argument for believing in God is laced with lots of information on how humans think, how we evolved to think, and how evolution may have created a "need" to believe in God. In the book Dawkins uses many examples to expose the flaws in a number of philosophical, theological and rational arguments on the existence of God. These examples are extremely good training in critical thinking skills that we can use to good effect in our day to day living and in futures work. Much of the work that we do as foresight consultants is about helping people to understand how their brains work, how they think and how this impacts on their forward strategy. Reading this book helps that process.

I have two criticisms of the book. First of all Richard Dawkins has trouble refraining from attacking people that think differently from him and sometimes crosses the line into personal attacks. This is both against the principle of the book and detracts from its arguments. Secondly, Dawkins seems to dismiss the possibility that our need to believe in God or some sort of spiritual faith may indeed be an emergent property of the way that our brains have developed. A strict evolutionary argument would be that a need to believe in God would have to be a useful trait that aided our ability to survive and reproduce or be a side effect of such a useful trait. A perfectly plausible alternative is that our brains have developed down an evolutionary path but that the resulting complexity has created emergent properties that are unrelated to our evolutionary path. Overall I would recommend reading The God Delusion as my criticisms are minor ones compared to the quality and impact of the book as a whole.

Paul Higgins