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Robert C. Baldwin, CMRP, Editor When does the future begin? That is what futurist Glen Hiemstra asked the audience as he began his keynote address at Wonderware's big user conference and trade show in Las Vegas this summer.

Your answer probably mirrors one of those offered by the audience. But the perception Hiemstra drove home to us is that we live in the eternal present (which consists of constant change) and that the future is just behind us breathing down the backs of our necks.

His talk drew attention to patterns in our behavior and provided a fresh perspective on where we might be headed. He spoke of revolutions: how they progress (like popcorn in the microwave—starting slow and building to a crescendo), the electro-mechanical revolution just past, and the techno-social-economic revolution that we are in the midst of.

The three technologies of the current revolution, which he sees exploding over the next 20 years, are digital, biotechnical, and nanotechnical. The digital aspects of this revolution were congruent with Wonderware 's view of the future, which includes extensive use of automation and control technologies, data and information technologies, and condition monitoring and plant asset management technologies.

Speaking of the digital explosion, Hiemstra alluded to inventor Ray Kurzweil 's writings suggesting that the $1000 that buys the computing power of an insect brain today, may buy the computing power of a mouse brain by 2010, and perhaps the computing power of a human brain by 2020.

Impossible? Hiemstra reminds us that many things that are impossible today will be possible tomorrow, just as many things that are possible today, were formerly impossible.

I was still pumped up about the future weeks after hearing Hiemstra. Then I had an opportunity to talk with a friend, the former head of an award-winning maintenance organization that delivered 94 percent uptime with 65 percent planned maintenance, who left the organization a number of years ago to pursue other opportunities. He mentioned current performance at his old plant: it was on its second CMMS since he left, had slipped back into reactive maintenance, and is cannibalizing its equipment for spare parts.

What a reality check. But it is in keeping with Hiemstra's closing remarks that "the future is something you do." In some cases it is back to the future, strengthening the fundamentals of reliability, and in some cases it is forward into the past, sliding back toward reactive maintenance, which reminds me of Hiemstra's key point: Your image of the future drives current action. **MT**

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