UPDATING THE VOGON PLANNING PROCESS
by Jason Kitcat

"'*People of Earth, your attention please,'* a voice said, and it was wonderful. Wonderful perfect quadraphonic sound with distortion levels so low as to make a brave man weep.

'This is Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz of the Galactic Hyperspace Planning Council,' the voice continued. *'As you will no doubt be aware, the plans for development of the outlying regions of the Galaxy require the building of a hyperspatial express route through your star system, and regrettably your planet is one of those scheduled for demolition. The process will take slightly less than two of your Earth minutes. Thank you.'*

The PA died away.

Uncomprehending terror settled on the watching people of Earth. The terror moved slowly through the gathered crowds as if they were iron filing on a sheet of board and a magnet was moving beneath them. Panic sprouted again, desperate fleeing panic, but there was nowhere to flee to.

Observing this, the Vogons turned on their PA again. It said:

'There's no point acting all surprised about it. All the planning charts and demolition orders have been on display in your local planning department in Alpha Centauri for fifty of your Earth years, so you've had plenty of time to lodge any formal complaint and it's far too late to start making a fuss about it now.'

The PA fell silent again and its echo drifted off across the land. The huge ship turned slowly in the sky with easy power. On the underside of each a hatchway opened, an empty black square.

By this time somebody somewhere must have manned a radio transmitter, located a wavelength and broadcast a message back to the Vogon ships, to plead on behalf of the planet. Nobody ever heard what they said, they only heard the reply. The PA slammed back into life again. The voice was annoyed. It said:

'What do you mean you've never been to Alpha Centauri? For heaven's sake mankind, it's only four light years away you know. I'm sorry, but if you can't be bothered to take an interest in local affairs that's your own lookout.

'Energize the demolition beams.'

Light poured out of the hatchways.

'*I don't know'* said the voice on the PA, *'apathetic bloody planet, I've no sympathy at all.'* It cut off.

There was a terrible ghastly silence.

There was a terrible ghastly noise.

There was a terrible ghastly silence.

The Vogon Constructor Fleet coasted away into the inky starry void."

- Douglas Adams *The Hitch-Hikers Guide to the Galaxy*

Mr.Vogon's new regulation

Futuristic, barbaric, funny and starkly close to the modern day planning process. Every new road and every new public policy implemented seems like a Vogon demolition order. It may be our elected representatives who write and ratify legislation but democracy doesn't stop after the election. Every time a civil servant, secretary of state or minister announces wonderful new regulations, why is it that great swathes of the electorate blink, pinch themselves and then wonder what the hell possessed Mr.Vogon to think up of such ridiculous ideas – don't they realise what the consequences will be? Representatives need open channels of communication to continue being *representative* after election, otherwise they might as well be on Alpha Centauri.

Democracy is a process and not solely the act of electing some people every couple of years. But after the Internet boom as well as the US presidential election debacle it is this single act which has been focussed on. There is nothing inherently wrong with working to improve the election systems – we all know there is plenty to fix.

But I feel that we risk losing the forest for the trees. Or in this case missing the Vogons' planning process for their amazing quadraphonic PA system. I see the growth of Internet Voting as more than just a business opportunity – it's the chance to introduce cultural change through the Trojan horse of technology. I'm a believer in that often un-stated assumption of some campaigners: Democracy is (as Kevin Kelly puts it) 'a self-organising strong attractor' – it's inevitable if the freedoms of speech, information and public discourse are adequately championed. I see technology as a key way to champion these freedoms in the coming years.

These aren't a new concepts: Information Theorists have long suggested that introducing new technologies into organisations is a great catalyst for cultural and procedural change. They even have rafts of case studies to support this view. But the challenge now is can technology become a driving force in changing not just one organisation but the conglomeration of parts that form governments? Furthermore, as democracy needs to be *inclusive*, we need to be altering the attitudes of all participants of the democratic process – not just the most visible players.

Mr.McLuhan's unnoticed new form of Democracy

Those involved in electronic voting should see their role as trail breakers. If acceptance grows for technology in voting then I believe we can introduce other systems, ideas and processes that facilitate improved collaboration, discussion and consultation. It almost sounds easy when put that way, but there are many powerful people who are (rightfully) suspicious of the changes new technologies can wreak. If done badly the repercussions could be dire as vast swathes of the population are excluded through a digital divide.

But imagine the upside if it's done right…. Nobody's saying it will be easy but we need faith in our ability to work things out. So envision a democracy where as opposed to assuming people know consultative documents are available in some obscure downtown office, we put them online with structured debate systems. Picture visualisation tools that help the electorate to understand trends in their society and what impact policies are having on those trends. Writers as diverse as Brock Meeks, Manuel Castells and Stewart Brand have all openly explored the possibilities and I'm not going to spend your time thinking up all the exotic technologies to apply.

> 'Today, the [voting] audience can be used as a creative participating force… A new form of "politics" is emerging in ways we haven't yet noticed.'
>
> - Marshall McLuhan *The Medium is the Massage*

There is a nascent 'e-democracy' movement which has had some early successes such as Tracy Westen's Democracy Network and the Minnesota e-democracy group. Inevitably there have been failures too, most recently with the closure of Voter.com which had only recently incorporated the Democracy Network into its operations. So there are challenges on many levels ranging from merely gaining acceptance to ensuring we don't end up with a de-facto direct democracy which results in mob rule. Activists such as Marc Strassman with his Smart Initiatives work soldier on rain or shine, facing up to these challenges as opposed to hoping they go away. Their success is intimately intertwined with our own.

Ms.Dyson, it's not a tyranny of the majority

Democracy, as Esther Dyson says, is 'the tyranny of the majority' but that is in some respects an oversimplification. Yes the election of representatives (especially in non-proportional systems as used in the USA and UK parliamentary elections) is about majorities but when the democratic *process* is healthy and vibrant the interests of minorities are well, even over, represented by community groups, charities and so on.

I see one of the key challenges for the coming decade to be how we can integrate the diverse and often conflicting desires (and thus pressures exerted) by the increasingly vocal community of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Through the use of the Internet and their leaps in media management NGOs can become extremely powerful. Sometimes their name and shame tactics aren't fair, right or representative. So can technology provide forums, processes and techniques for NGOs to become involved in a more accountable, democratic way while retaining the important, independent roles that they play?

Similarly resentment and anger at the increasing power of transnational corporations needs to be addressed. In a world where 51 of the 100 largest economies are corporate we need to see how new legal structures, enabled

by modern technologies, can provide true accountability and perhaps more achievably – transparency. It is in a company's interest to reduce the current anti-capitalism backlashes but can we find a way to do this that all parties see as satisfactory?

These present stark challenges for the future but if those leading the way in electronic voting can agree to this radical e-democracy agenda and see it as an integral part of their existing works then there's hope that maybe, just maybe, Earth won't be demolished for a hyperspatial express route.

Jason Kitcat is founder and co-ordinator of the FREE e-democracy project (http://www.thecouch.org/free/) as well as a founding partner of Swing Digital (http://www.swingdigital.com) an Internet consultancy.