

Structure Matters: Method to Manoa School's Madness or How I became convinced Jim Dator is a robot!

John A. Sweeney
University of Hawaii at Manoa
USA

Make of yourselves a mirror where the future may see itself, and forget the superstition that you are epigoni. You have enough to ponder and find out in pondering the life of the future; but do not ask history to show you the means and the instrument to do it (Nietzsche 1957, 41).

"I am a robot," thus spoke Dator. I vaguely recall the first time I heard this odd statement radiate from his beaming, yet decidedly matter-of-fact, face. I still feel a bit nonplussed at his assurance that this is indeed the case, even if the thought that he might be an extra-terrestrial has come to mind on more than one occasion. Although I remain a bit uncertain about the full context for his declaration, I think Jim's contention centers at least in part on his theory of technology, which he discerns as having a symbiotic relationship with humanity, especially as it is fundamentally and simply "how humans 'get things done'" (Dator 1983, 30). In light of this seemingly pedestrian formulation, Dator paints a more complete portrait by distinguishing between three kinds of technology: social, biological, and physical. In addition, he identifies three components of technology: software, hardware, and orgware, which undergo various processes of invention, development, diffusion, and replacement. In cognizing all of this from the simple assertion that technology is how humans "get things done," you can see how I came around to the idea that Jim Dator really is a robot—the man is a machine (one perhaps powered solely by popcorn, which seems to be Jim's favorite brain-food).

According to Dator's technological theorem, all humans are in some sense robotic with regards to the bio-physiological processes that govern, at times poorly, our all-too-human existence, which is to say that humans have far less control over "being" human than one might imagine. As Tom Robbins playfully put it, "human beings were invented by water as a device for transporting itself from one place to another." (Robbins 1990, 11). As an advocate of the Anthropocene, which suggests that humans ought to be, if only out of necessity, at the helm of the next geological age, Dator has advocated that humanity should take the reigns in dealing with global challenges such as climate change and ultimately

“assume responsibility for their rose” (Dator 2004, 230). In the same breath, however, he is also quick to note that things might not necessarily pan out unless we “imagine and create institutions that make it easier for [us] to assume, rather than to avoid, that opportunity” (Dator 2004, 230). Jim’s deployment of Walter Truett Anderson’s infamous “governing evolution” mantra is a call for responsiveness to what has been done, and if such responsibility is not taken, then we might as well be a device for transporting water from one place to another, to which I could imagine Jim responding: “And that’s ok too.”

In reflecting on Dator’s intellectual legacy, I cannot help but think that only a finely tuned machine driven by precise mechanical and algorithmic computations could ameliorate such complex and rigorous frameworks from simple postulates, and Jim has spent the better part of 40+ years elucidating and enlightening the future(s) in this exact manner—hence, my suspicion that he is a robot. In case it has escaped the record thus far, I submit that Jim has a knack for navigating particularly thorny intellectual matters in delightfully straightforward ways, which can also make being one of his students a real challenge as he appreciates, if not expects, the same candor in return—a lesson that I learned the hard way and that enshrined my perspective on the method to the Manoa School’s madness.

I deploy the term “madness” fondly and as a direct allusion to Nietzsche’s madman found in Book Three of *The Gay Science*. I offer the passage at length as it is worth reading in full:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the marketplace and cried incessantly: "I am looking for God! I am looking for God!"

As many of those who did not believe in God were standing together there he caused considerable laughter. "Have you lost him then?" said one. "Did he lose his way like a child?" said another. "Or is he hiding? Is he scared of us? Did he emigrate?" They shouted and laughed in this manner. The madman sprang into their midst and pierced them with his look. "Where has God gone?" he cried. "I will tell you. We have killed him — you and I. We are all his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving now? Where are we moving now? Away from all suns? Aren't we perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Aren't we straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Hasn't it become colder? Isn't more and more night coming on all the time? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God's putrefaction? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? That which was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death

under our knives — who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games will we need to invent? Isn't the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it?"

"There has never been a greater deed — and whoever shall be born after us, for the sake of this deed he shall be part of a higher history than all the history that came before." Here the madman fell silent and again regarded his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern to the ground and it shattered and went out. "I come too early," he said then; "my time hasn't come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still traveling — it has not yet reached human ears. Lightning and thunder need time, deeds need time after they have been done before they can be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars —and yet we have done it ourselves."

It has also been related that on that same day the madman entered various churches and there sang a requiem aeternam deo. Led out and told to shut up, he is said to have retorted each time: "What are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?" (Nietzsche 1974, 181).

I invoke this text as a way of situating my take on Jim's *oeuvre* and the guiding method to the Manoa School, to which I will return after an anecdote on how I learned my lesson that structure matters.

While I can attest that Futures Studies flourishes at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, students who select this area of specialization also suffer from a chronic dearth of course offerings as there are primarily two graduate-level classes that form the foundation and basis for one's training in the Manoa School of Futures Studies. As both *POLS672: Politics of the Future* and *POLS673: The Future of Political Systems* are offered consecutively in the Fall and Spring semesters respectively, the pipeline for Manoa Schoolers essentially begins and ends with these seminars. Dator has recently updated both giving some of us "old timers" the chance to experience them anew. I initially enrolled in *POLS673* in the Spring 2009 semester and *POLS672* in the Fall 2009, which is in reverse order and should give the reader some sense as to the fragmented nature of this piece. I then took Dator up on the offer to "learn some new tricks" in the refurbished editions during the Fall 2010 and Spring 2011 semesters, and it was in the latter offering that I ran up headlong against the robot that is Jim Dator. Working with Kaipō Lum, who successfully defended his dissertation on governance design the year prior, Dator retooled 673 to focus upon the challenges of governance design within four alternative scenarios. The "four futures" modeling method is the unequivocal hallmark of the Manoa School, which Dator constructed around the principle that the future is less a time than it is a space or place that should be studied and analyzed for the means to promote *eutopias*, or "preferred futures." As "images of the future" are media by which one can, at best, begin to start imagining and creating preferred futures or, at worst,

foresee and adapt to oncoming catastrophe, which, as Dator is fond of noting, is tantamount to “surfing tsunamis,” analyzing and creating images of the future serves as the meat and potatoes of one’s instruction at the Manoa School.

As my class was provided with the basic tenets of our scenario, which was Transform, our task did not feel in any way like surfing a tsunami, even though our grade for the course centered solely on the successful presentation of our governance design at the end of the semester. In the archetypal structure of a Transformational scenario, which might be driven either by high degrees of technology or spirituality in the Datorite tradition, the devil is in the details. Although a gross oversimplification, we resorted to the familiar “leave it to the machines” structure that has the Singularitarians glowing and the rest of us scratching our all-too-human heads. While my group quickly came to a consensus as to the specific textures and contours of our design, I grappled with a single question throughout the semester: what is at stake in the distinction between government and governance? As a means to distill this difference, I turned to the juxtaposition between programming (government) and design (governance) as a means to elucidate this quagmire. Taking some cues from design thinking, I situated programming as the process by which design breaks down—more anathema to design in principle than it is practice. To govern evolution, then, would be to program that which escapes confinement, or, simply put, to constrain the very limits of life itself. Clearly, governments excel at this, but there is more at stake in the difference between programming and design, especially as it relates to Futures.

As Jaron Lanier notes, programmers, not unlike some foresight professionals, inevitably encounter “lock-in” whereas designers, although not always, are charged with thinking the unthought—thus, the inherent link with Futures Studies where absurdity and ridicule are expected if not welcomed (Lanier 2010). Lanier explains, “Lock-in removes ideas that do not fit into the winning digital representation scheme, but it also reduces or narrows the ideas it immortalizes, by cutting away the unfathomable penumbra of meaning that distinguishes a word in natural language from a command in a computer program” (Lanier 2010). Indeed, the open nature of Futures Studies as a discipline, especially at the Manoa School, stands in stark contrast to the project of foresight as it is practiced predominately and elsewhere in academia where “lock-in,” the inevitable result of prediction, stands in stark contrast to the design-driven method of forecasting.

As our seminar plowed through various design challenges, I felt we were overlooking larger structural dynamics, the very conditions of possibility, that allows for governance to devolve, perhaps unnecessarily, into government—after all, should we as futurists be as equally concerned with stopping some futures from coming into being as we should with promoting others? Armed with some readings and a few quotes to toss out in conversation, I broached the issue during our final class session, which encouraged meditations on the course and the presentations the week prior. Now, perhaps it was the wine—one of the many perks of being a graduate student in the Political Science department at the Manoa School—or maybe I was just feeling my oats as a futurist whose penchant for critical theory had run amok, but I unleashed a torrent of quixotic revelations upon the class hoping to alter (in my view for the better) the course and those in it. I did this, of course, not to undermine the specific projects or to challenge the assumptions under which the readings and assignments were constructed, but rather as a way of creating a space for discourse

on some of the key presumptions of the Manoa School, namely: if the purpose of Futures research and production aims to promote such thinking in perpetuity, especially within political contexts, how can one avoid, as Nietzsche famously put it, becoming the very monster that one initially sought to thwart? Feeling satisfied with my rhetorical ruse, I sat back and waited...and waited...and waited. After what seemed like more than an awkward pause, Dator dutifully responded, “But John, structure matters.” As if the pearly gates had opened, I felt a light strike my face in the moment (again perhaps it was the wine or a modicum of embarrassment) as Dator succinctly and decisively whittled away all of the theoretical gobbledygook I had used to pad my unintentionally utopian, and not eutopian, arguments. In the most intellectually honest and seemingly robotic sense possible, he had cut straight to the heart of things and had taught me a hard lesson.

This revelation, which I should have come to much sooner both personally and professionally, continues to haunt me with its brazen simplicity, and Dator’s dogmatic tenacity in instilling this contention across his *oeuvre* speaks volumes to its centrality in the Manoa School—it is, I contend, the very method that drives the Manoa School’s madness: structure matters. In his own words, Dator explains:

While people—their desires, beliefs, fears and hopes—are important, ultimately, when all is said and done, it is the social structures within which all people are embedded which influence how people live and act that are more important. The good news is that all social structures are human inventions, so if we don’t like the way they influence us to live and act, we can change them. But the bad news is that we must struggle within them, and against them, in order to change them, so that the game is rigged against those of us wanting change from the beginning (Dator 2004).

I suppose part of me had known that this was the case, especially as the greater portion of my undergraduate coursework in philosophy centered on the “deconstruction” of this and that endemic “metanarrative” and combating their ideological stranglehold on the masses. While I certainly see this motif—that critique is a creative act—as more than implied in Dator’s maxim, I remain confident that the most important part of his assertion rests with the corollary idea that as social inventions these structures can and must be invented anew. Avoiding “lock-in” is not the issue so much as the willingness to start over and create new structures, which may or may not produce the expected results. We are, as Jim contends, creatures of habit, and acknowledging our limits is a likely first step in surpassing, or perhaps designing around, them. Perhaps this dynamic speaks the inherent “lock-in” relative to our internal programming, although humans certainly nurture nature, so to speak, we also very much remain “natured” by our environment both human and otherwise and thus should start here when pursuing change. This more positivistic type of thought runs counter to much of contemporary, which is to say fashionably French, critical theory, especially those aspects that are averse to building and creating structures in hopes of ameliorating the institutional and provincial inequalities that lead to conflict the world over.

Dator is no Derrida, and that’s a good thing, but he might have a bit of Deleuze,

who many consider to be Nietzsche's philosophical heir, in him. As Deleuze and Guattari contend, "There are times when old age produces not eternal youth but a sovereign freedom, a pure necessity in which one enjoys a moment of grace between life and death, and in which all parts of the machine come together to send into the future a feature that cuts across all ages" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 1). Without making mention of his age, Dator embodies this "sovereign freedom" and has certainly sent "into the future a feature that cuts across all ages." I definitely view my time as his student to be nothing short of "a moment of grace between life and death," and as my anecdote aims to demonstrate, Dator's frankness is a testament to wisdom garnered from birthing Futures Studies as a truly "indisciplinary" way of thinking—one that "is not only a matter of going besides the disciplines but of breaking them" (Baronian and Rosello 2008). In Nietzschean terms, Dator thinks with a "hammer as with a tuning fork," and unlike some of his intellectual predecessors and even contemporaries, Jim has become known, if not world-renowned, for his recalcitrant optimism—the game might be rigged, but that does not mean we should avoid playing (Nietzsche 1990, 32).

Many of Jim's students have found complementary resonances between his take on Futures Studies and more philosophical modes of engaging with intellectual and social structures, even though Jim remains suspicious, and with good reason, of the latest jargon. That Dator's students have sought resonances with a variety of fields and disciplines is a testament to the Manoa School's diversity and legacy as a site of intellectual imagination and artistry. With that said, I also think Jim's healthy skepticism, which is in some ways a product of his penetrating insight, is in many ways the greatest strength and most enduring legacy of Jim as an futurist, which leads me back to Nietzsche's madman and how I became convinced that Jim Dator really is a robot.

The madman, who proclaims the death of God, does more than provide a voice by which Nietzsche expresses his theological misgivings. A closer look at this aphorism provides a bit more context to the author's complex thought and, I would argue, the method to the Manoa School's madness. As one who has "come too early," the madman is a prophet of a future(s) age whose time has not yet come; he is in fact a voice from a radically divergent image of the future—one that has certainly come home to roost. If one takes seriously the notion that the present, at least in part, is a past image of the future, then one encounters the most troubling phrase in Nietzsche's text and a common refrain in Jim's work: "yet we have done it ourselves." In situating the madman, or the voice of ridicule, as the agent of change in his preferred image of the future, Nietzsche, much like Dator, instructs us to "become gods" in inventing structures that allow and inspire us to move beyond "the breath of empty space," which is a future that remains, as yet, undetermined.

As Dator would have it, our challenge as futurists is to proceed as the "murderers of all murderers" in fragmenting commonly held and accepted notions of the future(s)—in essence, the futurist must wield "the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon." This, however, is only one half of the equation: the futurist is also charged with lighting a "lantern in the bright morning hours," which is to engage others in the future(s) through the present by re-envisioning structures that define our all-too-human existence, even if "the greatness of this deed [appears] too great for us." As the guiding method of the Manoa School, the call to arms that is "structure matters" is ultimately a means by which to engage the *becoming*, as *being* suggests stasis,

of humanity in the wake of an “infinite nothing.” The future, as Dator contends, has never been solid, stable, or predictable, and one must be vigilant in voicing that which has “not yet reached human ears.” As Nietzsche pens, “Gods, too, decompose.” Robots, on the other hand...

Correspondence

John A. Sweeney
 Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies
 USA
 Dept. of Political Science
 University of Hawaii at Manoa
 2424 Maile Way
 Saunders 617
 Honolulu, HI 96822, USA
 Email:john.sweeney@hawaii.edu

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