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The Long Now

By Po Bronson

Page 1 of 14
[previous](#) | [start](#) | [next](#)
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Time-traveling with Danny Hillis.

00:00:00 the curious thing Danny Hillis has been up to

The legendary designer of computer architecture, Danny Hillis, has given up computers for a while. A Disney Fellow and vice president at Walt Disney Imagineering in Glendale, California, he has devoted himself to a mission that at first glance seems beyond wacky: He is building a monument-sized mechanical clock that, if it is erected and started according to schedule on January 1, 2001, will continue ticking and counting time through the year AD 12,000.

Considering that the pyramids of Egypt and Stonehenge are only about 5,000 years old, Hillis's objective is so off the charts that it kind of annoys the mind to even attempt to think of how long that is. As if this were not challenge enough, Hillis has set himself to what seems an even more formidable aim:

He wants us to take him seriously.

Danny hopes that these two ingredients - the clock and taking it seriously - will combine to lengthen the technology industry's short-term framework of time. In essence, he wants us to stop thinking about what's for lunch and start thinking about how to feed the world. An admirable objective that no one will contest, but it's not apparent what a mere clock will accomplish.

00:01:00 what he'd like our sense of time to be

Danny Hillis would have us execute a sort of backflip-with-twist on the way we have learned to think about the environment - which is to recognize that our negligible

year-to-year impact on nature adds up to devastating consequences over generations of time. The backflip is to stop carping about the negative, and to imagine what we might accomplish over generations with minor year-on-year effort. The twist is to apply this type of thinking-beyond-nature to the rest of our lives.

It turns out that the "sense of time" has indeed been altered in this way for the 15 or so people that Danny has inspired to join his effort (1) - smart people who have dedicated a better chunk of two years pondering such design questions as:

- "In what language do we create a manual to explain to people, several thousand years into the future, how to repair the clock?"
- "What counting mechanism will survive erosion for 10,000 years?"
- "If we put the clock in a city to get visitors, will the city even exist in thousands of years?"

Reflecting upon these almost unanswerable problems carries over to the rest of their lives. At work, these 15 or so people find themselves less interested in coming up with the next cool Web site, and more interested in advancing artificial intelligence. "Deep time" is how they describe their state of mind.

00:02:07 how seriously the rest of us are supposed to take it

However, most of us won't get to work on the clock. What we will get is an opportunity to visit the clock monument, the way we visit a museum. That's why the taking-it-seriously is so important. Inevitably, the visiting hours of the clock will close at around 5 p.m. on any given day, and at 4:15 some tourists will show up at the gates and decide to get it in quickly, then go have a beer, and they will rush through the monument and never take it seriously and leave by 5, their time frameworks more defined by their 45-minute allowance than by the clock's 10,000-year ambition. Only by taking it seriously - in the way that the 15 people currently working on the clock take it seriously - will the experience of visiting the clock cross over to have a beneficial impact on the visitor's time frame.

Po Bronson (pobronson@aol.com) is a frequent contributor to Wired; he wrote "Is the Revolution Over? Report from Ground Zero: Silicon Valley" in Wired 6.01.

Page 2 >>

(1) 00:00:20
 Hillis is to techies what Robert Altman is to actors. Cool, famous people who could make a lot more money doing something else get drawn in to his projects: His Tinkertoy computer, his Connection Machines, and now his Millennium Clock have all read like a who's who of the day.

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