

If tomorrow comes

27 Aug, 2004, 0020 hrs IST, Vikas Kumar, TNN

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If normal is boring, then what Danny Hillis does for a living can appear downright weird. He likes inventing things just for the fun of doing so, and hopes he'll learn something new each time.

Like building a Millennium Clock which is intended to last for the next 10,000 years. Can it be done? Hillis certainly thinks so, and he's already proven that by building a nine-foot prototype of the clock, which has been on display at the Science Museum in London, England.

With over 50 US patents under his belt, Hillis is undoubtedly one of the most prolific inventors of our time. However, he has often been criticised for some of his impractical inventions, like the clock, which often make little sense to the outside world.

But make no mistake. Hillis is no lost-in-his-own-planet kind of scientist that he appears to be. He's just concerned that that we aren't thinking too deep into the future, limiting our horizon to maybe just a few centuries or so.

One of his suggestions — prefixing an additional zero to the conventional year. So the year 2004 in Hillis' framework would read as 02004, addressing the deca-millennium bug, which would become a real problem in another 8,000 odd-years.

Much of Hillis' inventive streak can be traced back to his childhood days. Born on September 25, 1956 in Maryland, USA, Hillis spent a significant part of his early life travelling with his father, an epidemiologist, and his mother, through the jungles of Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya and Zaire in Central Africa, following outbreaks of hepatitis.

India too was a major milestone in his life. It was in Calcutta as a teenager that Hillis built with dry cell batteries, nails and plywood, a computer that could play tic-tac-toe, demonstrating his ingenuity even with scarce resources.

Today he's looking at drawing on the same mindset — the Millennium Clock — to be made of simple "bronze age" material like rock and mechanical levers and which won't need electricity.

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