



Robot Futures

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A roboticist imagines life with robots that sell us products, drive our cars, even allow us to assume new physical form, and more.

With robots, we are inventing a new species that is part material and part digital. The ambition of modern robotics goes beyond copying humans, beyond the effort to make walking, talking androids that are indistinguishable from people. Future robots will have superhuman abilities in both the physical and digital realms. They will be embedded in our physical spaces, with the ability to go where we cannot, and will have minds of their own, thanks to artificial intelligence. In *Robot Futures*, the roboticist Illah Reza Nourbakhsh considers how we will share our world with these creatures, and how our society could change as it incorporates a race of stronger, smarter beings.

Nourbakhsh imagines a future that includes adbots offering interactive custom messaging; robotic flying toys that operate by means of "gaze tracking"; robot-enabled multimodal, multicontinental telepresence; and even a way that nanorobots could allow us to assume different physical forms. Nourbakhsh examines the underlying technology and the social consequences of each scenario. He also offers a counter-vision: a robotics designed to create civic and community empowerment. His book helps us understand why that is the robot future we should try to bring about.

Robot Futures Details

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From Reader Review Robot Futures for online ebook

Hom Sack says

A very provocative glimpse into what the future looks like when more and more autonomous robots live among us.

John says

This book is a whirlwind tour of what Robots may bring. The author wants to end the idea that the Robots of the future are human-shaped, or wheeled. Robots, he stresses, enhance the interface the digital world with the human world.

It gets off to a roaring start, with the next few decades bringing some bizarre new changes, like robots that can go survey human population to enhance political or marketing campaigns. Not something I'd ever considered.

Halfway through, it turns into a bland, visionless sci-fi talk about robots in 30, 40 or 50 years into the future. This didn't add anything or excite me at all. Accelerando was orders of magnitude better.

Ryan Morton says

A good set of short sci-fi stories combined with a cozy coffee-shop-book-club-meet-up conversation with robotics professor. Reza portrays a few interesting, thought-provoking, and sometimes scary futures in an accessible manner, that even a roboticist finds interesting. Each short story is followed by a toned-down, but still quite academic, analysis of the current state of the technological, ethical, and societal plot points.

The author is clearly knowledgeable in the robotics and technical aspects of these stories. The stories get right to the point, but in a fun non-academic way that makes you want to keep on reading. Each is followed by highly articulate breakdown of the core issues facing researchers and practitioners today, and tomorrow, regarding the story's topic. A light dusting of survey citations will appease the academic audience, while a fluid, enlightening writing style keeps the others turning pages, learning and becoming part of the story.

A good read for the roboticist, sci-fi enthusiast, future politician/policy-maker, or anyone these interested in the intricacies of highly advanced technologies on the future of humanity.

Rj says

Just finished Illah Reza Nourbakhsh's, Robot Futures (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013). It is a small, short book featuring a collection of future scenarios involving robots that allow Nourbakhsh to discuss various issues about robots. It is an easy and fast read but leaves one wanting more in depth discussion of the issues raised.

Alex says

Quite interesting technological speculation, and easy to read given the underlying complexity of the subject matter. I couldn't help but be reminded of William Gibson's "The Peripheral" and Eric Drexler's "Engines of Creation" in the latter sections of the book. I was also interested to see Nourbakhsh's rebuttal to Kurzweil even in the context of fantastical descriptions of "patching" between nanorobot-enabled bodies. An engaging mix of science fiction and contemporary reality in an exciting field of engineering.

Mark says

Illah Nourbakhsh is a roboticist at Carnegie Mellon University. But more than that, he is a scientist who thinks about the social impact of robots, which in its broadest form includes not only the kind of humanoid robots we normally envision, but drones, virtual reality mobile bots, smart appliances and all the other computer powered devices that will interact with the environment and serve us -- or disserve us -- in ways we can hardly imagine.

In fact, in one of his most provocative chapters (each of which begins with a scifi scenario in the future), Nourbakhsh says it will actually be easier in the far future for scientists to develop nanobots that will embed themselves in our brains than it will be for them to develop an exact digital replica of a person's brain to upload to some kind of machine (Ray Kurzweil's Singularity). In that scenario, brain enhancing nanobots might do everything from helping us communicate directly with nanos in someone else's brain, to enhancing our movements and reaction times, to allowing us to see colors we cannot presently see, to giving us instant access to the vast trove of information on the web. And of course it opens the possibility that someone other than ourselves could hack our brains (although some would argue we've let certain politicians do that already).

Before reaching that stage, he speculates, we will have mobile robots that will extend our already fractured attention spans by allowing us literally to be in two or more places at once. If one of our bots is climbing rocks with one friend in another country, we can partake of that experience, while then switching back to whatever person we are dealing with in our current physical location, while using another robotic assistant to not only support a call to our wife but handle the more routine part of the conversation using an exact mimic of our voices, possibly while our bot runs alongside her during a morning jog.

While Nourbakhsh does not stint on the gee whiz aspects of future technology or its more malevolent uses, what is more important to him is that we begin to think about the ethical and social implications of these creations. He helps lead one nascent project in Pittsburgh now that tries to help grassroots community groups use robotic or computerized technology to make neighborhoods safer or healthier, by for instance slowing down drive-through traffic and simultaneously advertising information about the history and positive features of the neighborhood people are passing through.

Because much of technological development today is driven either by corporations that want to sell us something (which will lead to Minority Report-style personalized ad messages appearing in front of us wherever we go) or governments that want to control us in some way (witness China's growing camera surveillance society), Nourbaksh is highly interested in figuring out ways for everyday people to have access

to these same technologies and prevent its power from just becoming the purview of the 1 percent.

A provocative and fascinating book.

Sara J. says

Concise and thought provoking. A must read- quick too.

Jeff says

Updates on robotics from somebody working in the field. It has short sci-fi stories at the top of each chapter elaborating how robots will work their way into our lives. Scary. Annoying. I think "robot smog" is the phrase the author uses to describe our future...

Gabriel says

Robot Futures is a quick and snappy look at how robotics will shape the future of humanity. It is well-written and insightful and I would recommend it. The central thesis is one we've heard before - robotics will flood the world in a physical manifestation of the "internet of things," and bring with them a host of legal, ethical, and technical challenges.

Sadly, the conclusion of the book is essentially that we're all doomed because unless we come together to think ethically about robotics and about the impact on society of a physical manifestation of the internet, we will end up with a world run by invasive marketers and the military. So. We should look forward to a world of invasive, deeply manipulative marketing and military robots killing us indiscriminately. (Hey, the truth hurts sometimes.)

P.W. Singer says

fantastic book that explores many questions that arent too far off...
