

THE JORDAN HARBINGER SHOW

Worksheet for Rob Reid | Synthetic Biology for Medicine and Murder (Episode 244)

Lately we can't even turn on the news without bracing for the next disaster. Whether it's a mass-shooting, terrorism, or some other catastrophe of our own making, it's pretty clear that there's a small percentage of the population that just wants to kill as many people as possible before they leave this world. Fortunately, most nihilistic killers like these don't have access to nuclear weapons. But what if they had access to something equally dangerous? What if nearly everybody did?

On this episode we talk with science fiction author, tech entrepreneur, and fellow podcaster Rob Reid, who recently [spoke at TED about synthetic biology](#) — a relatively new field of gene-splicing and genetic engineering that is expensive today, but on the cusp of being affordable to hobbyists soon. It's an exciting notion, but what happens if one of these hobbyists turns out to be a nihilistic mass murderer in waiting whose ambition is to create a devastating superbug and wipe out millions of people? Rob addresses this and so much more in [this simultaneously terrifying and fascinating episode](#).

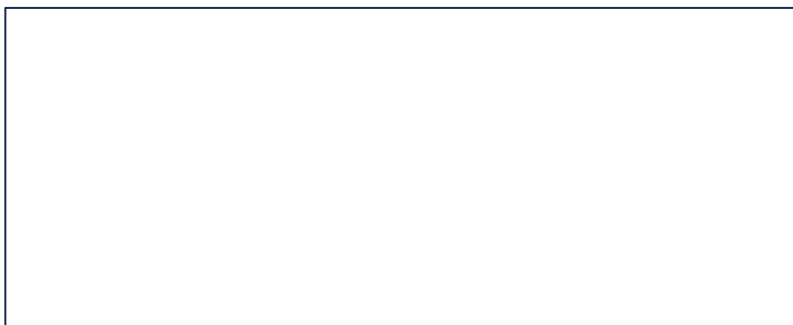
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A Force Multiplier for Murder

As disgruntled shooters, angry bombers, and plane-crashing pilots have proven, a certain percentage of the population is made up of suicidal nihilistic killers. More than 800,000 people kill themselves every year, and a tiny number of them want to take as many others with them as possible. The damage and havoc they inflict is relative to the weapons at their disposal — someone with access to automatic firearms is going to be able to take out more people than someone who can only get their hands on a hammer, and someone who has the keys to a commercial airliner can take out more people, still. So what can we expect to happen when these nothing-to-lose miscreants start dabbling with synthetic biology tools like **CRISPR** that could potentially allow them to create new superbugs for which humans have no natural resistance?

Rob says: “The thing that we need to ask ourselves in this era of rapidly expanding, rapidly improving technology is what lethal weapons are average people going to be able to access 15, 20, 30 years from today that they can’t access right now?”

This technology’s going to be ubiquitous, so banning it outright won’t work. Flex your creative muscles and consider what countermeasures you might take to avert a would-be mass murderer’s catastrophic plans with the runway of 15, 20, 30 years to prepare for the worst.



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A Force Multiplier for Progress

For all the problems synthetic biology will undoubtedly cause humanity, it will also allow us to be longer-living custodians of a healthier planet with applications from commonplace organ transplants to fast-growing food sources that replenish the oxygen supply to termite gut microbes powering our cities with renewable energy.

“The amount of stuff that’s going to come out of this field that’s positive is reason enough to make sure we don’t get annihilated,” says Rob, “because the future has the potential to be so amazing.”

Provided you’re not one of the suicidal nihilistic killers we talked about earlier, what positive applications for synthetic biology would you like to see? If you could address what you perceive to be the biggest crisis we now face as a species and a world, how might you apply synthetic biology to solve it?

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For Whom the Umwelt Tolls

Rob brings up a concept called *umwelt*, coined in the early 20th century (from the German word for “environment”) by biologist Jakob von Uexküll to describe the world as we experience it through our available senses. If my cat and I are in the same room with you and your pet bat, our *umwelten* differ significantly depending on how our senses allow us to perceive this room.

“There are senses that humans lack — actual senses that beings on this planet have, and there are extents to our senses,” says Rob. “The term that’s often used is called *umwelt*; it’s a very interesting idea. It’s that sliver of reality that a given critter can perceive.”

If you were a synthetic biology tinkerer in the not-so-distant future, what senses would you be most eager to enhance or create for your ideal umwelt? Would you become a superhero — or a supervillain?

Full show notes and resources for this episode [can be found here.](#)

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We deconstruct the playbooks of the most successful people on earth – and learn new strategies, perspectives, and insights you can't find anywhere else. Then, take these valuable insights into your own life and live what you listen.

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