Draft Templeton Proposal, September 3, 2014

1. **Project Title** (150 characters max): Finding Genius in an Antidisciplinary World

   Project date: August 1, 2015 through July 31, 2016

2. **Executive Summary** (1300 characters max): This proposal responds to a specific problem: how to find genius in an antidisciplinary world. Peer review evaluates work in traditional disciplines, but how do we find exceptional talent in fields that don't yet even have a name?

   Since 1985, the MIT Media Lab has been doing just this, but on a limited scale. The Media Lab has been a place where scientists, engineers, designers, and their students have worked on big, antidisciplinary questions that fall between established fields. Now it's time to scale this process.

   The proposed project expands upon this 30 year track record, and seeks to locate other geniuses working in these white spaces between fields, by offering a series of prizes to remarkable individuals working in a Media Lab–like style. Media Lab Director Joi Ito will work with a "kitchen cabinet" of creative thinkers and connectors, who will act as informal curators, bringing order to this process without stultifying it. These curators will award ten prizes; prize winners will distribute half the prize money to five other individuals working on a related topic, who will meet during the year and then convene at the Lab annually beginning in summer 2015. Ultimately, this method of locating geniuses in the white spaces between disciplines should increase the pool of students and faculty who would be appropriate to work at the Media Lab, and will create new methods to identify geniuses who might be missed under traditional mechanisms that tend to reward those who gravitate toward a disciplinary mean.

3. **Project Activities** (4000 characters maximum):

   The "Finding Genius in an Antidisciplinary World" project will build on the model of an existing Media Lab program, the Director's Fellows. There are people all over the world with less-than-traditional backgrounds who would be great additions to the Media Lab community. The Director's Fellows initiative creates a way for these extraordinary individuals to take part in Media Lab activities alongside faculty and students.

   While the Director's Fellows are diverse in terms of their locations, experiences, and disciplines, they have not been chosen based on academic criteria. The "Finding Genius" program will represent a more academic version of the Director's Fellows, and will focus on truly exceptional individuals who have escaped notice. Additionally, while the Director's Fellows primary relationships are to the communities in which they work, we hope the Templeton Fellows will have an orientation toward the Media Lab. We want to use this process to find the next generation of exceptional individuals who should come to the Media Lab, men and women who will make great discoveries and thrive in an

institutionally supported yet antidisciplinary space. *While it is not part of the scope of this grant request, eventually we expect that we may be able to use philanthropic support from other foundations and individuals -- some of whom have already stepped forward -- to bring some of the prize winners to the lab on a longer-term or even permanent basis as students, researchers, and faculty.*

Each year, a group of "gatekeepers" or curators, selected by Joi Ito and remaining anonymous, will choose ten Templeton/Media Lab Fellows. Each fellow will receive a prize of $100,000, with the stipulation that he or she give away half of this money to five additional scholars, thereby creating a cluster of six people working on a particular problem. Possible problems currently existing in the white spaces between disciplines, which have come to the Media Lab's attention, include the intersection of electrical and bioengineering, virtual currencies and their potential as a general platform, the intersection of cybersecurity and immunology, and high bandwidth connections for human-in-the-loop artificial intelligence.

Selected individuals can use their prize money for whatever they wish, so long as it is related to the topic of the cluster. Research, travel to a convening, buying supplies or books are all relevant.

These ten clusters will meet on a schedule established by each group leader. The Media Lab has a strong annual presence at TED, SXSW, the World Economic Forum, Foo Camp, and will participate in MIT's Solve conferences, which begin in October 2015, and we can provide logistical support should clusters choose to meet at these events. Each year, the ten clusters will also be asked to convene during the Media Lab's summer festival, a time when our Director's Fellows, Advisory Council, Templeton Fellows, and students and faculty will come together. We expect to launch the first of these festivals in summer 2015.

The goal of the Media Lab is to provide a unique kind of support—a thin substrate of organization—that feels non-institutional and does not dictate or micro-manage the process. Choosing ten initial prize winners, each of whom gets to pick five more, will help to decentralize the process and ensure that one person—or the Media Lab as a whole—does not overly control the process. Exceptional individuals will self-select and gravitate toward one another, but once they are in the system, the resources of the Lab can ensure that they have as much support as they want or need. In short, we will create something that is less programmed than a department, but more structured—and more geared to impact and deployment—than Foo camp.

The Media Lab will begin this program immediately, using startup funds provided by an anonymous donor, which will carry us through the first convening in July 2015. We hope that a 12 month Templeton Foundation grant beginning in August 2015 will enable us to expand the number of prize winners and cohorts and fund the second convening, at the July 2016 Media Lab festival. Staff support to run this program is requested.

Rather than applying for a multi-year grant, we are applying for one year. We will have a good sense by October 2016 what works and what doesn't and can tailor a second request for support appropriately.

4. **Current Conditions** (1000 characters maximum)

The search for geniuses is limited in several ways. The first is that there is no identification system for them within academia. Peer review works well within established disciplines that have their own journals and their own standards for evaluating professional success. But it doesn't work well for antidisciplinary work.

Current programs to find exceptional individuals are either too organized or not organized enough. There is a limit to how much the search for geniuses can and should be centrally planned and organized. The best people tend to have their discussions outside of institutions, meaning there is a danger in trying to control the process too tightly. At the same time, events like Foo Camp can be too unstructured, with topics and outcomes uncertain until the last minute.

The MIT Media Lab believes it can bring the right balance of institutional rigor and free form creativity to this process. We are a top research and teaching institute in one of the world's best universities. At the same time, we are unique within MIT, and have worked for 30 years to ensure that our students and faculty have the freedom to explore.

5. **Outputs** (1000 characters maximum): Outputs include: 1) ten $100,000 prizes; out of that money, each prize winner will then award five $10,000 prizes, thereby creating a cluster of six individuals working on a project; 2) convening of each cluster at annual conferences such as SXSW, Foo Camp, or TED, where Media Lab staff can provide structure and contribute resources to the meeting; 3) convening of all ten clusters at the Media Lab in July 2016; 4) website to make convenings accessible to a broader audience.

6. **Outcomes** (1000 characters maximum)

Outcomes include: 1) Significant changes in the nature of scholarly work, as antidisciplinary fields are highlighted and nurtured, and the individuals who work in them are given as many resources and rewards as those who fall into the traditional disciplines that academia recognizes currently; 2) Creation of networks that expand on the six person cluster in each antidisciplinary area supported by this grant, and the related development of new fields; 3) Broad public exposure, including national and international media coverage, highlighting these new antidisciplinary areas, so that others are encouraged to fund them further, and also highlighting new ways to find and nurture genius; 4) Otherwise obscure individuals of exceptional intelligence are recognized and rewarded.

7. **Vision of Sir John Templeton** (1000 characters maximum)

The motto that Sir John Templeton chose for the foundation, "How little we know, how eager to learn," captures the spirit of both the Media Lab and our proposed project to

identify and nurture genius in an antidisciplinary world. His optimism about the future, and his notion of the speeding up of knowledge in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, resonates with our project, which finds whole new areas of inquiry open, such as biological and electronic synthesis, or digital currencies, that weren't even imaginable ten years ago, and which have yet to be fully recognized by the traditional academy. The Media Lab and the Templeton Foundation also share a goal of supporting contrarians, people who are outspoken and unconventional in their work and beliefs, even if these are unpopular or seem far-fetched. Not all ideas will prove successful, but our institutions are willing to give them a try and let their promoters prove themselves. This is how important innovations are realized, not by wishy-washy projects that veer toward an established, mediocre mean that is agreeable to all.

8. No; is not similar to, and does not expand on, any previous Templeton grant.

9. Start date: August 1, 2015

10. Duration: 12 months

11. Primary contact: Peter Cohen

12. Project Leader: Joi Ito (need CV)

13. Project Co-Leader: Individual to be hired, with matching funds from an anonymous donor, and then continued with funds for the Templeton Foundation.

14. No relation to foundation.

15. Additional personnel. Several individuals have already been approached about being consultants to this project, to help identify the prize winners. As mentioned earlier, this "kitchen cabinet" of curators will remain anonymous. Media Lab Events & Special Projects Manager Jessica Sousa will assist with logistics at convenings.

16. **Evidence of future success** (1000 characters max): There are two precedents that suggest that "Finding Genius" will be implemented to a high standard: the Director's Fellows program and the Media Lab Advisory Council. These are both programs that were started by Media Lab Director Joi Ito, in order to bring extraordinary people from a variety of fields into the circle of the Lab. Today, the Director's Fellows program has admitted its second cohort, and boasts 21 members ranging from community activists to international development specialists to a chess master and a race car driver. (As mentioned, we envision the Genius Fellows to be a more academic version of the Director's Fellows.) The Advisory Council consists of 24 individuals, all leaders in their fields, again without formal Lab affiliation, who have been brought closer to the Lab through this program. In July 2014, the Director's Fellows and the Advisory Council came together in a convening that is a prototype for what we envision will be our annual summer festival, during which the Templeton Fellows will join these two groups, students, and faculty.

17. **How came abou**t (1000 characters max): This proposal and plan resulted, in part, from conversations that Joi Ito has had with Barnaby Marsh and Ayako Fukui at the foundation. Joi, Barnaby, Ayako, and Media Lab Advisory Council member ███████ have had extensive discussions about the challenges of finding genius in a world in which disciplines are falling apart, and in which the traditional ways that disciplines recognize excellence are failing to find the true geniuses working today.

18. No

19. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA.

20. Dollars

21. **Budget (100% of costs, August 2015 to July 2016)**

10 prizes at $100,000 each: $1,000,000

Coordinator for 12 months: $152,625 plus benefits: $39,683

July 2016 convening at Media Lab: $100,000

Administrative support @ 50% effort: $22,556 plus benefits: $5,865

Travel expenses: $29,272 domestic plus $50,000 foreign

Website to make convenings more accessible: $100,000

Overhead @ 15%: $225,000

Total: $1.725 million

22. **Amount requested from foundation**: $1.725 million

23. **Supplemental funds**

Funds from an anonymous donor have been pledged or promised, to complement the Templeton-funded program in a number of ways. As such, we are calling these supplemental funds, rather than matching.

Supplemental Gift in Hand: A $300,000 gift already received from an anonymous donor will help to launch this program while we await world from the Templeton Foundation. (Attached: award letter from Leon Black, who made an initial $500,000 anonymous gift, in honor of a friend who wishes to remain strictly anonymous. $300,000 of this will be used to launch this program.)

- money to run program September 2014 to July 2015: 2 clusters (200k)

- coordinator January 2014 to July 2015: 75k plus benefits

- July 2015 convergence: 100k

Anticipated Supplemental Gifts: In addition, we are anticipating an additional gift from this anonymous donor in winter 2014/15, of up to $10 million. If received, this gift will be used to expand the number of clusters in the first year's cohort beyond the two mentioned above, and to run the program through July 2015.

Beginning in August 2015, Templeton money will run the prize program and summer festival. At that point, the anonymous donor's gift will be used for other projects that complement the prize/festival program. For instance, we anticipate using some of this money to bring individuals identified through this process to the Lab on a longer-term or permanent basis, as students, researchers, or faculty. Permanent faculty hires are one possibility.