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New Conceptual Approaches to the Study of American Foreign Relations: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

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In the summer of 1948, John Von Neumann, the great mathematician who is

said to have invented the digital computer, delivered a series of lectures at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton on the subject of self-replicating machines. There was no theoretical reason, Von Neumann insisted, why one could not construct an automaton—a robot—capable, with access to sufficient raw materials, of duplicating itself. All it would need would be the ability to compare its own dimensions with those of the resources available, and then make the necessary adjustments. Von Neumann went on to point out, though, that such machines would lack the capacity for evolutionary development: that would come only if an automaton bumped up against something by accident, thereby altering its own shape and creating a new template from which a slightly different, and perhaps slightly improved, copy...

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