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Machines mimic life at NextFest. 26/06/2005. ABC News Online

[This is the print version of story <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200506/s1400665.htm>]

Last Update: Sunday, June 26, 2005. 9:44am (AEST)



An android of science fiction author Philip K Dick is displayed at NextFest in Chicago. The android was created as a tribute to Dick, who has written many science fiction books concerning androids. (Reuters)

Machines mimic life at NextFest

Meet the robot lobster and the android that not only smiles, frowns and blinks but also recognises people and talks back.

They are two of the spookier entries at *Wired Magazine's* annual NextFest, the high-tech carnival at a Chicago convention hall which is showcasing futuristic, sometimes uncannily lifelike technology.

"The difference between animals and robots is robots get stuck while animals squirm their way through," said inventor-engineer Joseph Ayers of Boston's Northeastern University.

His robo-lobsters, designed to roam the sea floor and find undersea mines, are equipped with "neurons" that allow them to work their way around clutter much as real lobsters would.

Employing sequenced mechanical muscles made from the same metal mesh material used to make the stents implanted in heart patients, Mr Ayers said his work might some day lead to more lifelike prostheses.

He hopes to shrink the mechanics behind the robot's movements onto a computer chip.

Also on display at NextFest were a combination submersible jet-ski, a virtual air hockey game and corporate entries such as General Motors' hydrogen-powered vehicles and General Electric's technologies to generate energy and make drinking water out of sea water.

Another robot, that resembles a small tank on its hind legs, was admired by Major Jeff Stone, who was taking a break from the US Army's nearby exhibit.

"Our soldiers love these things," Maj Stone said, referring to iRobot's Packbot, a hundred of which are in Iraq defusing and exploding bombs.

US soldiers assigned to operate the \$US100,000 robots have even given them affectionate names.

"Drop some C-4 (plastic explosive) right on the weapon, and you don't have to worry about it" hurting anyone, Maj Stone said.

Packbot manufacturer iRobot also promoted its automated vacuum cleaner line at NextFest. At \$US329, the costliest versions can be programmed to do their work while the homeowner is away.

Nearby, a black-clad soldier, Sergeant Robert Atkinson, explained the features of his future warrior's suit designed by the US Army.

"This right here," he said, motioning to the computer screen on his wrist, "is the concept of a flexible monitor that shows your heart rate and breathing rate, and projects images from a drone flying overhead."

The suit, which may hit the battlefield in 20 years, is also equipped with artificial muscles that contract to help a soldier pick up a wounded comrade.

The most lifelike robot on display was one depicting the late science fiction writer Philip K Dick created by Dallas start-up Hanson Robotics. Founder David Hanson formerly worked at Disney.

Seated naturally on a sofa, the figure's face contorted into human expressions - frowning, blinking, smiling - and replied to visitors' comments using a software program that chose from among 10,000 pages of Dick's writings. Cameras behind its eyes could "recognise"

acquaintances.

Initially a likely museum piece or fancy toy, the androids could one day become companions for the elderly, the company's Steve Prilliman said.

-Reuters

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