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NextFest offers taste of technology // WIRED magazine's futuristic showcase coming to Navy Pier

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A game in which your brainwaves move the ball.

A coat that renders you invisible.

A robotic head that grins, grimaces, makes eye contact and carries on a conversation with you.

Those are among the 125 exhibits set to hit Navy Pier next week in a fair with a futuristic flair called NextFest.

Starting next Thursday, the three-day extravaganza promises a "wow"-inspiring sneak peek at what the world may look like in five to 10 years.

WIRED magazine presented the first NextFest last year in San Francisco, where the publication is based.

The Chicago edition will boast 25 more exhibits and occupy nearly 40 percent more space, 145,000 square feet.

Magazine publisher Drew Schutte said the attractions this year will be bigger and better. Naturally.

"We added the goal of making them more interactive -- more things you can touch and see -- and more demos," he said.

Every exhibit is an operating prototype. "We went to universities, R&D labs and inventors and said, 'What are you working on that actually works?' We didn't want anything that was just a concept."

Author's electronic alter ego

The disturbingly lifelike robotic head, its face made of a rubbery material, looks like the late science fiction writer **Philip K. Dick**, who often wrote about robots.

It has "a complete range of humanlike expressions," said inventor David Hansen, a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Dallas.

He and partner Andrew Olney, a doctoral student at the University of Memphis, scanned in thousands of pages of Dick's writings so the head can answer people's questions in the author's own words.

Over the phone, a reporter asked, "What got you interested in writing science fiction?"

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The three-sentence response was somewhat indirect, beginning with, "Yeah, I remember an article in the 'People's World' after World War II in which science fiction was denounced as a reactionary tool of the imperialistic fascist powers."

Olny said the head also gives such replies as "Fine, thank you" and "Hi" to simpler questions.

Among other highlights of the event:

Invisibility coat -- A video camera behind the wearer projects scenery onto the garment's front, creating a see-through illusion. One practical application could be in the floor of airplane cockpits, allowing pilots to avoid hard landings by "seeing" the ground coming up beneath.

Brainball -- Players of this game wear head straps wired to brainwave sensors. Waves generated by a calm brain move a ball to a goal, enabling cooler heads to prevail.

Telepresence robot -- A student homebound by illness or disability remotely controls a robot in the classroom that can swivel its head and raise its hand when teacher asks a question.

Bionic dolphin -- This personal watercraft, with driver inside, can submerge, leap and perform barrel rolls. It will perform in the Chicago River at the Michigan Avenue bridge at 9 a.m. next Thursday.

NextFest cost "many millions" to produce, Schutte said. GE is the main sponsor, with pavilions funded by GM (transportation), Motorola (communication), Yahoo! (entertainment), Pfizer (health) and Northrop Grumman (security).

New York in 2006

In 2006, NextFest moves to New York. For Chicagoans, "this is a rare opportunity to see this many new technologies from around the world at one time in one place," Schutte said.

Admission next Friday is limited to teachers, students and nonprofit groups. Weekend tickets are \$10 online at www.nextfest.net and \$15 at the door. Children under 12 will be admitted free.

The **Philip K. Dick** Robot, which looks like the late science fiction writer, promises a variety of "humanlike expressions."

A video camera on the "invisibility coat" records scenery behind the wearer and projects it onto the garment for a see-through effect.

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