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LEISURE & ARTS

Robots, Gadgets and High-Tech Games

A visit to Wired magazine's NextFest.

BY JOEL HENNING

Tuesday, July 5, 2005 12:01 a.m. EDT

CHICAGO--You know you're in a world of extravagantly high technology when you find yourself establishing active animosity toward some of the robots in an exhibition and deep affection toward others. Such was the case at last month's NextFest.2005 at Navy Pier, sponsored by Wired magazine, which included more than 100 futuristic exhibits concerning exploration, entertainment, transportation, science and medicine.

The most advanced robot on exhibition was also, in my view, the most obnoxious. Designed and programmed to be the spitting image of sci-fi icon and author Philip K. Dick ("Blade Runner," "Minority Report," "Total Recall," etc.), the robot has hardware by Hanson Technology and uncannily lifelike "skin." Cameras in the robot's eyes allow it to track faces, and 60 sensors behind its face make it eerily able to reproduce facial expressions. It can even recognize people in a crowd (Mr. Dick's family and friends, celebrities, etc.). Mr. Dick's doppelganger is set in a room replicating the writer's study.

Despite these enormous technological achievements, I was put off, perhaps because Mr. Dick--I mean the robot--not only didn't recognize me, but wouldn't answer my questions. I would, for example, ask it how it likes Chicago. Driven by some of the best speech-recognition software, advanced natural-language processing and speech synthesis in the world (designed by a team led by Andrew Olney, of the FedEx Institute of Technology of the University of Memphis), it would launch into long stories, mainly about itself and its namesake's writing (much, I'm told, like the real Philip K. Dick, who died in 1982, was wont to do).

"Over the years it seems to me that by subtle but real degrees the world has come to resemble a PKD novel," the robot told me. "Several freaks have even accused me of bringing on the modern world by my novels. My writing deals with hallucinated worlds, intoxicating and deluding drugs, and psychosis. But my writing acts as an antidote, a detoxifying, not intoxicating, antidote." Hopelessly lost, I asked it what the hell all that means, but it ignored me and went on, staring at me all the while, following my increasingly agitated fidgeting with its incredibly lifelike eyes, and employing the 60 sensors behind its face to sneer at me.



July 19, 2005

2:29pm EDT

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Not being a science-fiction geek, I finally liberated myself from the unpleasant Mr. Dick to quickly become enthralled by Chroino, created by Tomotaka Takahashi of Robo Garage at Kyoto University. This little guy is blissfully silent and looks nothing like anybody human. But put through its paces, it rivals an Alvin Ailey dancer in action. It can stand up from a squatting position, bend over and balance on one foot, and is reported to be the first ever robot to walk more or less naturally. It refused, however, to dance to the music being played in the vicinity by the "Juke Bots" robots, two giant, ugly mechanical arms surrounded by vinyl LPs, programmed to outlast the very best human DJs, and to do so without the aid of any designer drugs.



The Innerspace Dolphin

More to my liking was the "Innespace Dolphin," which frolicked in the Chicago River to launch NextFest. A cute combination of Flipper and a Jet Ski, the Dolphin skips across, dives into and cruises through open water much

like its live namesake, and unlike Mr. Dick's robot, it did not diss me.

I needed a way to settle down after my unpleasant interview with Mr. Dick's double, so I headed to NextFest's entertainment pavilion to play Brainball, created by the Interactive Institute, one of those rare games where the *least* aggressive player wins. First my head was wrapped to monitor my alpha and theta brainwaves. Then I sat opposite my opponent, and we both tried to be as calm as possible. A computer converts the players' brain waves into energy that moves a small ball across the table away from the mellower player. I won one and lost one. The Interactive Institute also displayed a pillow that connects to the Web. Hug it and its electroluminescent wires as well as those in the companion pillow--wherever it is--change color, so separated lovers can share a tactile experience, which Mr. Dick's robot sorely needs.

But most of the games on exhibit were not designed to soothe. In fact, several are designed to get kids moving. Kick Ass Kung-Fu uses a camera, software and huge video screens to put the players into the action. As you fight the evildoers, your movements are magnified by the software, so you appear to be as fantastic a fighter as any fantasy video game character. FP Gamerunner puts the player on a treadmill. You can run after or away from the bad guys as you attempt to destroy them with a full panoply of weapons controlled by triggers in the hand grips.

The Navy Pier event is the second annual NextFest; the curator is Wired's vice president and publisher, Drew Schutte. "I grew up fascinated with World's Fairs, and this is my chance to build them on my own," he told me. Last year's inaugural NextFest was in San Francisco. The Chicago event is 40% larger, and Mr. Schutte hopes next year's,

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scheduled for New York, will grow at least as much.

"These are far more difficult to organize than art exhibits," he says, "because we are working with students in dorm rooms in Japan, Finland and Tennessee, as well as GE, GM and Xerox. Some of our exhibits are in production; others are prototypes that only sometimes work." Ultimately, hopes Mr. Schutte, NextFest will be able to show more of its exhibits in action, like the Moller "Skycar," on display but unable to demonstrate its ability to lift drivers vertically off the highway and speed away from fellow commuters at 350 miles an hour.

NextFest is not all over-the-top technology or fun and games. I had my veins revealed by the Luminetx VeinViewer, which used an infrared light source to show their exact location on the surface of my skin. This spooky device will prove a boon to medical technicians searching for the right veins in which to insert needles, and Botox specialists trying to avoid them. And I had my heart's mitral valve revealed by GE's Vivid I, a miniaturized cardiovascular ultrasound machine, which amounts to little more than a wand and a laptop computer, 30 times smaller than current ultrasound equipment. Thus, soon your doctor won't routinely just listen to your heart with a stethoscope--he'll have a look at it as well.

GM offered a look at its environmentally pure hydrogen-fuel-cell cars, controlled entirely by electronics, which, its reps insist, are more than mere fantasies to ward off the green crowd. I just wish they hadn't also come with a Hummer prototype that runs on hydrogen, representing the ultimate oxymoron.

For those who live in the world of cutting-edge technology, NextFest is far more than a high-tech amusement park. "For me, NextFest is the embodiment of the best in technology," suggests Kristian Hammond, professor of computer science at Northwestern University and director of its Intelligence Information Laboratory. "It serves a huge role world-wide in the scientific technology field. It's one of the few venues that exists for exploring how technology interacts with people and people interact with technology. Brainball may seem like a ridiculously silly game, but it demonstrates how a machine can know something about your emotional state. Who knows where that will go?"

Mr. Hammond even liked the Philip K. Dick robot. "Minor things like eye contact and facial expression can be unbelievably powerful. People have the misconception that good science has to be complex. When I look at this, I see good science solving problems rather than exercising theories. Even KickAss Kung Fu and the videogame on the treadmill demonstrate what things can become. This NextFest stuff is driven by personal creativity, by personal vision, by deep interest and love for what technology can do for us."

I know what it can do for me. Next year, Mr. Schutte promises to take me up in the Skycar.

Mr. Henning covers art and culture in Chicago.

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