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Robots quick-step humans into the future at US exhibition

(AFP)

30 September 2006

NEW YORK - Robots are ready to take over from the army of workers who do not have time to prepare their daily meals. They could also teach you ballroom dancing.

The NextFest exhibition in New York has mechanical chefs, the smart fridge that tells you when the orange juice is running low, Japanese digital dancers and even, for separated families, a T-shirt that gives a long-distance hug.

NextFest features 160 futuristic inventions from companies and institutions around the world, addressing growing climatic fears as well as more mundane domestic concerns.

The displays seem fantastic enough, but Chris Anderson, chief editor of Wired magazine, which organised the event, said: "We are at a very early stage of the digital revolution, and here we are only seeing glimpses of it."

The NextFest robots take a lot of the centre stage.

"Never mind helping humankind explore space or do dangerous jobs. The next generation of robots is here to help us figure out what we're doing Saturday night," says the programme for the exhibition of 12 robots from Japan, South Korea, Britain and the United States.

There is a robot DJ that can play vinyl discs from dusk till dawn without getting tired.

Two former Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) students have created a robot orchestra that plays real instruments -- wind instruments, drums, xylophones -- but in a very modern style.

"I'm a composer and I was writing music people couldn't play," said Christine Southworth, one of the creators of Ensemble Robot.

"I didn't want electronic music but instruments. Robots can play very fast and



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precisely. People love it, because they've never seen it before."

"Actroid DER" has amazingly lifelike silicon skin and a silky voice to match. It is rented out to Japanese companies to act as a receptionist or to make high-tech presentations.

Takeshi Mita, a director of Kokoro Company LTD, which makes the Actroid, said "companies want something special, it's a good advertisement or a promotion."

The Actroids drew complimentary remarks from visitors such as French designer Philippe Starck. Other robots do not seem obvious candidates to take over from human counterparts.

The Dance Robots in ballgowns by Yasuhisa Hirata of Japan's Tohoku University could help people with two left feet. But they have not yet been tested in a night club and are intended as models for moving frames to help the elderly walk around.

The digital revolution is more advanced in the kitchen.

General Electric has developed an intelligent kitchen where the soap powder can be rationed and the oven temperature can be automatically set according to the meal. A fridge can even send a telephone message to its owner to let him or her know which food to stock up on.

MIT has developed a spoon that identifies the food and gives its temperature.

Human warmth is also included in the revolution.

Two young scientists have created a T-shirt that has sensors at the waist and shoulders. One person wearing the "hug shirt" can squeeze the shirt, which then sends a message by portable phone to someone wearing a similar shirt at long distance, who then gets a digital hug with the same pressure and temperature. Well, it's the thought that counts.

Security is also a major feature of NextFest.

One company is working on an embarkation card that guarantees the identity of the carrier for security guards at airport gates.

The "PayByTouch" system allows credit transactions using a finger print as the signature. Its creators highlight how there was an estimated 53 billion dollars of credit card fraud in the United States last year.

For environmentalists there are houses made from recycled materials and many simple, everyday items intended to highlight energy conservation.

The metallic petals on the "Flower Lamp", an overhead light, will only open if the house's electricity consumption is at an agreed low.

The "Power Aware" cord glows; depending on how much electricity is being consumed.

"The green issue is becoming a mainstream idea this year," said Victor Friedberg, director of the NextFest event, which ends on Sunday.

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