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Robots at this year's Robodex exhibition in Yokohama got their wires crossed, figuratively rather than literally, and failed to jump through the hoops as hoped. Martyn Williams cowered in a corner until it was all over...



I recently took a trip to Robodex, the world's only exhibition of entertainment robots. The show has only taken place twice (the previous exhibition was in late 2000) and robot technology has made quite a jump since then. Sony had its latest robot, the SDR (Sony Dream Robot) on display – dancing and crooning to some type of Hawaiian beat – and Honda Motor's Asimo robot was also out to impress people, literally.

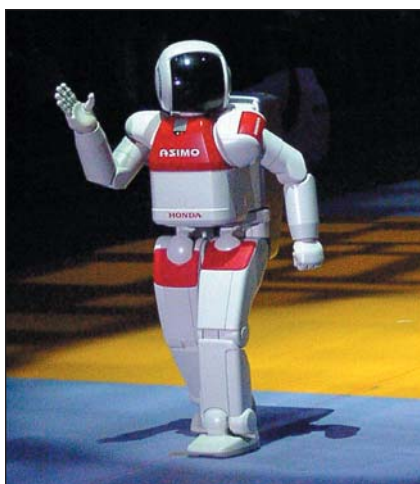
Jobs for the droids

When it walked down the centre aisle at the finale of the robot show, Asimo almost looked as if it was strutting. Bouncing slightly from side to side with one hand in the air waving, Asimo looked to the world as if it knew it was the man and was out trying to pick up any cute girl-robots that were around.

Maybe it was the scent of flowers left by Posy, the flower-girl robot, that stoked Asimo's libido. Posy is more than just another cute robot – like Asimo 'she' is actually fully employed by luxury perfume maker Guerlain in a series of advertisements for a new perfume. According to the company, sales are up and things are going well.

Misreading the signals

Too bad the same couldn't be said for all of the robots in Yokohama. While the



exhibition was more successful than ever, the growing use of WLAN (wireless local area network) systems caused problems. Before Robodex kicked off the assignment of WLAN channels, which are used to control the robots, was decided. However, come showtime there were

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outside signals leaking on to the show floor that confused the mechanical critters.

Had this been an episode of *The Simpsons*, the robots would have gone nuts, attacking people and demolishing the building while Bart sat outside with his laptop chuckling. But real life, luckily, proved to be much duller – a few of the robots refused to move and one needed a push-start to get going. Signs everywhere warned journalists to disable the WLAN on their notebooks and for visitors to turn off the Bluetooth functions on mobile phones.

Home improvement a modern con

Talking of Bluetooth, engineers at Toshiba have embedded the wireless system inside a range of home appliances including a refrigerator, washing machine and microwave oven. A home controller, looking something like a tablet PC, is used to operate the devices, which Toshiba says it is putting on sale to see consumer's reactions. At least one consumer I spoke to was less than impressed and wondered why, if you were going to have to walk up to the microwave to put your food inside, couldn't you just use the buttons on the front rather than retreating to the sofa and your home controller. Still, it looks good in the brochure.

Pay per drink

It's not just appliances that are getting more useful. Drinks vending machines are going all high-tech thanks to a system called C-Mode from mobile phone provider NTT DoCoMo and Coca Cola. The new system allows users to purchase drinks with their phones and have the charge come up on the monthly bill. And it doesn't stop there. C-Mode machines also have built-in printers that will be able to churn out maps of the local area or coupons for restaurants from a mobile website.

The path of love letters rarely runs true

And finally, pity Japan's ambassador to the OECD (organisation for economic co-operation and development), Seiichiro Noboru. The 60-year-old bureaucrat was working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the early hours of 27 March when he emailed a love letter to a friend, but inadvertently posted it on to an internal bulletin board. Numerous staff members read the letter in the couple of hours before IT systems staff deleted it, according to the newspaper *Asahi Shimbun*. He earned a chiding from Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi for using a government computer network for his private mail and, no doubt, infamy inside the ministry. ■