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Robots: The bizarre and the beautiful



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Thanks to the imagination of roboticists, automatons today come in all forms: Some bizarre and some beautiful, but all with a common goal of aiding humans.

And designers take inspiration anywhere they can, from a desire for raw functionality to learning from the biological diversity of nature.

"Nature is a rich source of design ideas," notes Bruno Siciliano, robotics researcher and dissemination officer for EURON, a community of the best European robotics groups and resources in research, industry and education.

"Nature has already solved a lot of the problems that robotics researchers encounter, so it is a good place to go for ideas," he says.

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Robot imitating life



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Biomimetics, or mimicking biological systems, is a very popular approach in robotics and has led to a host of unusual designs. Take, for example, the Robot Fish developed by researchers in the UK's University of Essex. It looks like a real carp and is often mistaken for one.

The fish can move 20 inches a second and, at slower speeds, has a battery that will last five hours. The researchers built three fish as an attraction for the London Aquarium, where they have proved a very popular feature.

But ultimately the design could be used for seabed exploration, to study pipelines for leaks, or even be used for intelligence gathering. The fish can avoid obstacles and swim entirely independently. The researchers hope to increase the robot's intelligence so that it can hook itself up to a power source when it is time for a recharge.

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"Sure, it would be possible to design a standard submarine robot to do similar jobs, but by replicating the designs from nature, researchers can use the advantages of that design," Siciliano says. "In the case of fish, they move through the water easily, without using much energy. As the design of robot fish improves, it will approach that level of efficiency."

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Snakes and spiders



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The Anna Konda is a snake-like automaton that can avoid obstacles and put out fires. The robot moves using hydraulics and is, the designers believe, the strongest snake in the world, and the only one powered by hydraulics.

The advantage of the snake is that it can move through small spaces and is extremely flexible, though at 3 metres long and 70kg it deserves its moniker as the heftiest of all snakes. It was designed by SINTEF in Norway. Spiders, too, have provided inspiration to researchers.

Germany-based Fraunhofer Institute for Intelligent Analysis and Information Systems in Sankt Augustin has designed three: The Amos, Morpheus and TED.

The bots are designed as experimental prototypes for neural perception and networking, an essential element of multi-legged systems. Besides, they open the prospect of highly mobile, stable robots that can traverse a wide variety of terrains, even stairs, without difficulty.

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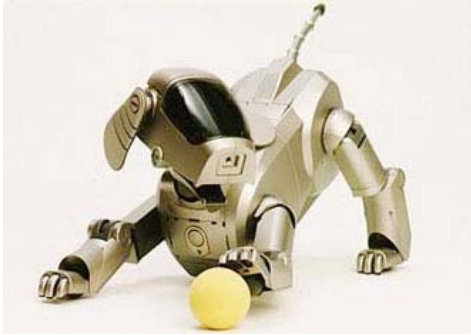
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Games robots play



body imitation.

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Robots offer the potential to create new gaming and entertainment platforms, too. One of the most successful commercial robots of all time, Sony's Aibo, was designed primarily for entertainment.

In the games domain, fooball (table football) has proved a popular choice among researchers. In this case, a robot controls one side of the game and the human player competes against the robot.

It is more than just fun, though, because designing an effective robot fooball player demands very rapid processing and fast reaction motors. It is a profoundly difficult problem but, once solved, it can feed into the wider stream of robotics research.

Education toys like the Robota dolls, a family of mini humanoid robots, can engage in complex interaction with humans, involving speech, vision and

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Games robots play



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The Robota dolls have been around since 1997, but new prototypes are in constant development at the Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne in Switzerland.

Finally, a robot that looks perhaps oddest of all, the e-Puck, is a very small, disc-like robot platform. It contains sound and proximity sensors, a camera, Bluetooth capability and accelerometer; all in a tiny robot with the same volume as a computer mouse. It is an incredibly flexible platform.

Through all of this, one thing is certain: The imagination of engineers will continue to create bizarre and beautiful robotic entities.

"We have a whole range of fields and applications in robotics, and in the future, expect many more designs for each of these domains," Siciliano says.

Courtesy: *Mumbai Mirror*

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