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Phildickian robot

See for yourself - technically speaking, 'Sci-Phil' could be the late sci-fi author

By David Williams
[Contact](#)
July 3, 2005

The author of the science fiction classic "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" died 23 years ago, so we can't ask Philip K. Dick how he'd fancy an android version of himself.

Then again, in a sci-fi meets sci-fact sort of way, we can.

Behold the robotic representation of the man whose writings inspired such movies as "Blade Runner," "Minority Report" and "Total Recall." With a startlingly lifelike bearded face, human mannerisms and a head full of "phildickian," as aficionados say, thoughts and notions, he's on display through next Friday at the University of Memphis FedEx Institute of Technology.

"The way I like to talk about it is, it's art," said Andrew Olney, 28, a native Memphian and U of M PhD student who developed the robot's software.

"It's an interactive robotic sculpture. You can talk to it. If you ask it long-winded Philip K. Dick kinds of questions, it'll come back with real Philip K. Dick kinds of responses, a lot of times drawing from interviews, speeches and stuff like that."

The robot -- whose human subject also wrote a novel called "We Can Build You" -- is a partnership of the FedEx Institute of Technology, Dallas-based Hanson Robotics and the University of Texas's Automation and Robotics Research Institute.

"It's a pretty big leap (in robotic technology)," said David

Hanson, 35, founder and CEO of Hanson Robotics and the creator/artist behind the robot hardware. "There was unveiled about five weeks ago in Japan a robot that's a receptionist. But what we've done is put deep semantic artificial intelligence behind (the PKD android), so that it can assemble new responses on the fly.

"And, also, we put advanced computer vision with our robot so that it can recognize faces. It would call you by name when it sees you."

The PKD android project, which has the blessing of the late author's family, was completed in about seven months, on a five-figure "shoestring" budget benefiting from volunteer labor and donated materials. It was featured at last weekend's Wired magazine NextFest in Chicago, where one media report called it "the most lifelike robot on display."

He smiles. His skin crinkles. He shows disappointment and wide-eyed surprise. Imagine a wax museum figure come to life -- speaking not stock programmed lines, but drawing on thousands of pages of the subject's writings and interviews.

"There's so much material in there, that I have no idea what it's going to say," said Olney, a fan of Dick's writings.

Some of what the PKD robot says is stream of consciousness -- a brain playing tag with its memory banks, sometimes to strange ends.

But then, as Olney said, Dick was given to the "massive tangent" when talking and was, late in his life, "pretty much wiggling out" with visions and contact with supernatural forces.

So along with being a leap into the future, the robotic Philip K. Dick is another sort of trip.

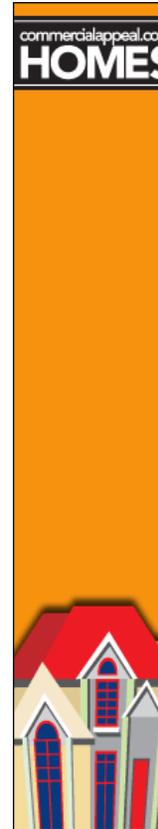
Like when he's asked whether, you know, androids dream of electric sheep.

He starts talking in a robotic version of breathless about the subject, telling you about a robot sheep on top of a building, looking so real it fools the neighbors.



Jim Weber/The Commercial Appeal

A lifelike android of the late science fiction author Philip K. Dick is pieced together for display at the University of Memphis FedEx Institute of Technology. He looks, talks, even "thinks" like Dick, thanks to the software designed by Memphis PhD candidate Andrew Olney and David Hanson, head of Hanson Robotics.



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