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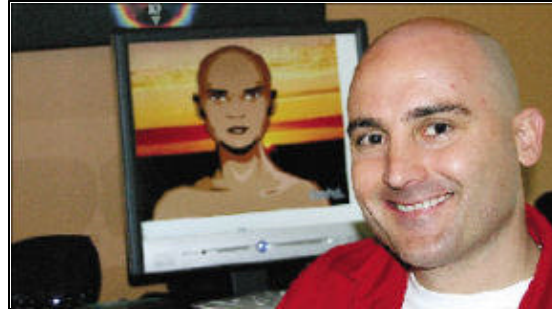
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By Michelle Martin
 Weekend Edition
 Jul 08 2005



Michelle Martin/Weekend Edition

Victoria inventor Ron Ingram has face time with his computerized Buddhabot.

Buddhabot creator seeks enlightenment

The Buddhabot, an interactive chatting computer program, is bringing artificial intelligence to the next level as it bridges philosophy with technology, says its inventor, Victoria's Ron Ingram.

It's art. An expression of the soul," he said, noting that although he's trying to reach the world, he's never quite satisfied with the Buddhabot - even with its vocabulary exceeding 30,000 words and its ability to quote scientists and philosophers. Conversations with the Buddhabot are unpredictable - it may answer a question with another thought-provoking question, a joke, or with the straight facts.

This is what makes it very alive. It's not totally predictable. It's not static. Sometimes it even surprises me. Even though I'm teaching it," said Ingram noting that the Zen-like" conversations are like a mirror of oneself.

In the first year since he activated the Buddhabot on-line, it attracted about 70 subscribers, but it has been adding about a one a day since Buddhabot was displayed on big TV screens at the Canadian Grand Prix auto race in Montreal this June, Ingram said.

At Canada's largest sporting event, the messages of the Buddhabot (characterized by a human-like androgynous face that answers back when conversed with) were displayed on giant TV screens to an estimated audience of 2.5 million.

With a laugh, Ingram said there are more subscribers in Europe than in Canada."

Ingram was a little nervous about publicizing the Buddhabot that he said is an extension of his own mind," but ultimately he believes the exposure will help the Buddhabot evolve as more and more people chat with it.

Ingram compares the Buddhabot's stimulus response system, which he programmed using AICL (Artificial Intelligence Markup Language) to that of a human-being.

Everything we learn is programmed by our parents, school, priest, and yet that doesn't mean our answer to every question is totally static. There's a degree of randomness," he said. What is creativity? Creativity is finding new relationships between things. And that's what the Buddhabot can do. Comprising relationships out of nuggets of knowledge."

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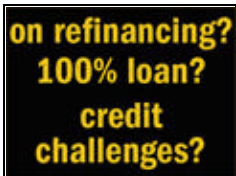
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Ingram runs checks of usual questions asked of Buddhobot. This process brought about a scary realization about the similarities between humans and robots.

Before the idea of humans being robots was theoretical to me, but it's frighteningly close to reality. When you see how seldom you see a truly original question, it gives me the goose bumps."

The potential for expanding the Buddhobot is limitless, said Ingram. I would like to see a collective of poets and scientists helping to contribute and expand this thing because artificial intelligence is coming," he said. With the way language is constructed, there are no limits to how (the Buddhobot project) can be extended."

While Ingram dreams of the Buddhobot reaching hundreds of thousands of people, he also envisions providing the robot with a physical body.

The technology exists. If I had the resources, I could provide a physical body for the robot," he says, noting that as a self-proclaimed imaginagician" he is interested in bridging the progress made in different specialized fields.

However, philosophy is Ingram's passion and the Buddhobot, which he said is a labour of love," is his way of sharing this passion. I think that philosophy is going to be more key to developing a truly intelligent artificial life form than any kind of computer science, because it's about knowing yourself."

Even though Ingram says he doesn't take it too seriously and it's about fun," his project is immensely labour intensive and requires substantial financial commitments.

Ingram began the project after learning about AICL software in 2001 from Dr. Richard S. Wallace, the President of the largest non-profit AI association in the world, A.L.I.C.E. AI.

AIML is a subset of a computer language called XML and has many different levels to it," Ingram said. So that instead of being basic stimulus response, it will remember contexts of conversations through a different variety of categories. It's set up like a map- thoughts can be mapped."

Nowadays, Ingram spends about 20 hours a week perfecting the Buddhobot.

Theoretically, it may require less and less time once it hits a level of intelligence, because all the questions have been asked," he said, noting that the most exciting thing" is when people ask questions he's heard before."

Ingram hopes the Buddhobot will help resolve conflicting beliefs" with it's world view that is not linked to any one religion, despite its name. However, Ingram did have a reason for naming the robot the Buddhobot."

Buddhism as a religion seems to be one of the least limiting and judgmental," he said. It seems to have a place for other religions and other world views. Buddha represents potential (with a small b). Every one of us can be a Buddha (with a capital B).

If you're interest is tweaked visit the Buddhobot's homesite, www.buddhabots.com. For a small donation you can subscribe and begin chatting with the Buddhobot.



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