

No. 473: "Motion Slickness"

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Posted **Thursday, Aug. 31, 2000, at 4:00 p.m. PT**



One moves by pushing itself along. "It's kind of like an accordion," says Dr. Jordon Pollack of Brandeis University. Another "walks something like a crab," says his colleague, Dr. Hod Lipson. What are the doctors describing?

"My Aunt Sylvia and Uncle Phil."—*Beth "Looking Forward to Rosh Hashana" Sherman*

"So the Knicks are headed back to training camp. And they're not getting any younger."—*Peter Carlin*

"What Dick Cheney sees when he looks at today's Army and Marine Corps."—*Will Vehrs*

"Brandeis' terrifying new genetic project, the live Crab Accordion."—*Marshall Sella*

"Hod? Hod LIPSON? Hey, he owes me MONEY!!!"—*Tim Lundberg*

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Self-Replicating Answer

Pollack and Lipson are describing cute li'l robots designed and built not by people but by a computer—that is, a robot that makes robots. "They were not engineered by humans," Pollack says, "and they were not manufactured by humans."

Using a parts list, an instruction set that mimics evolution, and an objective—create a machine that can move on a horizontal surface—the computer set about conceiving and testing many different designs, handing off the best ones to a prototyping machine. Human intervention was required only for the final step, installing the robot's motor and microchip and downloading the programming instructions that send it out to kill, kill, and keep on killing until the pestilence that is humanity is scoured from the face of the Earth. Except maybe for the part about the killing and the scouring.

Pollack stressed the primitive simplicity of these robots ("They look like toys," he said. "As does that adorable Jennifer Tilly," he did not add.) and that we are years away from self-replicating robots capable of a satisfying killin' spree, but work continues. "We hope to get up to insect level in a couple of years," Pollack says. Coincidentally, Rupert Murdoch never said any such thing about the reporters he employs.

Common Denominator

Mocking the elderly.

"Each other. And the trash talk among the scientists at the faculty basketball game just got worse from there."—*Greg Diamond* (*Daniel Krause, T.G. Gibbon, and Greg Narver* had similar answers.)

"SUV drivers, after negotiating a hairpin corner on their Firestone ATXs while simultaneously under the influence of B&J's Dioxin De-Lite Ice Cream."—*Deborah Guy* (similarly, *Anthony Wright* and *Sharon Dynek*)

"If these guys haven't seen Mummenschanz before this, they really ought to get out of the lab more."—*Floyd Elliot*

"Pollack and Lipson just screened *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo* for the AI department's Friday mixer."—*Gary Drevitch*

"You know, if they don't like the Special Olympics, they should just come out and say so."—*Steven Davis*

"They're writing stage directions for *Sex and the City*, unfortunately."—*Barry Johnson*

"The latest Sony Dreamcast game. Shouldn't these doctors be getting some work done?"—*Francis Heaney*

"Student volunteers in the latest artificial sweetener trials. 'Hey, it's a quick and easy way to earn 50 bucks,' said volunteer Todd Smith. 'And it's a quick and easy way to earn 50 bucks,' he repeated, from a newer orifice mutating under his left arm."—*Al Petrosky*

"The hopes and dreams of New York Mets fans: inflated and then deflated, scampering along."—*Anthony Wright*

"Winky and Blinky, the mutated monkeys."—*Sophie Pollitt-Cohen*

"Crabman and Accordion Boy—the latest developments at Brandeis' 'Splicing Cool Stuff Together' genetics project."—*Gus Robertson* (similarly, *Francis Heaney*)

"An accordion and a crab."—*Mark Shotzberger* and *Josh Kamensky*

"The Religious Right on Sunday afternoon. 'I am completely devoted to the Lord,' explained Jerry Falwell, 'but Jesus, are those pews uncomfortable.' "—*Evan Brady*

"Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt as they try to simultaneously encourage and avoid publicity."—*Fred Petrick*

"The motions of California wine-makers after tasting their new earthquake vintages."—*Marty Byrne*

"The millions of tiny robots that make up the AI Gore construct."—*Paul Canniff*

"Medical analysis of the George W. Bush wedding video."—*Robert Cohen*

"Oh God, did Dan Duquette trade for MORE grizzled, useless veterans? Don't the Red Sox have enough already?"—*Aaron Schatz*

"Birthing classes for full-figure gals."—*Ray Hastings*

"The karmic STDs a prison guard gets for having sex with Susan Smith."—*Matt Sullivan*

"An elephant? And both doctors are blind? Good one!"—*Greg Diamond*

"The Dalai Lama and Chinese President Jiang Zemin, trying to avoid an awkward moment whenever they end up in the same room together."—*Fred Petrick*

"Baby Terminators. Although the doctors say they will 'drown the little buggers like rats' if they even start to look like Arnold Schwarzenegger or Robert Patrick."—*Rob Young*

"Bush and Gore or Gore and Bush. I can never remember which is crablike and which is accordionlike."—*Chuck Pennscott*

"Both are extolling the glories of ICU nurse Angelina D'Arcangelico in the recent issue of the 'British journal' *Nature*."—*David Feige*

"Presidential candidates. The doctors hope that by November they may evolve the ability to run a country better than 'those loser humans.' After that statement, the two men took off their human suits and blasted off in their flying saucer. At least that's how my local UPN news finished the story."—*Rob Young*

"The Strom Thurmond-Jesse Helms Iron Coot Athlon, in which the two Rightin' Titans race across a football field the size of a single football field for the title Fastest Undead Man Alive."—*Ellis "Four Jokes in a Single Sentence! Now, That's Productivity!" Weiner*

"Although the imagery of caterpillarlike accordions and side-slipping crabs is intriguing, I can't get past the question of what the hell kind of name 'Hod' is."—*Mike Pope* (similarly, *Greg Diamond*)

"The first one would be intestines, and the second one—um, a crab inside your intestines?"—*Greg Diamond*

"The latest in bio-colonoscopy technology."—*Will Vehrs*

"The Brandeis football team's offensive and defensive performances, respectively, in their season-opening loss to Boston University, 73-0."—*Mark Wade* (similarly, but Miami Dolphins, *Dan Dickinson*)

"It's either more quarks or more boy bands. Take your pick."—*Josh Kamensky*

"These doctors were consultants to the casting director for the movie *Dead Man Walking*. Like most conservatives, they refer to felons as 'it.' "—*Fred Wickham*

Ad Hominem Corner

"Venus and Serena."—*David Finkle*

"Siskel and Ebert."—*Jon Hotchkiss*

"Matlin and Carville."—*Will Vehrs*

"Helms and Hatch."—*Francis Heaney*

"Bush and Cheney."—*Mary Anne Townsend*

"Buchanan and Perot."—*T.G. Gibbon* (similarly, *Jon Webb* and *Al Petrosky*)

"Larry Flynt and Dr. Laura."—*Steven Davis*

Self-Reference Corner

"The slow pace in which new 'News Quiz' questions are being generated lately."—*Dilan Esper*

"I don't know how Pollack and Lipson got hold of the home movies of my parents' last season of snowbirding in Fort Lauderdale, but I prefer to remember them in their younger and more spry years."—*Jon Delfin*

"They're my therapists. I'm pretty sure they shouldn't be talking about my self-loathing and my guilt complex in public like that, but what do I know? I'm such a dumb ass."—*T.G. Gibbon*

"Look—I've had it up to HERE with jokes about accordion players. AND we certainly aren't crabby—EXCEPT after far too many snide remarks about the finest musical instrument in existence. AND the only reason the accordion is not a standard element of the symphony orchestra is simple jealousy."—*John Tyrrell*

Newz Kwiz 4 Kidz Korner

"Today we honor robots! Science is creating robots that can create new robots, maybe even copies of themselves! And maybe even tiny little robots, smaller than you can see, that can be injected into your body to fight disease! Isn't science great? I sure hope we will be able to figure out how to turn those robots off when we want to, though! I mean, it's nice when they're helping us, but once they're inside us, what if they decide that they don't like how we're treating them, and whenever we do something they don't like, they clump up our lungs and suffocate us until we give in? And maybe the robots could beam signals from person to person, so we'd always have to pretend to love the robots in case another person's robots saw or heard us and told our own inside robots to start suffocating us! We'd be slaves to the robots! You're really lucky to be growing up in these days, kidz; I didn't start having wild paranoid thoughts like that until I was in high school! Sweet dreemz!"—*Greg Diamond*