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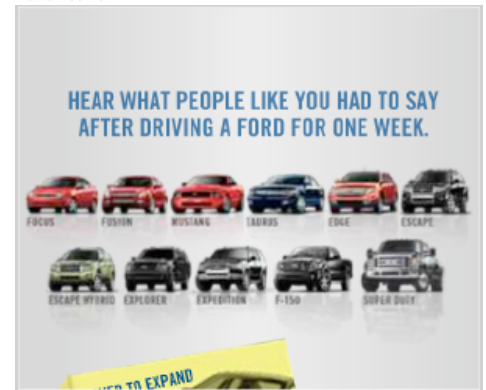
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A Call to Robotic Arms



Microsoft's quarterly earnings released last week were so robust they surprised even Wall Street analysts. Company executives attributed the success to strong early sales of Vista, the new version of Microsoft's marquee Windows operating system. Yet this news did not quiet the incessant questions: Can the software giant keep pace with accelerating technological change? What's the future for Microsoft?

Craig Mundie, who was named last year as the company's chief research and strategy officer, has suggested one possible answer: Robots.

"I hope we'll someday see the emergence of a robotics platform like Windows was a platform for personal computing," Mundie told me. He said Microsoft wanted its research ultimately to have a "galvanizing effect" on the global robotics business much like Windows' revolutionary impact on desktop computers.

I had the chance to catch up with Mundie on the edge of Microsoft's annual tech fair in downtown Washington. The tech fair is a modest cousin of a yearly event in Redmond showcasing the wares of **Microsoft Research**, the company's basic research labs.

Arrayed around a single room were 10 displays, including an exhibit illustrating MSR's collaborative effort with **Bryn Mawr College** and the **Georgia Institute of Technology** to use computers in the classroom as a way of attracting more students to computer science. The notion is to give students their own small robots, which they can name and decorate as they see fit, and then have them begin writing computer code for these artificial companions.

The exhibit prompted Mundie to talk more broadly about the role of robots in Microsoft's strategic thinking. He noted that engineers are embedding intelligence in more and more things, from portable music players and mobile telephones to cars. Yet a wide gap exists for intelligent robots, he continued. Most robots today are either large, industrial machines used for tasks like assembling automobiles or small, whimsical ones that are little more than toys.

What about the middle ground? With its graying population, the United States will increasingly be looking for a way to help the elderly live their everyday lives without having to abandon their homes for assisted-living facilities.

"One of the things society could use to deal with this problem is

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personal robotics," Mundie suggested.

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What they need to do are program robots to write the next version of Windows. It would get done faster.

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