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Bits and Bytes

NASA teams up with a robot named WALL-E

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by Mark Ollig

When I first heard about this new Disney movie, I wondered who the person playing Wally would be.

I mean, the only “Wally” I had ever heard of was Wally Cleaver from the 60s TV classic and Wally Cox from the Hollywood Squares game show.

Possibly Walter Winchell was nicknamed Wally, too.

If you Google “Wally” it comes back with only about 22,500,000 search results.

I went to see this G-rated Disney/Pixar movie last Monday with some relatives and learned Wally was really “WALL-E” a “Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-Class” robot.

The movie itself was set in the future, about 700 years time, and WALL-E was the last robot left on earth – still faithfully carrying out its human-programmed instructions.

WALL-E continued to go to work every day to lift, load and compress waste into a square cube and store in an orderly fashion.

Of course, I won't play the spoiler and go into great detail about this movie for those of you who have not seen it yet (your humble columnist does not want angry letters and e-mails).

I admit my first impression upon seeing WALL-E was how the face of this robot strangely reminded me of the one in the 1986 kids movie “Short Circuit.”

Well ok, maybe it does not fully resemble “Number 5” but how many robots do I know?

This animated film was made using three-dimensional computer graphics, which are amazingly life-like. It was not at all like watching a cartoon. The same type of graphics were used in the movie “Toy Story.”

The movie even provided some thought provoking revelations about what the future might be like.

During the start of the movie, WALL-E roamed and cleaned the garbage cluttered city and also collected knick-knacks along the way.

When at “home,” WALL-E would throw in an old tape into a VCR player, (which I was surprised lasted to the year 2708) and repeatedly watched the same scene from that great movie classic, “Hello Dolly” while storing away the day's knick-knacks it had collected.

One of the writers of this movie must have just loved that scene from Hello Dolly.

“Hello Dolly” also happens to be one of the (only) songs I know how to play on a piano.

NASA teamed up with Walt Disney to build excitement around this movie in an effort to create interest by the young people of today in the technology of tomorrow.

Walt Disney, NASA and educators have teamed together and created educational materials, many of which are available on the NASA kids' web site at tinyurl.com/fct9h.

NASA is excited about the potential impact of "WALL-E" on young minds.

"Kids get hooked in through these exciting films," said Bert Ulrich, multimedia manager for NASA. "You're really reaching a very important segment of the population, because they're basically NASA's future."

"For us, it's just a wonderful way to get the word out about how exciting space is, and the little rover helps," Ulrich said (referring to the robot WALL-E).

Speaking of robotics, NASA has scheduled the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter, or LRO, which is a robotic spacecraft to launch sometime this fall.

This robotic spacecraft will orbit the moon, and its six different instruments will take images and gather information about the moon's surface.

The Disney studios created a 30-second public service announcement featuring WALL-E for NASA television. You can watch it at disney.go.com.

The video is designed to draw students to NASA's web site and explore space technology and learn about other NASA missions.

"Robots will be the next big thing to come," said Wolfgang Fink, head of the Visual and Autonomous Exploration Systems Research Laboratory at the California Institute of Technology.

"Robots are more and more deployed in households. Think of those vacuum-cleaner robots [the Roomba, from iRobot], for example," Fink went on to say.

I also think of Japan and the robotic innovations they have been researching and producing lately.

The Japanese have built some very futuristic "domesticated robots" you can check out at tinyurl.com/62bydy.

"WALL-E is going to be a guest host to help us teach about NASA's satellite mission to the moon, The Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter," said Marci Delaney, the DLN team lead at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center.

These young people will be the ones making amazing discoveries on some far away planet or finding new ways to improve the human condition we find ourselves living with right here on earth.

They will be our future engineers and scientists.

The official Disney WALL-E website has many activities for kids (and young at heart adults) to explore. Take a look at tinyurl.com/yq3wdm.

Be sure to check out this week's "Web Site of the Week" where I will be featuring the Disney web site of WALL-E. Your humble bits_blogger will present forum readers with some interesting pictures and highlights.

Oh, I found out Ben Burtt provided the voice of WALL-E.

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