

Financial Times, 2/6

Smooth Dinosaur Senses Way Forward for Robots

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2/6/2006

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FULL TEXT: *Financial Times*, 2/6

Sony may have abandoned its Aibo robot dog but metal pet lovers will soon have a replacement in Pleo, a lifelike dinosaur robot being unveiled today by the co-inventor, with Sony, of the Furby.

Unlike the furry, blinking but static hit toy of the late 1990s, Pleo is viewed as a big advance in robotics, with its fluid movement and sensors that stop it walking into walls and falling off edges.

It does not require a remote control and can cough, blink, chomp, twitch, sigh, sneeze, sniff, yawn and move its tail.

It can even empathise with its owner's mood, showing anger, boredom, fear, curiosity, joy, surprise and other emotions.

Ugobe, the company that has created Pleo, is based in the same San Francisco Bay area location as Pixar, the maker of *Finding Nemo* and other computer animations, and its advisory board includes a senior video game executive and a former president of Lucasfilm, the maker of *Star Wars* and animatronic characters.

Pleo, the work of Furby co-creator Caleb Chung and a team of biologists, animators, robotics experts and programmers, is the first of a range of "designer life forms" that will be able to evolve and interact with one another, says Ugobe.

This could lead to a new kind of gameplay between light-sabre wielding robots on the tabletop rather than on the computer screen.

Sony said last month it would no longer make its Aibo robot dogs, in a restructuring move.

"Sony set the standard for robotics in the consumer market with Aibo and they should have kept it because the market for robots is very strong," says Bob Christopher, Ugobe chief executive.

Mr Christopher says component costs are getting lower and Ugobe's sophisticated software and artificial intelligence allow Pleo to "walk fluidly and balance itself and not just walk like a tin man, while at the same time being able to make emotive gestures."

Pleo will take its first public steps at the Demo 2006 event in Arizona today and will go on sale to the public in the autumn for Dollars 200 - a tenth of the price of the Dollars 2,000 Aibo.