

Lessons to be learned from society of robots

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An Exeter political philosopher is embarking on an exciting project researching an artificial society of robots. As part of a team of academics from six universities, Robin Durie will be looking at how ‘artificial culture’ emerges within a group of robots.

The team, led by Professor Alan Winfield at the University of the West of England has received funding from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council for the project.

Over the next four years, an artificial society of robots will be created in a lab in Bristol, with around 60 miniature robots organised into groups that are programmed to interact and to imitate each other. The team will manage the conditions under which the robots interact and observe how they behave together. The research will attempt to identify and interpret patterns of behaviour as evidence for an emerging robot culture and to see whether this new understanding may shed some light generally on how culture emerges.

Dr Robin Durie, political philosophy lecturer at the University of Exeter, explains: “In a sense we will be using robots like a microscope to study the evolution of culture. The possibility that genuinely novel, non-human, culture may emerge within the robot lab is both exciting and challenging. How will we be able to be sure that we are really witnessing the emergence of novel cultural behaviours, rather than simply projecting our own human concepts of culture on to the robots?”

He adds: “In the long run, these questions have the potential to cast a

new light on some of the great political challenges which confront us today, such as how we relate to people from cultures which appear to be fundamentally different to our own”.

The team are also planning to set up a website so that the artificial culture lab can be observed and interpreted over the internet by anyone from school children to fellow academics and enthusiasts.

The project team is multi-disciplinary and comprises theoretical biologist Professor John W Crawford (University of Abertay Dundee), philosopher Dr Robin Durie (University of Exeter), social scientist Dr Frances Griffiths (University of Warwick), computer scientist Professor Alistair Sutcliffe (University of Manchester), art historian and cultural theorist Dr Jenny Tennant Jackson (Leeds Metropolitan University) and roboticist Professor Alan Winfield (Bristol Robotics Laboratory).

Source: University of Exeter

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