

Easter bunny may be close to extinction say University of Exeter students

20 March 2008

Easter may never be the same again once production starts rolling on new machinery developed by engineering undergraduates.

Gone will be the traditional oval shaped eggs and Easter bunnies, replaced with completely personalised chocolate gifts.

The new process can produce a 3D object of any shape in chocolate from a computer design.

The project set out to push the boundaries of additive layer manufacturing (ALM) technology as chocolate is a particularly difficult material to work with. James Bulleid, project team leader said 'chocolate exists in about six different forms, only one of which is nice to eat. We had to make sure that our end result still tasted as good as the original ingredient.

Exeter has substantial expertise in ALM as Mike Felstead, Research Fellow explained 'ALM is an emerging technology, moving from the laboratory to the factory floor. We're more used to researching metals and plastics for aerospace and Formula 1 applications, but we thought this would be an interesting challenge for the students.

One day ALM will be a major engineering manufacturing technique and by choosing something quirky like manufacturing bespoke chocolate we think we've got an excellent teaching demonstrator with its own commercial potential – you can send flowers anywhere from any florist, imagine being able to design a unique chocolate gift for production and delivery to a loved one far away!

The team have secured a variety of sponsors from international heavy weights like Cadbury's to Tiverton based HepcoMotion, manufacturers of linear motion products and Farnell, a specialist electronic component supplier.

It is hoped that once the prototype has had further development, the technology will be affordable enough to be sited in shops and available for individuals to use over the internet, making it possible to produce totally personalised chocolate items.

James Bulleid, concluded 'we are all really excited about the possibilities for our innovation. Having Cadbury's, Hepco and Farnell as sponsors have also given us access to fantastic resources which have really helped our development and the potential applications for the end product are infinite.'

Source: University of Exeter

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