By Marius Dragomiraga, Technology News Editor

Robots Among Us via Microsoft Research

Human-robot interaction

Microsoft is increasing its focus on innovation in the field of robotics, but the Redmond company is doing much more than simply provide a platform for the creation of software applications designed to power robots. It is also providing sponsorship for third-party robotics research projects in addition to the Research and Development funds it's made available to its robotics division. "Robots Among Us" is an initiative set up to catalyze the development of human-robot interaction (HRI). Essentially, Microsoft has coughed up no less than half a million dollars for the exploration of new models of interaction between machines and humans. "Our goal is to accelerate HRI research so developers will have the tools and software they need to build robots that interact with humans in real-world environments, performing useful applications safely, effectively and efficiently", explained Stewart Tansley, senior research program manager, Microsoft Research. "And we are thrilled by the number of the winners' emphases on healthcare, the environment, search and rescue and other areas of immediate societal value." The field of human-robot interaction is intimately connected with what Microsoft referred to as social robots. And it is in the search of social robots that the Redmond company launched "The robots are coming!" request for proposals (RFP) in October 2007. "Robots Among Us" is the result of last year's RFP, a program that spreads over $500,000 between eight academic researchers. The eight research project sponsored by Microsoft Research through the "Robots Among Us" program deals with a wide variety of subjects from a snack robot to a Human-Robot-Human Interface for autonomous vehicles, but also to digital interfaces for intelligent wheelchairs, climate monitoring, disaster response and prosody recognition. "The particular thing that intrigued us about this field from a research point of view is that there's an ecosystem of devices in the context of how robots and humans interact", Tansley added. "We are interested to see how PCs, phones, the Internet and other common technologies come into play in the world of more socialized robots."