Robots In Our Lives

(NAPSA)—The thrill of intercollegiate competition: competitors executing strategic maneuvers on the playing field as the clock ticks down.

Another football Saturday? No, this is the yearly International Design Competition (IDC), and the competitors are laundry basket-sized robots built by seven student teams from major universities from around the world.

Is it the roughhouse mayhem of "Battlebots?"

No, these are designed for agility and dexterity in performing constructive tasks. Like the more famous dueling machines, however, they suggest that robots have emerged from science fiction to increasingly become part of our everyday world.

"You might someday have your dinners prepared by descendants of the robots in this competition," said Dr. John Williams, professor of civil and environmental engineering at MIT and director of its Intelligent Engineering Systems lab. "The ingenuity shown here is just an indicator of the growing interest in robots and even in building them."

In its 12th year, the IDC is patterned after a robot-design contest created 30 years ago at Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a creativity and design exercise for mechanical engineering students.

In this year's competition, held in August at MIT, each team had two weeks to build a working robot from identical kits of miscellaneous parts. The remote-controlled robots then compete one on one on a playing surface. The winning bot is the one to swing a pendulum most and put the most balls and hockey pucks into a bin within 45 seconds.

Even for some of the world's top engineering students, turning a box of garage clutter into a functioning robot requires help. At this year's competition, each team was provided two Tablet PCs, notepad-sized mobile computers, slated for public availability in fall 2002, that can use a pen-like stylus directly on the computer screen.

Students (L to R) Julien Barrier from France, Martin Jonikas of the United States and Alexandre Takeshi Ushima from Brazil collaborate on a Microsoft Tablet PC to build a robot during MIT's RobotWorld challenge.

Rather than being tied to a desktop PC, teams could carry their project computer anywhere they were working, and sketch design ideas, notes or calculations directly into the computer—no paper needed. Then teams could use wireless e-mail to share and collaborate on their work between the two Tablet PCs.

While IDC teams used prototype models, the Tablet PC—which runs a specialized version of Microsoft Windows XP Professional—is planned for full public availability in November 2002.

For more information about this year's IDC, please visit http://pergatory.mit.edu/idc.