

## **Battle of the Bots (approx 430 words)**

It is not just the military looking for robots to replace humans; robots are finally edging their way into the domestic world. They can't yet drive the kids to soccer practice, but they can do the vacuuming, and one company claims that by Christmas it will be delivering orders for a robotic domestic servant named Valerie, who can do just about everything.



Valerie's Stepford Wives, glassy-eyed stare may be a little creepy, but the manufacturers claim they have pre-sold three of the \$59,000 robots that, they say, will be able to: respond to spoken everyday-English (and other language) commands, speak, lift and carry up to 50 pounds, do dusting, pick things up, put things away, paint, set the table, sweep, wash dishes, vacuum, dress or undress herself (but not have sex, apparently), and access the internet to do such things as checking sports scores and booking plane tickets. And to top it off, she's 5'8", with fashion model proportions, and you get to choose your own eye color.

Their claims seem a little hard to credit, given that the closest reputable trial of such technology is probably a funny-looking creature named Pearl, developed by researchers at Carnegie Mellon, the University of Pittsburgh, University of Michigan and Stanford University. Pearl costs twice as much, isn't nearly as sexy, and can only do a fraction of the things the makers of Valerie claim she'll soon be able to do.



(Pearl – photo from the Carnegie Mellon web site)



(photo source: <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/04095/295927.stm> - not sure if we can use it; if we can, I think it would be great to have this picture staring at the Valerie photo!)

However, she can guide herself at a slow human walking pace without bumping into things. And when her software and hardware are working properly, she can remind her users when to take their medication. The hope is that eventually she will also be able to detect and act on unusual changes in behavior, such as getting help if her owner has not moved for an unusually long period of time and does not respond when asked to do so by Pearl. And the senior citizens at the Longwood at Oakmont retirement community, where she's been taken for usability testing, are also keen for her to be able to do things such as bring them a chair when they need a rest.

In the short run, though, robots are more likely to enter our lives as single-purpose devices, much as they have so successfully in manufacturing. One of the first big

successes has been the Roomba, a self-propelled vacuum cleaner that spins its way across your floor, which is currently selling for about \$180. It may look like a giant bug as it scuttles underneath the sofa and around the table legs, but hundreds of thousands have already been sold, according to the manufacturer, iRobot Corporation. What will be next: scrubbing toilets?

