

DESIGN LIFE NOW

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Podcast Transcript: Natalie Jeremijenko

My name's Natalie Jeremijenko and I call myself a natural systems engineer, a/k/a an artist. Feral Robots is a project that takes advantage of the flourishing of commercially available robotic-dog toys. These are low-end robotic dogs that are widely available across the world, and they pose an interesting question to us culturally. How do we use these dogs to explore our contemporary place and time? The project involves the upgrade of the commercially available dogs in three ways.

Mechanically, we widen the wheel base; we lower the center of gravity; we equip these dogs for all terrain exploration. The new nose is an environmental toxin censor and the new brain is a microprocessor that we add in addition to the one that the robot comes with, that tells the dog to follow the concentration ingredients of the environmental toxin it's missing.

So typically these dogs come out of the box where they can beg for plastic bones, bark the tune of the National Anthem or walk in circles. But now they can also appear to sniff out environmental toxins. I work with teams of fantastic students that may not be your typical engineering students, where we take bunches or packs of these dogs and design them specifically for a site of community interest.

Then we release them to create a kind of a mediagenic event, not just for the students and the faculty involved, but for the local community and interested parties like state environmental officers or other scientists or local community members or journalists

This is a challenging technical and social and research project for all of these students. And it involves, first and foremost, a kind of vivisection of the electronic toys, taking them apart, thinking about how they are made, how they might be improved, how, in fact, the production processes involved in producing these consumer electronics and any other similar products might be improved for better environmental performance.

Each child, each student that I'm working with, has a dog that's their own that they work on, and each dog is tuned for a particular site that the students also research and understand; a place like Starlight Park in the Bronx.

Once at the release, the students themselves are asked by the journalists or people in attendance. They direct their questions to the students, not to the faculty. They get asked, "Well what do these levels of contaminants mean to my health, to your health?" And they get asked, "What should we do about this? How do we fix it?"

And suddenly the students, who a few weeks ago were tentative about taking apart these products, are in a responsible position for re-imagining our environmental and technical future. And that's what I think we can learn from interactive toys. Not how to interact, but how we might participate in the technological future.

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