

Best of Last Week – New dinosaur species, living robots that reproduce, protection afforded by people wearing masks

December 6 2021, by Bob Yirka

An AI-designed, Pac-Man-shaped “parent” organism (in red) beside stem cells that have been compressed into a ball—the “offspring” (green). Credit: Douglas Blackiston and Sam Kriegman

It was a good week for biological science, as a team at Universidad de Chile, discovered [a new dinosaur species with a unique slashing tail](#).

About the size of a dog, it had seven pairs of "blades" positioned sideways like a slicing weapon. And a team with members from several institutions in the U.S. and Canada found that [ocean plastic is creating new communities of life on the high seas](#), most specifically in the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre, aka the "Great Pacific Garbage Patch." Also, unfortunately, a team with members from the University of Copenhagen and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology found that [the Norwegian wolf has gone extinct](#). The wolves now living in Norway are all Finnish, the team found, as part of the largest genetic study of wolves done in the world.

In technology news, a team with members from Tufts University, Harvard University and the University of Vermont built what they described as [the first living robots that can reproduce](#). Called xenobots, the Pac-Man-shaped robots can mass together and create new baby bots. Also, a combined team from Ruhr-Universität Bochum and Niederrhein University of Applied Sciences [identified 14 new types of attacks on web browsers](#). And a team at the University of Edinburgh developed [an artificial-neural-network-based model that can automatically generate film trailers](#). Also, a team at MIT developed [a machine-learning model that could one day allow robots to understand interactions the ways humans do](#).

In other news, Stephane Bancel, CEO of Moderna, told the press that [existing COVID-19 inoculations will struggle against the fast-spreading omicron variant](#). A team at the University of California, Davis announced that they had developed [a jelly-like type of ice cube that does not melt or grow mold](#).

And finally, a team at Max Planck Institute for Dynamics and Self-Organization found that [three meters between people is not enough distance to prevent infection](#), but if both people wear masks, the risks drop dramatically.

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