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Element Products Aims to Bring Robotics to the Masses

By Jessica Davis -- *Electronic News*, 10/19/2005

Aimed at educational and hobby markets, Element Products' Scribbler programmable robot is making its debut in time for the holiday shopping season at a price point that many consumers can actually afford.

That marks a change for these markets where programmable robots typically cost thousands of dollars, or at the low end a few hundred. Element's Scribbler, in stark contrast, costs just \$99.

"We see consumer robotics as one of next big industries," said Ben Wirz, president of Element Products and the engineer behind the consumer play robot. Just back from RoboNexus, a robotics convention, Wirz and Element VP Phil Mass believe that robots for consumers will be the next big wave, following the popularity of PCs in the home. "The success of the Roomba has sparked interest in by VC money in the market," Wirz said.

The challenge is delivering the function that consumers want at a price point they can afford, the Element executives said. The Scribbler includes two 8-bit microcontrollers, plus some sensors and actuators. Users make the machine do their bidding by programming one of the two microcontrollers – a BASIC stamp microcontroller from Parallax, Inc., a company that has formed a partnership with Element to market the Scribbler. Parallax

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also provides the software programming expertise and the documentation.

Scribbler's sensors are designed for object avoidance, line following and detection of dark and light conditions. The robot also includes a low-tech penholder, allowing users to program it to draw.

"We think the Scribbler hits a big market," said Mass. "A lot of people want to get into robotics, but it's too expensive. We wanted to bring down to an affordable price point to everyone. We've done robot kits in the past, but this is the most advanced and lowest cost."

While the robot's launch is coming in time for the holiday shopping season, Element's executives are looking for sales to be spread out over the year by aiming it at the educational market as well as at the consumer market.

"There is a big interest among educators at the high school and grade school level," said Mass, who added that the robot can be used by children as young as 8-years-old. The device includes a visual programming environment and a text-based BASIC programming environment, providing appeal for novices and experienced hobbyists alike.

"There are a lot of robot contests in the U.S. – RoboFest, the Robo Olympics, and a lot of these people are interested in the Scribbler. More teams could afford to get into the competition with this platform."

Both Mass and Wirz come from a robotics background, founding Element Products in Broomfield, Colo. two and a half years ago specifically to develop consumer robots after leaving iRobot in Massachusetts, the company that developed the Roomba.

"We wanted to bring technology and lower cost robotics to the consumer and hobby markets," Wirz said.

And although its first product has just barely hit the market, Wirz and Mass are already looking to follow on products.

"We have several things in the works as far as what we want to do next," Wirz said. "We hope to stay within the consumer robotics market and offer further products there."



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