



Addicting, fun robot is educational

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Growing up, I loved robots. Sadly, all I had were toys designed using 1980s technology.

Actually, "technology" might be too strong a word for something such as my family's inflatable "robot."

That's right. Huff and puff into a big plastic balloon, and it expanded into a sort-of robot shape. Then, shove the giant balloon into a small motorized base. Use a remote control unit to move the base forward and backward. See, it's a robot! It moves via remote control, has an inflatable body and takes only 87 batteries!

Thankfully, robots today are different. Take a look at the Scribbler Robot.

It's deceptively simple: It looks like a small, blue dinner plate with a wheel on each side. Throw a couple of LEDs on the top, and you're done. But, like any good book, most computers and the White House, what really counts is inside.

The Scribbler interacts with the world: It has light sensors to detect the direction of light. It uses infrared sensors to see objects in front or below, enabling it to thread its way through an obstacle course or follow lines drawn on the floor. It communicates with us using lights, sounds and music. All of this can be controlled, and the Scribbler is fully programmable.

Out of the box, the Scribbler has seven demo modes: Shine a flashlight toward it and walk around the room, and the Scribbler will follow the light. Or let it drive around on its own and watch it navigate your room, driving around obstacles or backing up if it collides with anything. Program the robot using a PC, improving on demo programs or creating new ones.

The Scribbler Robot gets its name from its ability to draw lines and patterns on the floor as it moves. (A large sheet of paper is highly recommended here.) These brief descriptions only scratch the surface of the Scribbler's capabilities.

This is a device (I hesitate to call it a "toy") I would have loved as a kid. I know because I love it now. When I first showed the Scribbler to my wife, I started babbling about "this cool programmable robot that does light and object detection." Sometime during my monologue, she came up with down-to-earth questions at which she excels: "What is the purpose of that thing?"

At first, I had no answer. The inherent geek-cool factor is what attracted me to the Scribbler. But after an hour of testing, the benefits were obvious: Programming and using the Scribbler do indeed provide the stereotypical hours of fun for the whole family.

But there's much more. It successfully performs the difficult task of entertaining while sneaking in intensive education about logical thinking and computer programming. It belongs near the top of any "best educational toys" list. It teaches kids how to experiment and interact with technology, removing them from staring blankly at video screens.

The Scribbler Robot's focus on education through entertainment is real and addicting, rare in toys today. Now, if you'll excuse me, I wanna go "play" some more.