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## Robots + virtual worlds = Robini-i



The problem with robots is that they tend to do the same thing over and over. That's great if it's a robot that builds cars but boring if it's a toy.

This is something Sony learned with its Aibo robotic dog years ago. The Aibo had a small but dedicated group of hardware hackers who took joy in programming the robot to customize its movements, to play soccer or do synchronized dance moves. Alas, there were not enough hackers in the world to keep Aibo alive, and Sony put the product to sleep in 2006.

Starting Sept. 28, another company is making a run at robots for the masses. Robonica, a South African startup, said it will start selling a \$250 robot that can be programmed to do any number of things. In addition, the robot can jack into an online virtual world by way of a computer to download new programs, play games or socialize with other robots and their owners.

"We're hoping to create a whole new genre of robotic gaming with Roboni-i," said company director Tom Dusenberry, a veteran of the toy- and video-games industries who founded Hasbro Interactive.

Roboni-i is equipped with an array of infrared, RFID and touch sensors. Players can use a remote control to steer the robot. It also roams around, looking for other robots or objects to play with, if left on its own.

It also has the ability to evolve a personality based on four artificial intelligence characteristics -- playful, adventurous, competitive and mission-oriented.

The mission for shoppers, should they choose to accept it, is to locate one to buy. The company is only selling the robot at select stores, including FAO Schwartz, Fry's, Amazon.com and ToysRUs.com.

-- Alex Pham

<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2009/08/robots-virtual-worlds-robinii.html>