

# ROBOTS

Last Christmas, my eight year old grandson received a robot from Santa Claus. It's almost as tall as he is. It can walk, talk, dance, avoid objects by "seeing" them, and can identify colours. That's not enough, though. It can throw a ball, has an extensive vocabulary, and can perform amusing functions like belching and (ahem) breaking wind. If he falls down, he painstakingly gets himself back up. The makers of DuraCell or Energizer are probably co-manufacturers because he uses batteries as food. This robot begs the question, how come we don't have robots doing useful things instead of performing as toys? After all, I can burp all by myself, and so can my grandson. It's probably in our genes.

Why don't robots split wood? We have gas or electric powered splitters, sure, but they don't heave the wood onto the platform, stack it after it's split, or carry it into the house. The current day splitter only does 25% of the job.

Why don't robots do the dishes? Sure, we have dishwashers, but a human has to load them, then, when the dishes are done, empty the machine and put the dishes away. Again, only 25% of the work. When I cook, I can never find the stuff I need in the refrigerator or in the spice cabinets. Why couldn't I just read the ingredients from the recipe and have a robot scuttle around the kitchen and fetch them? If he (or her) put them away, he would know exactly where to find them.

Doors open with electric eyes, and that's a big help. Mostly only the "out" doors, though. I guess retailers calculate that if you can't get in the store by yourself, you can't be trusted to buy. As an aside, why do so many office buildings have double doors only one of which is unlocked? This really irritates me. The architect calculated double doors were necessary, but the owners of the building fly in the face of necessity and only unlock one of them. This is true even in the Belleville Hospital and the Picton Medical Centre. How many times have you pushed on a door that won't push, then spent a futile few minutes tugging on it, only to find that it will not budge because it's locked. It's only the neighboring door that works. Why? To solve this problem, I think someone could make a robot that would greet you as you entered and open the door for you. On departure, it would wish you a good day and, again, open the door for you. This is the kind of simple thing that a robot could do. That would be infinitely more personal and effective than an electric eye. Besides, if the electric eye works like the one at the liquor store, it opens the door whenever a car passes on Lake Street. My idea would put a dent in the employment of retired people at Wal-Mart, but you know, each step of progress seems to have a downside, and I think we could live with this one.

There's a robotic vacuum cleaner called the Roomba that looks like a gigantic roach scuttling about

your floor. The reviews are guarded, hinting that the machine spits out almost as much dirt as it sucks in, so the householders is obliged to dust much more frequently.

So why can't the scientists make useable robots? Honda has a "cutting edge" robot program and has a prototype called AISMO (I don't know what it stands for). It's goal is to make life easier for those confined to a bed or chair. At a recent demonstration, AISMO fell down a flight of stairs, much to the delight of the Luddites in the audience and the engineers at Hyundai.

Jet fighter planes can fly without pilots, and pilotless, can engage in dogfights, launch missiles, drop bombs, and do whatever fighter planes do. That's a good idea, as the defenders of our nation would not risk having to ditch in enemy territory. Commercial airliners pretty much fly and land by themselves, too. I think pilots are on board solely to reassure the public that they in safe hands. I know a commercial airline pilot who cut off the ends of his fingers on his lawn mower. He had to be retrained and retested to assure that he could still flip the switches and turn the handles that fly a plane using his abbreviated digits. I think I'd rather trust the judgment of automatic pilots than the judgment of a human who would stick his hand under a running rotary lawnmower. The U.S. military is developing a robot with a head like a teddy bear to carry casualties from the battlefield (Battlefield Extraction Assist Robot, or BEAR). In justifying the teddy bear head,

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