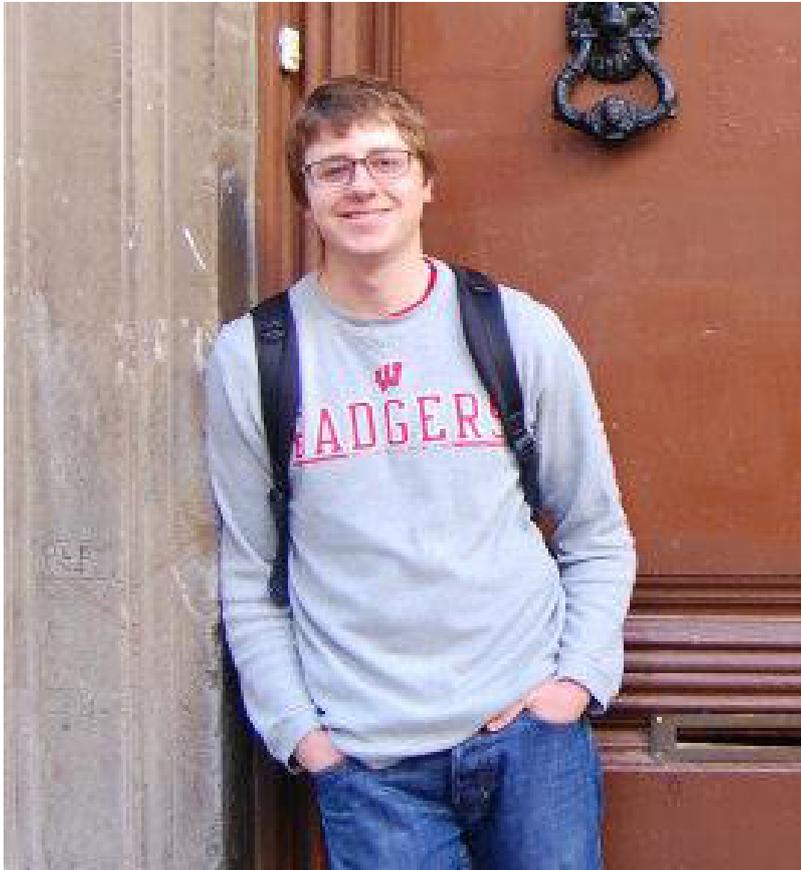


Kaspar the Friendly Robot

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With the simple Google search, “companion robots,” I was surprised (more, perhaps, than I should have been in this day and age) to find a large variety of machines of varying degrees of humanoid appearance already being instituted into homes and schools as – and this is key – assistants, not replacements.

It’s easy to conjure up a mental image of the practically-human droids that attempt world takeovers in films such as *I, Robot*, but what we have available today is somewhat less sophisticated.

The argument for robotic assistance for the elderly, for example, consists in the fact that caretaking for someone who wants to live independently can be an incredible strain on one’s energy and wallet, and that a companion robot could alleviate both of those problems. The [Mobiserv](#) [1] edition of the [household robot](#) [2] offers such services as house control (switching lights on/off, door locking/unlocking, etc), reminders to eat lunch or take medications, monitoring of vital signs/sleep patterns, prompts to exercise when it senses that you’ve been sitting on the couch too long, and even a prod toward calling up a friend on the phone if the robot decides you have been isolated for too long.

All neat features, but the majority address just the physical aspects of well-being, and I’m pretty sure there’s more to caring for someone than turning the lights on

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for them when it gets dark. The intention is to assist the real caregiver, rather than replacing real one-on-one interactions and the comfort of having someone who actually cares, as opposed to something programmed to care.

There are also robots designed to assist the busy parent. [This cute little owl](#) [3], named Ixi-Play, interacts with children in several ways, but I'm nervous to embrace something that might encourage spending less time with one's own children, even if it is less messy than house training a cat.

I believe companion robots are more beneficial when they address specific health issues such as autism. One experimental robot named [Kaspar](#) [4] teaches autistic children how to interact with people in everyday situations. Remotely controlled by a teacher or by the child, Kaspar speaks, uses facial expressions, and can play Nintendo Wii just like a human. But what makes Kaspar unique from humans and other robots is that it is intentionally simple. It has only a few basic functions which it repeats, making interactions predictable, and therefore more comfortable, for children with autism.

The kids are only exposed to Kaspar for about ten minutes a week to ensure that they don't develop any real attachment to a machine, but [parents and teachers attest](#) [5] that even these short sessions have made improvements in their children's social skills. It teaches the basics of emotional and physical behavior with which autistic children commonly suffer.

Is it possible that these ends might be achieved without the use of robotics? Yes, but if Kaspar's repetitive nature and simple features make a child more comfortable and accelerate his or her development, then its purpose is fulfilled and it is time and money well spent.

Robots are not replacement friends, caretakers, or babysitters. While some appear to exist as mere "because we can" prototypes, those that address specific health and social concerns without removing us from real human interaction have practical and worthwhile functions.

As long as we stop short of manufacturing an *I, Robot*-like army of artificially intelligent humanoids, we shouldn't have to call on Will Smith to save us.

What are your thoughts on the ever-growing role that robots play in our lives? Does the good still outweigh the bad? How far can we take our relationship with machines before it becomes unhealthy? Comment below or email me at anthony.paese@advantagemedia.com [6].

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<http://www.wirelessdesignmag.com/blogs/2014/05/kaspar-friendly-robot>

Links:

[1] <http://www.mobiserv.info/>

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[2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFZ9sUbbfe8>

[3] <https://www.ixiplay.com/the-robot-buddy-kids-will-love>

[4] <http://kaspar.herts.ac.uk/>

[5] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdF7TwhUgLY>

[6] <mailto:anthony.paese@advantagemedia.com>