Amazon Astro is ‘terrible’ and will ‘throw itself down’ stairs, developers reportedly claim

Some of the people building Amazon’s Astro home robot are not impressed with it, according to a report by *Vice*. One person who worked on the robot, which was announced today, reportedly called it a “disaster that’s not ready for release,” while another said it was “terrible,” and the idea that it’d be a useful accessibility device (part of Amazon’s pitch is that Astro can help with elder care) was “absurdist nonsense.” The sources also mentioned that the bot doesn’t handle stairs well, with one even saying that it would “throw itself down” them “if presented the opportunity.”

To make matters worse, *Vice* also reports that the robot is fragile and that several devices had broken. That’s not great news for a $1,000 (or $1,449) robot that lives on the floor, where it’s prone to being stepped on by children, kicked by inattentive adults, or attacked by pets displeased with its presence.

After the publication of this article, Amazon sent a statement to *The Verge* and suggested the documents cited in the story were outdated and that the characterizations don’t reflect how well Astro works today.

Astro is always watching
Leaked documents and videos of developer meetings obtained by *Vice* also show that Astro is doing a lot of surveillance with its facial recognition systems, and the feature where it

follows people around if it doesn't recognize them. *Vice*'s sources say that it's not great at actually figuring out who people are, which could lead to Astro annoyingly nipping at the heels of people it should know. One of the people who worked on it called its data collection "a privacy nightmare."

Here is Amazon's statement in response to this story:

> *These characterizations of Astro's performance, mast, and safety systems are simply inaccurate. Astro went through rigorous testing on both quality and safety, including tens of thousands of hours of testing with beta participants. This includes comprehensive testing on Astro's advanced safety system, which is designed to avoid objects, detect stairs, and stop the device where and when necessary.*

It's not necessarily surprising that Astro is always watching, though — it comes with a Ring Protect Pro subscription, and Amazon's own marketing for the robot shows off that it can be used as a security device (but in the context of wild animals entering your home rather than people). The most surprising thing is that we're seeing leaked documents, videos, and hearing from grudging developers on the *same day* the device was announced. Someone, or multiple someones, inside Amazon must not be swayed by the robot's charms.

[embedded content]

The leak also somewhat recontextualizes Amazon's invite-based rollout. You currently can't just buy the robot, you have to request an invite, a process which requires filling out a survey to indicate whether your house would be a good fit for Astro (which includes a question about what style stairs you have). It's possible Amazon is trying to put these bots into the best case scenario, to see if they can even survive that.

Update, 10:10PM ET, Sept 28th: *Updated with statement from Amazon.*

https://www.theverge.com/2021/9/28/22699284/amazon-astro-real-world-stairs-fragile-developer-claims-documents-tracking