Japan’s latest home robot isn’t useful – it’s designed to be loved

It’s not been a great year for home robots, with two high-profile projects – Jibo and Kuri – shuttering operations. But a new competitor from Japan is entering the market with a different approach. Lovot, created by Kaname Hayashi, a former developer of the humanoid robot Pepper, is a furry, foot-and-a-half-high creation that’s designed only to be loved.

“This robot won’t do any of your work. In fact, it might just get in the way,” Hayashi told *Bloomberg*. “Everything about this robot is designed to create attachment.”

Lovot looks a lot like an upgraded Furby. It has minimal motor function (it can’t fetch you a beer or hoover your kitchen) but interacts with users with a pair of lively eyes and wordless chirping noises. It has a trio of wheels for scooting around your home, and a pair of flippers that it can use to show surprise, affection, or even beg to be picked up.

On its head is a canister containing cameras and sensors. These let Lovot recognize sounds, identify individual humans, and distinguish people and pets from furniture using thermal vision. The bot’s eyes have six layers of projections to create an impression of depth, and its exterior (covered by a furry onesie that can be removed for washing) is touch sensitive. If you tickle Lovot it will laugh, and if you cradle it on your lap it will fall asleep.

[embedded content]

Lovot even weighs roughly the same as a human toddler, around 6.6 pounds or three kilograms, and channels the heat created by its processing chip to its skin. The company behind the bot, Groove X, says the intention is to encourage “skinship” between user and Lovot — a Japanese term that refers to the intimacy between mother and child.

The robot was unveiled earlier this week at an event in Japan where Groove X engineers touted Lovot’s ability to become part of a family. That might mean using its built-in cameras as baby monitors, they said, or by offering company to elderly relatives.

Companion robots are becoming more accepted around the world
The concept of robotic companionship is sometimes seen as unsettling in the West. However, in Japan, these sorts of robots have a better track record. Sony’s Aibo robot dogs, for example, are respected so much that they often get their own “funeral” when they can no longer be repaired. And the country’s Paro robot, a therapeutic bot that mimics a baby harp seal, is used in nursing homes to engage and entertain dementia patients.

Study after study shows that despite our professed unease, humans bond pretty readily with robots. And while home bots like Jibo and Kuri might have failed in part because they couldn’t live up to users’ expectations of functionality, a robot that’s designed to be loved can sidestep this problem. After all, you don’t care if cat or dog doesn’t help around the house — you value its presence for different reasons.

Lovot can be preordered now with shipping scheduled for the tail end of 2019. The cost, though, is roughly $3,000 a unit with a monthly subscription fee of $90. Love doesn’t come cheap.

[embedded content]

https://www.theverge.com/2018/12/20/18149817/lovot-groove-x-ho

me-robot-japan-designed-to-be-loved