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Disaster?**

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Wifi Spy Robot Face Off

This robot roll call has two cambots.

//WORDS: MARCUS ALEXANDER HART



Have you ever wanted to leave town, but still keep an eye on your house, talk to your plants and harass your pets? Well, now you can do just that, thanks to a pair of remote-controlled video sentry robots: WowWee's Rovio Mobile Webcam and Meccano/Erector's Spykee the Spy Robot. Both allow you to log via Internet and take a first-person audio/visual tour of your house, but each has its own unique strengths and weaknesses. With price tags around the three-hundred-dollar mark, most folks will only be able to recruit one of these mechanical minions, so *Geek* put them both through their paces to help you spend your home surveillance budget wisely.

ROUND ONE: Network configuration

Both robots can be operated locally in ad-hoc mode (a direct connection to a wifi-enabled computer) as well as operated remotely over the Internet. Configuring either robot for remote access is fairly straightforward for anyone well-versed in network configuration (i.e. most *Geek* readers), but could be an insurmountable task for the average parent of a screamy six-year-old who can't work his new birthday present.

Of the two, I found Spykee to be easier to configure. It only took a few minutes to establish an ad hoc network, and from there it was easy to configure the local network using the robot's software. To use Spykee over the Internet, you must register your robot's MAC number and give it a name and password at spykeeworld.

com, though you can't actually access your robot through the website. Once I had registered and forwarded the appropriate ports on my router (as directed in the manual), I was able to log on to Spykee and annoy my wife from any remote location.

Rovio's setup is a bit more complex. I was able to establish a local connection in minutes, but—even as a dude with an above-average understanding of home networking—it took me hours to configure Rovio for Internet access. Unlike Spykee, Rovio's setup is fully manual, requiring a good deal of port forwarding and the configuration of a DNS. If you don't know what that means, then there's a pretty good chance you'll be returning Rovio in frustration, as the documentation seems to only drop hints as to what you should Google rather than providing actual step-by-step guidance.

ROUND TWO: Software

Once properly configured, Rovio can be accessed through any modern web browser, while Spykee requires its own proprietary software. In theory, this sounds like a triumph for Rovio, but in practice, it isn't.

It is true that you can access your Rovio and see live video of your house from the comfort of any web browser. If you want to send or receive audio, however, you'll need to be using Internet Explorer, and you'll have to be using it on a Windows operating system. I personally don't know a single person who is both savvy enough to configure a Rovio and also uses Internet Explorer as his or her preferred browser. So, in a sense, Rovio *does* require special software—or at least software you wouldn't normally use. And if you're a Mac user, don't bother with Rovio at all unless you're deaf.

Spykee is operated through a standalone program that must be downloaded and installed. It is, however, compatible with both Windows and Mac with every function intact. So if you're interested in patrolling your house from a public computer in an Internet café in Tibet, then you'll definitely want a Rovio. But if you plan to connect using your own personal computers, then Spykee's software requirement shouldn't be an issue.



While hardly Optimus vs. Megatron—or even R2-D2 vs. C3PO—expect some electricity in the air when these teeny titans go at it.

ROUND THREE: Driving and Docking

Enough with the technical crap, what's it like to actually play with these things? In a word: awesome. Both robots provide a unique combination of remote-controlled toy and worm's-eye-view voyeur that's amazingly fun, if not actually all that useful. Each robot also has its own unique method of finding and parking in its charging dock when its batteries start to get hungry.

In terms of raw driving precision, Rovio is the clear victor. Its sophisticated controls and three omni-directional wheels allow not only traditional car-like driving, but the ability to rotate, strafe sideways, or even slide around in a circle while still facing forward. Its charging base includes a built-in "TrueTrack Beacon," which uses infrared beams projected on the ceiling to help Rovio find its way home. The system works very well in average to low light, but if there happens to be a bright shaft of midday sun cutting through the room and blinding Rovio's sensors, it'll just meander around like a confused sitcom husband who refuses to pull over and ask directions.

Spykee's controls are much simpler, though for most practical purposes, no less effective. Two treads allow forward motion, backward motion, and standing turns, allowing Spykee to get almost everywhere Rovio can, just in a slightly more cumbersome manner. Spykee also uses infrared to contact its charger, but this robot uses a direct beam to its base rather than getting the ceiling involved. In my tests, this allowed Spykee to find its dock much faster and with greater accuracy than Rovio could.

Perhaps the biggest advantage that

Rovio has over Spykee is one of stability. While Rovio is near impossible to flip, if Spykee's treads have an errant run in with a wall, more often than not, it's knocked flat on its back until someone can come and rescue it.

“Both provide a unique combination of remote-controlled toy and worm’s-eye-view voyeur that’s amazingly fun”

ROUND FOUR: Video, Audio and Performance

Up until now, the two robots have been fairly evenly matched, but this round is what separates the manbots from the boybots. There's no point in having a webcam robot if you can't suitably see and hear through it or control it.

Unfortunately for Rovio, in our tests, all three of these elements were lackluster. In a brightly lit room, Rovio's camera is actually much better than Spykee's, both in resolution (adjustable with a max of 640x480 compared to Spykee's fixed 320x240) and in picture quality. In anything less than bright light, however, Rovio's camera goes to black faster than a *Sopranos* finale. When placed side-by-side in the same dimly lit room, Spykee's camera was able to discern enough of the furniture to be guided safely across. Rovio, however, may as well have been looking into a bucket of tar in outer space. Both robots have headlights for these low-light situations, but both are so small that they seem to be included as a joke rather than as an actual function.

I touched on the limitations of Rovio's audio above, but even if you are running the right browser and OS to get it to work at all, it is still disappointing. In my tests, when trying to have a conversation through Rovio, the audio was an indecipherable mess of bird-like chirps and distortion. Also, when Rovio is transmitting/receiving audio, there is a noticeable drop in performance, both in the video quality and motor response. Spykee's two-way audio, on the other hand, is loud and clear, and has no discernible impact on performance.

Even with sound completely disabled, I experienced a half-second delay between my directional key presses and Rovio's actual movement. This may not sound like much, until you

consider that Spykee had absolutely no delay using the exact same computer and network. Side by side, I felt like I was driving Rovio through molasses.

ROUND FIVE: Talent competition

Though these robots are very similar, each has some features that the other does not.

Rovio can also use the same "TrueTrack Beacon" it uses for docking to record and play back a path. Its reported "pinpoint accuracy," however, left something to be desired. I programmed Rovio to roll off its base, go to my bookcase, take a picture of a certain book and then return to its base. Every time I executed the path, however, it would send back a picture of a different book in that general vicinity—never the actual book I had programmed it to find. Rovio boasts a motorized arm that allows its camera to move to one of three positions—low, a little bit higher, or looking at the ceiling. Rovio can also be used as a webcam by most video conferencing software (MSN, Skype, etc.).

Spykee's unique features are very kid-friendly. You can add one of eight different effects to your video—thermic, black-and-white, *Matrix* knockoff, etc.—which is sort of fun, but utterly useless. It can also serve as a "room guard," sensing motion with its camera and emailing you a picture of any intruders. Spykee can also play sound effects and mp3s, which sounds like a silly feature, but there's something indescribably awesome about a pint-sized robot rolling into the room blaring 2 Unlimited while muttering along in an R2-D2-like robot language.

THE WINNER

In the end, when the smoke has cleared and the circuits have been mopped off the canvas, it's difficult to call a clear winner in this bout. With its agile movement and adjustable camera, Rovio is theoretically the stronger 'bot. In practice, however, the plaything-like simplicity of Spykee makes him a much stronger, and more fun, real-world performer. Whichever robot you choose, after driving it around for a while, one thing will become abundantly apparent—your house has more dust bunnies under the furniture than you ever could have imagined. **geek**

// WORDS: MARCUS ALEXANDER HART

Doritos Collisions

From bacon-flavored mayonnaise to pie-flavored soft drinks to ketchup-flavored snack chips, this column has chronicled many of America's greatest achievements in making one food taste like another food. Today we continue that fine tradition with Doritos Collisions: two different flavors of tortilla chips stuffed into the same greasy sack. Available in three different combinations—Hot Wings/Blue Cheese, Zesty Taco/Chipotle Ranch and Pizza Cravers/Ranch—these chips give you the great tastes of sloppy fast food without the mess ... and

without actually tasting like them at all. We tested the Hot Wings/Blue Cheese variety, and found that they tasted like their namesakes only in a vague, broad-stroke kind of way. The redder “Hot Wings” chips were sort of spicy, and the whiter “Blue Cheese” chips were sort of cheesy, but I defy any living human being to blindly taste either one of them and correctly identify the bag-branded flavor. That said, all of the flavors still taste like Doritos, so there are really no losers here. At least that's what we'll keep telling ourselves... doritos.com

73/100**Collisions without a \$500 deductible.**

Pac-Man Retro Arcade Plug & Play TV Video Game System

Back when I was a kid, video games were simple. I didn't have fancy controllers with two sticks and 17 buttons that registered my movement and let me have a live conversation with 12-year-old illiterate morons in Costa Mesa. No, back in the day we had the Atari 2600. One stick, one button. And we liked it that way. JAKKS Pacific brings us back to those halcyon days of gaming with their Pac-Man Retro Arcade Plug & Play TV Video Game System. This hand-held, battery-powered game is approximately the size of a classic '80s joystick, but unlike its cartridge-based forebears, the Retro Arcade has 12 games built right in. Just plug it into your TV's AV jacks and you're on your way to a marathon of 8-bit action, including *Pole Position*, *New Rally-X*, *Dig Dug*, *Galaxian*, *Galaga*, *Mappy*, *Bosconian* and *Xevious*. Apparently the Pac-Man Retro Arcade is a boys' club—while it does include *Pac-Man*, *Super Pac-Man*, *Pac & Pal* and *Pac-Man Plus*, it somehow fails to include spherical hottie *Ms. Pac-Man*. Even so, we like the Retro Arcade so much that we'll forgive it for this exclusion. And for that troublesome second button. jakkstvgames.com

**98/100****Crank up the Buckner & Garcia!**

The Authentic Southern Sweet Tea Brewer

If Colonel Harland Sanders were still with us today, he would not have a Mr. Coffee in his kitchen. As an authentic Southern gentleman, the Colonel would have the Authentic Southern Sweet Tea Brewer from Hammacher Schlemmer. Just fill the brewer's removable, easy-to-clean trays with bagged or loose tea and up to a full cup of sugar, turn it on, and then go tend to your 11 herbs and spices. Just 10 minutes later, twin jets of 204-degree water will have simultaneously brewed your tea and obliterated your sugar, combining them into the most authentic Dixieland beverage this side of a mint julep. Fill the rest of the included high-quality glass pitcher with the requisite amount of ice and lemons, stir and enjoy. The brewing process keeps the sugar in suspension indefinitely, so your tea will stay fresh and tasty in the fridge for days. Unfortunately, we can't say the same for the Colonel's chicken and biscuit bowl. hammacher.com

84/100**You can be loud and be proud, 'cause the South's gonna brew it again.**



BIGS Sunflower Seeds

Sunflower seeds are disgusting. Okay, that's not fair. It's actually *eating* sunflower seeds that's disgusting. If you consume them in the way generally endorsed by the sunflower-seed-eating community (and the National Baseball League), you crack the husk with your teeth and then spit it out, swallowing only the edible kernel. As a prissy little girl, I refuse to partake in any food item that requires the expectation of 50 to 75 percent of its total mass. For BIGS Sunflower Seeds, however, I may just make an exception. These seeds are not only oversized for easier intraoral disassembly, but are also impregnated with the essences of five delicious snack-food giants. They start out with the classic Salted and Roasted flavor, which paves the way to Zesty Ranch, FRANK'S REDHOT Buffalo Wing and Vlasic Dill Pickle. And, in their continuing quest to make everything taste like bacon, our friends at J&D's have lent BIGS the savory flavor of Bacon Salt as well. That's a taste sensation worth spitting all over your office floor. Gross. bigs.com

81/100

The tastiest thing I've ever eaten then intentionally spit up.

Snickers Nougabot Bar

Give Michael Bay an existing franchise—say, *Transformers*, for example—and he's guaranteed to do two things with it—one, he will make it totally awesome, and, two, he will make it totally suck. The folks at Mars, given the same opportunity, will do neither. According to their website, their *Transformers*-themed Nougabot Bar has "electrifying yellow nougat and dark caramel to resemble Bumblebee from the new *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* movie." If you'll reference your regulation Snickers bar, you'll note that nougat, in its traditional form, is a light tan color. And they turned it yellow. That's like, a 3% change. That's like a transformer who transforms from a car into a ... yellow car. But the thing is, the Nougabot still tastes exactly like a Snickers bar. So even if you're disappointed in

"This is like a transformer who transforms a car into a...yellow car."

the slightly jaundiced nougat, hey, you've still got a Snickers bar. It's not totally awesome, but at least it doesn't totally suck. snickers.com

79/100

Nougabots! Trans-noug and roll out!



Crystal Catch Fish

It is a well known fact that there is a relaxing, therapeutic quality to watching a tropical fish aquarium. *Maintaining* a tropical fish aquarium, however, is a nightmare of cleaning, feeding and the occasional drama of your expensive pets killing and eating one another in a savage display of territorialism. Like most of society's problems, this dilemma can be cured by a robot. Specifically the Crystal Catch Fish from Swimways. This plastic pet lives in your swimming pool, floating upright just below the surface and gently propelling itself with the swishing of its clockwork tail. Yes, it tends to swim headfirst into the side of the pool, and yes, it does love to get its dumb ass stuck in the skimmer, but when you're trying to artificially emulate the intelligence of a fish, the bar isn't set very high. But what the Crystal Catch Fish lacks in navigation skills, it makes up for in illuminated bedazzlement. This waterborne automaton's clear plastic body features a handful of bright, color-cycling LEDs that throw dreamy light into your dreary pool. Or at least into its skimmer. swimways.com

78/100

Perfect for your next underwater rave.

"When you're trying to emulate fish intelligence, the bar isn't set very high."



Do you have something for Marcus to eat or put batteries in? Send your product to:

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