AN AFFORDABLE AND ACCESSIBLE DIY TELEPRESENCE ROBOT

Smartpresence comes as a kit with reusable parts, and allows video callers to interact and move around your home

Spotted: Toymaker The Crafty Robot has launched a crowdfunding campaign for its latest design: a DIY cardboard telepresence robot that works with a Smartphone, allowing people to virtually visit loved ones without being there in person.

Smartipresence is an expansion pack for the already successful Smartibot kit — a DIY artificial intelligence-enabled cardboard robot which launched in 2018. The kit is adaptable, and it’s really easy to reuse the parts and the software (circuit board, motors and battery box) to build your own telepresence robots.

BY adding a low-ratio motor, the Smartipresence system allows users to invent their own telepresence robots with whatever they want, from LEGO to plasticine or 3D-printing. The team has built some fun examples, including one based on a radio-controlled car, a tall one with a tank chassis, a 3D-printed monster truck, a little train that runs on a wooden track available from Brio and Ikea and, strangest of all, a telepresence duck that had the real ducks partially convinced.

In an interview with Springwise, Ross Atkin, the designer and engineer behind The Crafty Robot, said: “This design approach has allowed us to very quickly and efficiently create a product, in Smartipresence, that responds to the current situation, whilst also being confident that they won’t just become landfill when things get more back to normal the acute need for them subsides.”

To invite someone “to be present”, users simply have to put Smartipresence online (using the app on iOS or web app on Android) and send a link to the driving web app. The person on the screen (Pilots) can then see what the robot sees and drive it around from in the browser on their Smartphone, Tablet or computer. As soon as they start driving, their face will appear on the robot’s screen and
you will be able to chat amongst yourselves. Driving Smartipresence is designed to feel like being present, but only at 6 inches tall. Pilots can move forwards and backwards, turn and look up and down or spin around to dance.

Each kit ships with an access code providing 10 hours of telepresence calls. Once that is used up additional codes, each providing a further 10 hours of calls, may be purchased from The Crafty Robot website for the equivalent to €5.50 each.

You can even try out driving a Smartipresence robot (and have a chat with Ross if you like) between 5 pm and 6 pm BST (12 pm to 1 pm ET) on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays here.

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Takeaway:

Telepresence robots have been around for a while, but they have tended to be large, expensive machines designed for corporate use. Unlike other telepresence robots, Smartipresence is a cardboard kit which takes advantage of all the fancy technology available in smartphones. This allows the price to be a fraction of other telepresence robots, whilst minimising the ecological impact -- a key characteristic in future product design.