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Inventions' wonderful world on display at Microsoft fair

By [Kim Peterson](#)

Seattle Times technology reporter

Microsoft might be on the verge of its best office invention yet: a self-charging robot slave that goes to meetings in your place.

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Imagine the hooky-playing possibilities that Robie the Robot could create. You can control the robot from a personal computer, using its two-way audio and video technology to participate by proxy. You also could send Robie out to the water cooler to talk shop with co-workers' Robies.

Robie isn't even close to being sold at stores, but it was one of dozens of inventions on display yesterday at a research fair Microsoft hosted for hundreds of university faculty visiting the company this week.

Some of the inventions came out of Microsoft's advanced-research division, a group of 700 employees that spend a lot of time thinking about the future. Or, more precisely, how Microsoft can make money in the future.

Microsoft's university partners also exhibited projects. Brad Myers, a research scientist at Carnegie Mellon University, has been working to replace the remote controls lying around the home with one device, such as a cellphone or a personal digital assistant. Eventually, he said, appliances could be equipped with technology to receive the commands.

People waiting to take an elevator could enter their destination floor into a cellphone instead of pushing the elevator button, Myers said. Copy machines could be programmed to sort and staple from a Pocket PC.

Microsoft researcher Johannes Helander is working on a glove that could translate sign language into digitized letters. A person wearing the glove could spell out a word using sign language, and the word would appear on a computer screen.

Researcher Darko Kirovski is developing a low-cost way for motor-vehicle departments and companies to create identification cards on paper. The system uses compression technology to turn photos into data and encryption techniques to make forgery nearly impossible, Kirovski said.

Someone could receive a driver's license by e-mail and print it out at home, Kirovski said.

Some of the more unusual projects were developed by students Microsoft invited to participate in the research fair. Students from the Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands presented the idea of parents keeping in touch with grown children through special bowls with digital cameras in them.

A child could come home and put his keys in the bowl, which would take a picture of the keys and send the image to the parents' bowl. Parents could look into their bowls and feel comforted that their child is home safe.

Carnegie Mellon students proposed turning any sort of object into a digital media device that could store movies and photos from a person's travels. A souvenir miniature lighthouse, for example, could both serve as a memento from the trip and hold digital movies and photos.

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