



Written by [Lenore Skenazy](#) on June 9, 2023

Let Your Kids Waste Some Time

Meet Rod Brooks, a guy whose life story embodies the big idea: What we do as kids, *just for fun*, is developmental GOLD. It can help us discover our deepest interests, hone our hidden talents and take us to truly strange and wonderful places.

So, Rod.

Rod grew up in Adelaide, Australia, in the '50s and '60s. Back then, he told me, a horse-drawn cart still delivered the milk!

With a lot of downtime down under, Rod tinkered. Neither of his parents had finished high school, but they understood Rod was a curious kid and didn't interfere with his projects. As an 8-year-old, he was making things with lightbulbs, wires and batteries. Pretty soon he'd made a proto-computer that could play tic-tac-toe. This involved using old switches from switchboards, not nano-anything, because nano-nothing existed yet.

Did his friends come over to play this earliest of video games?

"No. I just played it with myself. I showed it to some adults, but they didn't quite get it," Rod told me. (We met at the TED Talks in Vancouver this spring, when I randomly sat down at his table for breakfast.)

Fast-forward from Adelaide. Rod came to America. One thing led to another, which led to MIT, where Rod ended up running an 840-person lab, winning prize after prize, starting companies and wowing the robotics world. But, he said, that's not what he's best known for.

I took the bait: "What ARE you known for?"

I'll give you a hint, readers. It's sweeping the country. Literally. Yep, Rod and a small team of brainiacs invented the Roomba.

"We started in 1990," Rod said. But they went through 14 failed versions before they came to market with it in 2002.

That year Rod's team also deployed new robots to Afghanistan to look for roadside bombs. The robots (Boom-bas?) found about 6,500 of them. "Before the robots," said Rod, whenever a suspicious object was noticed, "someone would get dressed up in a bomb suit and went out to poke it."

So, the robots were very welcome. Rod's team also created robots that got shipped to Japan after the tsunami, because they could withstand radiation and hence were deployed to search that flooded nuclear plant.

And when it became clear that some defense technology (I don't know which) was too convoluted and



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complex for our soldiers to use with any ease, he changed the control panel to something resembling a video-game joystick.

All of which says to me: Not everyone is a genius. But everyone is drawn to some hobbies or pastimes as kids, given enough freedom and a chunk of time (and a chunk of that chunk that is not online).

If we pause before signing our kids up for another “enrichment” class, they may find plain old free time enriching because it allows them to explore things just for fun. And if they make a mess?

There’s always the Roomba.

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