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By Mark Frauenfelder, Apr 20, 2005

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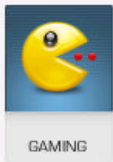
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NETWORKED PLUSH



Douglas Rushkoff Wed Apr 27 08:30:00 GMT 2005 Score: +43

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Inserting a cell phone or an Airpot in a fuzzy doll just won't cut it. It's time for toys to network.

It seems only yesterday when a touch-activated vibrator in an Elmo doll was enough to launch a "tickle-me" culture, and keep the likes of Toys R Us going for another Christmas season. Today, however, in the post-Furby universe of electronics-enhanced plush toys, it takes more than a few technological capabilities, however novel, to make a successful play experience -- or play for the market.

Hi-tech and high-touch are not incompatible at all. But in order to complement one another, they must be married intentionally and not just because it can be done. The iPod's soft edges beg users to "take me with you," which is precisely the quality that allowed the music player to work its way into our hearts and our lives. Likewise, the merger of wireless technology with plush dolls must be made with their complementary qualities in mind. So far, few toymakers are thinking this way.

Wireless plush won't work until toy designers fully grasp the essence of both technology and the essence of plush. From the looks of most of what's emerging from the toy industry this year, no one does. Mattel's Fisher-Price division, for example, has come out with two virtually identical strategies for its Personalized Winnie the Pooh and Elmo dolls. Parents plug the doll into their computer through a USB cable, and then program the dolls with information about the child. Call this the customization strategy. What does it matter that a plush doll knows your name? Not a hell of a lot, particularly since the main gateway to playability -- the cable to the computer -- is for the parents, not the children.

A host of other toys are making use of improving voice-recognition software to provide children with basic feedback to commands. Hasbro's new and improved Furby can now speak a bit of English along with his native Furbish, and can react to words like "hungry." Meanwhile, Playmates' "Amazing Amanda" can recognize its owner's -- I mean, "mommy's" -- voice after just three voice inputs, and then respond specially to her. The voice recognition strategy still feels to me like retrofitting a doll to the technology that happens to be available. And, as anyone who has attempted to type a document with IBM's ViaVoice will assure you, such software only makes the user more aware of the technology and its many limitations. I hate to think of my daughter shouting at her doll the way I did at my computer before chucking the program.

A notch closer to a truly wireless solution, Barbie's life-size cat companion, *Serafina*, is a plush toy with an RFID chip that allows it to speak 75 different phrases in response to inaudible cues that play under the music in Serafina audio CDs and the Barbie movie DVD, *The Princess and the Pauper*. While this may be a good short-term cross-promotional strategy for upcoming Barbie movies and records, it's only a nominally interactive toy: after all, the cat is interacting with other Barbie merchandise, and not the child!

Inexpensive wireless technology should offer toy manufacturers a whole new range of solutions to the cyberplush problem. More than simply embedding a cell phone in a doll, the designers who rise to the wireless challenge will, in the process, reveal to us something about the underlying nature of this industry and its fledgling culture.

Some students at New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program may be the closest to unearthing these secrets. Two students in my Narrative Lab, Dan Perlin and Brett Schultz, have developed prototypes for a set of dolls they call *The Needies*.

The Needies are a trio of plush dolls that like both imagined plush toys and real cell phones demand to be held. They are, in a word, needy. But while a Needy can communicate its needs verbally to its owner, complaining when being left alone and cooing or singing when being held, things get interesting when more than one Needy is brought to the same space. Enabled by simple radio transceiver technology, the Needies are "aware" of which ones are being held and which ones aren't, and begin to react accordingly.

The Needies who are being touched can taunt, console or ignore their neglected compatriots. When all the Needies in a certain location are being attended to, they sing a song together. To be sure, Needies are something of a satire on both wireless technology and plush dolls. But like the best of kids media - from Rocky and Bullwinkle to Ren & Stimpy - they act both as eye-opening allegory for adults, and straightforward, even educational fun for kids.

The Needies team took an interactive-centric approach, and just used whatever technology would work for the job. As Schultz explains, "We weren't at all interested in using technology for its own sake, which unfortunately seems to be de rigueur nowadays. In that sense, our decision to go with a no-frills radio transceiver over Bluetooth or Wi-Fi was primarily a matter of control. We can write our own protocols rather than tangle ourselves up in the superfluity of wireless standards."

Needies also represent one of the first of what I hope will be an emerging trend of truly networked toys, whose behaviors influence one another. By design, the Needies build networks with one another, serving as proxies for their owners who may be too young to engage in networked activity of their own. More importantly, they exploit the power of networking for their play value, rather than simply giving their users the chance to interact with a database of stored sounds, or serving as a soft casing for some simplified version of a traditional wireless device.

Those of us experiencing the wireless Internet understand that it's the connections we make to other people that matter most; we are building a wireless network together. Maybe toys like these will begin to make this medium's message clear.

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