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## At Toy Fair, Kids' Play Gets Wired

Latest Innovations Spring From and Into Virtual Worlds

By Scott Moore  
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NEW YORK -- Fact: Kids create more than 100,000 avatars each day in virtual communities such as Habbo and Club Penguin.

That startling statistic has broad implications for how kids play and what the \$22 billion toy industry wants to sell them to play with. More and more, when kids "go outside to play," they're really venturing forth into increasingly sophisticated online neighborhoods, and manufacturers want a piece of that action.

At the annual Toy Fair celebration of innovation and inspiration that wraps up here today, even many of the classic toys and time-honored storylines had a whiz-bang, Internet-based interactivity. The latest [Hot Wheels](#), once guided by hand by kids on their knees making vroom-vroom noises, now have chips that connect directly to the hotwheels.com community. [Disney](#) is expanding its Fairies franchise to an online Pixie Hollow, where girls can give each other eBracelets and hunt for Tinker Bell.

About a dozen companies are trying to follow in the footsteps of Webkinz, which has successfully sold stuffed animals that give kids a link to a virtual world with adventures, arcade games and instant messaging. In reverse, there is finally a line of cuddly plush Neopets that have hopped out of the monitor and can receive real hugs, rather than only webby ones.

Want a different virtual identity? There are games featuring cars, aliens, strong boys, frilly girls. All have safety features, such as blocking home addresses and ages, that manufacturers hope will assuage parents' fears about letting their kids go online. And there certainly are no toxins, small magnets or lead-based paints in the virtual toy world, a plus for an industry that was besieged last year by 17 product recalls covering more than 20 million items.

For the industry, which uses this four-day play date to hawk its current and upcoming products, here's the best-case scenario: Kids won't want to stop playing in their online worlds. With the ever-expanding child obesity problem, that also is the worst-case scenario.

IToy's ME2 (pronounced "me too," it stands for "my electronic double") grew out of a doctor's suggestion that George Irwin wear a pedometer to monitor how much exercise he was getting.

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Using a pedometer, ME2 keeps track of a kid's daily steps and transfers points to an avatar's power levels. Ride your bike; earn points to buy a virtual vehicle.

"To develop this, we didn't talk to anyone over 25," said Irwin, the company's "toycoon," pointing to the game's [Wii](#)-like controller and 360-degree, 3-D animation interface. "The best research we got was from 9-, 10-, 11-, 12- and 13-year-old kids."

His brother Peter, a co-owner, has three boys ages 7 to 14 who will "sit and stare at a screen for five hours in a row. I have to drag them away from the computer. . . . We thought, if we could find a way to create a toy that would encourage kids to find an activity, even if that activity is walking, that would be great."

The ME2 is designed to be the enforcer. Want to play longer or buy online accessories? Then take a break from the virtual 3-D world. A 15-minute bike ride or 10 minutes cleaning your room will provide double benefit.

Tom and Michelle Gallop of [Boulder, Colo.](#), came up with another way to get their three children away from the screen.

Meet Bob, an \$80 device that controls the electrical power for a TV or computer monitor. By requiring users to punch in a code number, Bob silently enforces parents' viewing rules, counting down the amount of viewing time available and turning off the screen during designated homework hours and at bedtime.

"I didn't like setting an egg timer and arguing with the kids. . . . Now they know they have a finite amount of time," Michelle Gallop said, citing her children's more-informed viewing choices. "And my sons are relieved I'm not yelling at them."

[Fisher Price](#)'s Laugh & Learn Smart Bounce & Spin Pony is based on the classic springy playground ride. But this one, for ages 12 to 36 months, is connected to the TV via a wireless device. The more baby bounces, the better the onscreen educational play. At age 3, the child can continue the move-and-play process on the Smart Cycle, celebrated last weekend as the Toy Industry of America's innovative toy of the year. And you think today's kids have trouble sitting still in school.

Keyboards are designed for the very earliest adopters. Targeted Technology Solutions has peripherals for children as young as 2, and myPC Toddler is spill-proof and washable, for those still drinking from a sippy cup.

For all the new products, the exhibit hall with its 1,200 vendors has been crammed with a surprising number of classics. Cabbage Patch Kids, introduced 25 years ago, are ready for an encore. Classic editions of Scrabble, Monopoly and Taboo are displayed next to newfangled versions, including an eco-centered Earthopoly, made by [Cincinnati](#)-based Late for the Sky. Pewter and plastic game pieces have been replaced by bamboo, lima beans, black walnuts, crystal, glass and shells.

Soren Torp Laursen, president of Lego Americas, sees a resurgence of classic toys. "I've been in the industry for 22 years, and for 22 years I've heard that technology is taking over the toy market. . . . Looking at the successes at last year's toy industry, [Lego](#) by a long mile was one of the very few shining stars."

Play hasn't changed, says Susan Magsamen. FamilyStories, based in Hunt Valley, Md., distributes some

of the science projects she created 20 years ago.

"Technology has a place, and it's really important, but we are wired to be multi-sensory," she said, explaining why hands-on activities can't be replaced by online experiences. "Kids have so many ways to get information, so many choices. In some ways, they are way overstimulated, oversaturated and overwhelmed. . . . They have one intense experience and they are ready to move on to the next."

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