Interactive Barney: Good or evil?

Conferees worry about where computerized 'character' toys are going next

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By Michael Newman, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

He has no rivets in his forehead, he harbors no homicidal tendencies -- though he's certainly inspired a few -- and he likes to play peek-a-boo. Still, when a panel of computer scientists gathered yesterday to discuss "interactive plush toys," the question before them was this:

Could Microsoft's "ActiMates Barney" be a more cuddly version of Dr. Frankenstein's monster?

Erik Strommen certainly doesn't think so, not least because that would make him Dr. Frankenstein. Strommen is in charge of research and design at Microsoft's Interactive Toy Group, and as such is the "father" not only of Barney but also of the ActiMates TeleTubbies, ActiMates Arthur and ActiMates D.W., both from the PBS program "Arthur."

Controversy about so-called "interactive plush toys" is overblown, he said. Others disagreed.

"When I hear Barney say, 'You're my special friend' -- that's a disingenuous statement," said Allen Cypher, a founder of Stagecast Software, which designs children's programs. "It's a fraudulent claim. It deceives kids into believing that Barney has some emotional attachment to them, and that's not true."

Other panelists worried about Barney's "authoritarian tone," or that he discouraged imaginative play. And some said that, while Barney himself was basically harmless, he may be a harbinger of worse to come: an interactive Cartman from "South Park," perhaps, spewing expletives and insulting his owner.

And one member of the audience asked if a child could take Barney apart and "reprogram him to say, 'Please slap me.' "

"These products are designed to prevent that," Strommen said.

The panel, titled "Is ActiMates Barney Ethical?" took place on the final day of the Computer-Human Interaction conference at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center. By the end, there was a surprising amount of consensus, though there was no danger of the "I Love You" song breaking out.

"Interactive plush toys" are basically old-fashioned stuffed animals made excitable by new-fangled technology. Squeeze ActiMates Barney's hand, and he plays one of a dozen games. Cover his eyes, and he plays peek-a-boo. Connect him to your television when "Barney" is showing, and he'll sing along with the songs.

And Barney, Strommen made clear, is only the beginning. The ActiMates TeleTubbies coo and babble just like the ones on TV, while "Arthur" and "D.W." also talk and play much like their TV counterparts.

There are already about 20 to 25 of these "interactive character products," Strommen said, with at least that many scheduled to be released in the next year. They are generally much more expensive than their unwired cousins; ActiMates Barney goes for $70, while the TeleTubbies -- only Laa-Laa and Po are currently available -- are $50 each.

Within a decade or two, "there are going to be chips in every toy," he said. "We are going to be surrounded by these things."

The panel focused on the social, developmental and ethical implications of the toys, with a heavy emphasis on how they affect the way children play. There were disagreements, but most seemed to think that it was an issue worth further thought, if not study.

Programmers and toy designers should take care to consider how their products will be used, said Batya Friedman, a professor of math and computer science at Colby College in Maine. At the same time, they should be aware that their inventions will not be used as they intend.

"The way tools are designed can make them more suitable to certain tasks," she said. But while "human behavior may be constrained or prodded by features of technology, it is not determined by it."

Allison Druin, a professor of education and computer science at the University of

Maryland, has designed an interactive "robot" in her lab, which allows children to make and tell their own stories and games.

The robot, which looks like a cast-off collection of "Sesame Street" characters, responds to the stories the children tell -- by drooping its eyes when it's sad, for instance, or spinning around when it's happy. Children can also program it to show more "emotions" by associating certain actions with certain words.

"Character matters," she said. When she asks children in her lab about their programs, she said, "they can't get away from the character to look at the technology."

"The technologist in me says, It's about time we can hug our technologies," she said. But established characters, such as Barney or the TeleTubbies, also bring "baggage" that may restrain children's imagination.

It was a point Cypher repeated, and one of his criticisms of Microsoft's efforts.

"As a professional, I'm interested in end-user programming and customization," he said. Yet Barney cannot be customized. Microsoft, not to mention his producer, view his well-defined personality as his chief asset.

Which brings up what may be the most unsettling use of the technology: Not that it may work toward negative or antisocial purposes, but that it could work mainly toward commercial ones.

A fast-food chain, for instance, could use an interactive toy to promote its latest specials. It could even be programmed to yelp, beep or otherwise make a ruckus whenever it passed near a restaurant. Or a TV network could give away an interactive doll inside cereal boxes, encouraging children to watch a certain Saturday-morning cartoon.

"The coercive implications of this technology are very strong," Strommen said. "All these products have that potential. We get calls from companies every day wanting to do that."
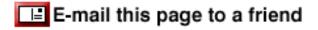
It's inevitable that the technology will be put to such a use, said B.J. Fogg, who is director of the Persuasive Technology Lab at Stanford.

But persuasive technologies, which he defined as those that are "created to influence or motivate their users toward certain behavior," are "not just for buying and branding."

At the Stanford lab, he said, researchers have devised a "Baby Think It Over," which can be used to discourage teen-age pregnancy. They also have a program called "Hygiene Guard," which monitors employees to see if they wash their hands when they leave the bathroom.

"We're interested in raising awareness," he said. "Persuasive technologies are already here, and more are coming -- and we need to discuss them."

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