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Make way for robobaby - the new tech toy

This Christmas, expect to be plagued by a new doll that screams for attention, demands to be fed and has a limited range of emotions

By NIALL MCKAY

Now that the Internet has let us down, Silicon Valley needs a new squeeze, a new love, the so-called New New Thing.

First, everybody thought that it would be mobile connected widgets, but such technologies need networks and infrastructure and that may take a little time to establish, at least in the US. Then, many believed that Wireless Application Protocol (WAP), a technology that allowed cell phones turn their handsets into handbags or virtual money, would be it. But it wasn't because nobody bought anything.

Now, robots are emerging as the new stars of the tech industry. This Christmas, expect to be plagued by the kids for a new breed of doll - a farting robo-baby. I know it's like all the horrors of children, technology and Christmas rolled into one, but both Hasbro and Mattel are slated to launch robo-babies that scream for attention, demand to be fed and have a limited range of emotions. Even worse, the damn things will learn.

It just goes to show that the technology industry is not driven so much by science or innovation as by fashion.

Twenty years ago when big hair ruled, robots were all the rage. There were 400 robotics companies in the US and major computer companies such as IBM and General Electric had massive robot projects. Universities even ran

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special robotics courses.

That all died when the technology (as technology does) failed to deliver on its promise. The robots were too expensive to build and did too little to justify the cost.

The Japanese stepped in and took over industrial robotics. Even more recently, according to the International Federation of Robotics, the worldwide market was only worth \$4.2 billion in 1998. Small potatoes by technology standards. Now, there are just three or four medium-sized robotics companies in the US and most of them are dedicated to building large automated manufacturing plants, rather than Robbie The Robot of Lost in Space fame.

But the technology industry is very good at taking old science and making it new. For example peer-to-peer networking, the technology that powers the music download software Napster, is as old as, well, networking itself.

The same is true for robots. Last week I got a call from a New York venture capital firm which wanted the skinny on a company called iRobot - the creator of the next craze - Hasbro's robo-baby, My Real Baby. What were its chances for success? What did I think of its business strategy? Are robots ready for prime time, etc?

I believe that personal robots are almost ready to make a comeback but this time they will either mimic something real - such as the dolls or Sony's Aibo robotic dog - or they will have a function. For example, Electrolux is working on a robotic vacuum cleaner.

The machine vision technology (or the eyes), the voice recognition technology (the ears), the speech synthesis technology (the voice) and the artificial intelligence (the brain) are all nearing a point where companies such as iRobot could create something useful or cute.

More importantly the components, such as computer chips, memory, cameras, and even items such as Global Positioning Satellite technology (for navigation) have become commodities, so that such devices could be cheap to build.

Indeed, both Hasbro's My Real Baby and Mattel's Miracle Moves Baby will be priced at around \$100.

Like lots of good technology, iRobots' My Real Baby sprang out of MIT's Media Labs Artificial Intelligence research projects. The company was actually developing reconnaissance robots for the military and mining

industry, when one bright spark realised that kids loved the creatures and projected human personalities onto them.

It's the artificial intelligence that adds a kind of magic to My Real Baby, says Ms Helen Greiner, iRobots' president and co-founder. She sits up smiles and looks around. She develops over a time and asks for her bottle. She likes being bounced and likes attention. Don't we all.

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