

Lure kittens to play online with (computer) mice

November 10 2010, By JESSICA MINTZ , AP Technology Writer

(AP) -- A company that has developed technology for controlling remote robotic arms over the Internet has adapted the system so that people around the world can play remotely with kittens.

The company first tested its system by building a paintball shooting gallery. But while Apriori Control, a tiny Boise, Idaho-based company, waits for paying customers, it's putting its systems through their paces at animal shelters in the West.

Scott Harris, head of Apriori, thought the systems would be used to meld real-world and online gaming, or as part of military training. A "beta" test drew more than 2,300 people to a website to shoot a paintball gun by pressing computer keys and watch their results splatter in real time.

Afterward, Apriori went to work on software improvements. It also decided to donate time and spare equipment to a good - and very cute - cause.

The Idaho Humane Society and the Oregon Humane Society now have kitten play rooms equipped with cat toys attached to robotic arms. Web surfers can visit the animal adoption groups' websites, download a browser plug-in and get in line for a turn at moving the toys. While they wait, they can watch over a live webcam as others try to catch the kitties' attention with a flick or bounce of the toy.

The system isn't flawless; a reporter visiting the Oregon site, which went

online at the end of September, had trouble with her computer freezing during installation of the plug-in, which requires Internet Explorer and a Windows computer. Once the technology was running smoothly, the kittens weren't - apparently, kittens can nap through just about anything.

Apriori's next project is with the Indianapolis Zoo, where they'll set up a way for people to feed animals from their home computers. The company has also been approached with pitches for "adult" applications, which Harris said he might consider "if I go broke." Harris has plenty of other ideas for future uses of the technology, though, from interactive Halloween haunted houses to dispensing medications remotely.

"I don't want to be known as, `Apriori, the company that plays with kittens,'" Harris said.

More information: <http://www.oregonhumane.org>

<http://www.idahohumanesociety.org>

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Citation: Lure kittens to play online with (computer) mice (2010, November 10) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-11-lure-kittens-online-mice.html>

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