

Have a digital day—new tech toys at German IT fair

March 17 2015, by Frank Zeller



A woman walks past an advertisement at the booth of IBM during the CeBIT technology fair in Hanover, central Germany, on March 16, 2015

There's the intelligent yoga mat, the coffee flask that'll give you and your smartphone a jolt, and a super-smart dinosaur toy with his head in the cloud.

Love it or hate it, this is a glimpse of the world of tomorrow according to the gadget makers who've shown up in force at the German IT fair CeBIT.

The start-up founders and architects of the "Internet of Things" have an app for everything to help the connected citizen get through the day.

Workout meta-data

For those who like to get the blood pumping at the crack of dawn, there's the Smart-Mat, a digital work-out assistant. Its over 6,000 pressure sensors can keep count of your push-ups, sit-ups, crunches and even your breathing rate.

"It can automatically measure different exercises and create meta-data for your personal workout regime," said a trim-looking Bo Zhou, who has developed the floor sports mat for the German Research Centre for Artificial Intelligence.

Although the mat is still a prototype, he said, it could in future be connected to any number of sports apps, like those that talk people through yoga routines.

"Right now yoga assistant applications on smartphones tell you a routine and you have to follow at their pace," Bo said. "You don't have your hands free. If you cannot follow it, you will miss the whole routine.

"But with this, we could distinguish whether you're in position and stable, and ready for the next step so you can follow your own pace."

Remote eldercare

If the Smart-Mat is good for body and spirit, there's another innovation for peace of mind -- the "easierLife" system that lets you check whether an elderly relative living alone is following their usual routine.

Its wireless sensors are fitted in an elder person's apartment to detect when they get up or leave the house. It sends a message by SMS, email or phone to the concerned relative when there is a worrying break with daily routine.

"If something goes wrong, you get a push notification that may say 'my mum has been inactive or didn't get back home from shopping'," explained company chief Sebastian Chiriac.



The concept behind "Cognitoys", which can talk with children and, through the powers of wireless communication and cloud computing, instantly answer questions such as "What's on Mars?"

"With this information, the elderly feel more safe and the relatives know

everything is alright at home, and if something is wrong they can react instantly to it," he said.

The system respects privacy to the extent that it doesn't rely on cameras or microphones and "works in the background", he said. It is available in a German language version and sells for 299 euros (\$315).

Java jolt

Having worked out and checked on the grandparents, it might be time for that morning cup of tea or coffee, perhaps on the run.

But what if the batteries of the mobile device are low and need a jolt of energy as badly as its user?

No problem, there's Terratec's HotPot 1200, a digital thermos flask that also boasts a USB port to power up an Android or iPhone mobile device.

When filled with a hot beverage of at least 80 degrees Celsius (180 Fahrenheit), it generates power that is stored in a battery.

Terratec says that the 60-euro device, which takes several hours to quarter-charge a common phone battery, may be better suited to campers than busy city life, but may come in useful at a weekend picnic in the park.

Dino wizard

The kids, of course, also want to have new toys.



Paul Lukowicz, Scientific Director at the German Research Center for Artificial Intelligence displays a gymnastics mat during the opening day of the CeBIT technology fair in Hanover, central Germany, on March 16, 2015

Perhaps a little green dinosaur that knows everything?

That's the concept behind "Cognitoys", which can talk with children and, through the powers of wireless communication and cloud computing, instantly answer questions such as "What's on Mars?"

(The dinosaur's answer: "red dirt and Martians")

To satisfy children's boundless curiosity, the toy draws on the considerable knowledge of IBM's supercomputer Watson.

"It can hold simple conversations with children, and as the child uses the toy, the toy learns about the child," said developer J.P. Benini, co-

founder of New York company Elemental Path.



A robot is on display at the booth of Robochop during the opening day of the CeBIT technology fair in Hanover, central Germany, on March 16, 2015

"If a child says they like pizza or they play soccer or what their favourite colour is, then in a counting exercise it would count soccer balls or pizza slices, and in a story it would use their favourite colour.

"It actually grows with a child, it understands what vocabulary level they're at... so the toy can actually educate them and challenge them over time."

Benini said that, to protect the four- to seven-year-old children who are the target group, the system works with encrypted communication to be "as non-hackable as possible".



Demonstrators protest for freedom of opinion in China during the opening day of the CeBIT technology fair in Hanover, central Germany, on March 16, 2015

The company plans to sell English-language Cognitoys online from mid-November for \$99 each, and other characters are set to follow.

"We've gathered a lot of very leading edge technologies to make a really compelling toy," said Benini, "but it's still a toy, and toys need friends."

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