

Iconic rubber duck goes digital, but does it need to?

June 8 2016, by Yuri Kageyama



In this May 23, 2016, photo, Yui Matusmoto, 4, plays with Edwin the Duck, a digital duck toy, in the living room of his home in Tokyo, as his grandmother Megumi Sekiguchi looks on. Edwin the Duck, billed as the world's first "smart duck," connects by Bluetooth with a smartphone or tablet device such as an iPad to play animation stories and songs. It also works as a regular speaker to deliver music of your choice in bed or in the bathtub. (AP Photo/Yuri Kageyama)

The iconic rubber duck has gone digital—but maybe it doesn't need to.

Billed as the world's first "smart duck," the \$100 Edwin the Duck is yellow, cute and waterproof, just like the good old rubber ducky floating in many bathtubs for generations. But Edwin also reads and plays music. He quacks, rather than squeaks like the traditional ducky, thanks to internal electronics. Motion sensors turn Edwin into a controller for games.

Yet Edwin feels like a work in progress, a collection of miscellaneous functions that are mildly duck-related, without the features that would truly make him smart. For instance, he doesn't converse with kids using computer-generated responses, as other smart toys do. And most of his wizardry merely directs a child's attention right back to screens.

Perhaps Edwin would have worked better without trying to be all that smart. Not every toy needs to be a smart toy. A good personality might be all that a digital rubber duck needs.

Edwin does have a personality—and more.

You can have Edwin tell a story or play a song by launching a free iPhone or Android app. The fun part comes through Edwin's built-in [motion sensors](#). As your kid shakes, turns or moves Edwin up and down, an animated Edwin on the app swims or flies, or selects a response in a game or quiz. Tap on Edwin's wing, and a light in his head turns on. Edwin becomes a night light—but one that can also tell a child a bedtime story or play a lullaby.



In this Monday, May 23, 2016, photo, Yui Matusmoto, 4, plays with Edwin the Duck, a digital duck toy, in the living room of his home in Tokyo, as his grandmother Megumi Sekiguchi looks on. Edwin the Duck, billed as the world's first "smart duck," connects by Bluetooth with a smartphone or tablet device such as an iPad to play animation stories and songs. It also works as a regular speaker to deliver music of your choice in bed or in the bathtub. (AP Photo/Yuri Kageyama)

Two children asked to play with Edwin appeared to enjoy squeezing Edwin's soft head, just for fun, as that was not designed to control anything digitally. They also liked moving the toy energetically to make an on-screen duck swim in a race. But one of them remarked that he wanted Edwin to read a different story. The selection is still limited.

Of course, the reading capability begs the question of whether parents ought to be reading to their kids directly instead. And should parents give kids yet another screen to stare at for these ducky games and quizzes?

Stevanne Auerbach, author of "Dr. Toy's Smart Play Smart Toys: How to Select and Use the Best Toys & Games," says children need to run around, do finger-painting, read old-fashioned books and interact with nature.

"I don't think you want to throw the rubber duck out and replace it with Edwin," Auerbach says.

But she isn't dismissing Edwin entirely and says there could be room for both. She also says Edwin might be a hit with adults as a night light that can play music.

For now, Edwin ducks concerns about privacy and security , mostly because he doesn't have Internet-enabled conversation capabilities, the way rival smart toys such as Mattel's Hello Barbie have.



In this May 23, 2016, photo, Kano Matusmoto, 5, plays with Edwin the Duck, a digital duck toy, in the living room of her home in Tokyo. Edwin the Duck, billed as the world's first "smart duck," connects by Bluetooth with a smartphone or tablet device such as an iPad to play animation stories and songs. It also works as a regular speaker to deliver music of your choice in bed or in the bathtub. (AP Photo/Yuri Kageyama)

Edwin, derived from the Old English word for "friend," is available in the U.S. and Europe. Edwin's creator, Pi Lab, says it's in talks to bring it to Japan.

Don Inmon, Pi Lab's co-founder, acknowledges that Edwin isn't the perfect duck yet and says more educational features are coming, including foreign-language instruction. He says casting a duck to house the technology was critical in giving an emotional element—a personality—as evident in Edwin's face design and tactile feel.

Perhaps Pi Lab could just stop there. Charlotte Lee, recognized by Guinness World Records for her collection of more than 7,000 rubber ducks, plans to buy Edwin, but says her favorites are the silly, wacky and not very serious.

In trying to be more, Edwin could be too smart to be truly playful.

Edwin the Duck comes with a variety of digital technology

The \$100 Edwin the Duck, billed as the world's first "smart duck," comes packed with technology, such as motion sensors, memory, Bluetooth and LED lighting. Although it looks like a rubber duck, it's designed to do much more:

SOUND EFFECTS: Edwin quacks, gurgles and makes other sounds meant to be soothing, such as wind blowing.

WIRELESS: It connects by Bluetooth to a phone or tablet app to play games, music and interactive stories. It works with Apple and Android devices, though Android features are limited until an app update is out in the coming weeks, according to Edwin's creator.

LIGHTING: An LED light in its head turns on so it can be used as a night light while it reads a bedtime story or plays a lullaby.

MOTION SENSORS: Edwin works as a remote controller that's shaken, turned or moved up and down to make the animation duck in an app swim or fly, play games and answer quizzes.

WIRELESS SPEAKER: Edwin plays music and other audio from a

phone or other Bluetooth-connected device. Sound quality is fine for a speaker of that size.

GAMES: In one game, the child is asked to identify shapes that pop up in the companion mobile app. In another, the child moves the duck energetically up and down to make an animation version in the app swim—and win—in a race.

WATERPROOF: It does work as a regular rubber duck in a tub.

More information: Manufacturer's website: www.edwintheduck.com

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