

I Feel Kitty, Oh So Kitty

A new Web-based system drives users to shelter websites—to play with cats in real time

BY CARRIE ALLAN

It's totally obvious: Even with Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and the gazillion other niche-interest websites out there (*IHateCilantro.com*, anyone?), the Internet had barely tapped into its true procrastination potential.

Until now.

Now, thanks to an innovative tool called the iPet Companion, you—and cat-loving Web denizens everywhere—can spend hours playing with live cats, using only a few buttons on your keyboard. And since it's for a good cause—giving shelter kitties something to do, and perhaps driving up cat adoption rates into the bargain—you don't even have to feel bad about it (though if you tell your employer we said that, we will deny it).

Developed by Apriori, a robotics company in Boise, Idaho, the system wasn't initially conceived as a long-distance cat toy, says Scott Harris, the company's owner. Harris worked in the photovoltaic and semiconductor business for years, and says situations regularly crop up where something goes wrong in a control room somewhere, and engineers need to hit a "reset" button to get things restarted. Sometimes that means "driving 45 minutes at 2 A.M.," and in cases where the control room was thousands of miles away or in another country, it might involve two days of travel. Harris and his team envisioned a system that would enable the user to see the button and use robotic controls to push it, live, over the Web, potentially saving huge amounts of time and trouble for those managing distant systems.

But as they were putting the system together, Apriori staff stumbled upon the Cat Factor: "One of my guys had a cat, and we were doing testing at his house, and he says, 'You know, I'm having so much fun—but I'm not getting a lot of work done because I'm just watching my cat through the camera and messing with him,'" says Harris.

Out of the mouths of bored tech guys ...



Early prototypes of the robotic toys that are activated by the iPet Companion were shredded in no time by feisty kittens. The developers subsequently devised sturdier playthings for the active furballs.

After kicking around the idea for a while, Harris cold-called Jeff Rosenthal, executive director at the Idaho Humane Society, and the two educated each other about their respective work. Soon Apriori was at the shelter, adding robotic cat toys to its colony cat room. Now, Web surfers can play along by visiting the humane society's site, then clicking on a virtual control panel that allows them to activate the toys and watch the cats respond.

"I thought the right sort of pet for this room was going to be kittens, because kittens are going to give us more play," says Rosenthal. "The other reason ... was that this was really our first foray into colony-type housing, and kittens are so much more amenable to colony housing, I think, because they socialize so quickly versus adult cats."

Rosenthal says that the folks from Apriori learned fast that kittens are "a heck of a lot more destructive than they'd realized." Many of the toys they started with were destroyed quickly, and they've since successfully beefed up the ruggedness of the components. Harris says Apriori is working with a pet toy

maker to develop toys to use in the future build-outs.

Now, since the camera is a little warmer than the rest of the room, some of the kittens like to sleep on it. "Sometimes at night I'll look over and there'll be a kitten hanging over the camera asleep," says Rosenthal.

The iPet has been great for the Idaho shelter, Rosenthal says. "For an open-admission shelter that has an incredible success rate here in Boise, but still has old perceptions persisting among a lot of the community, it's part of that paradigm change—hey, the humane society is not a sad place, it's a fun place," he notes. Hundreds of people have logged on to play with the cats—the shelter even heard from a lady in an assisted-living facility who can't have cats of her own but loves playing with them over the Internet.

"My boss saw it and said, 'Idaho beat us to the world's coolest toy,'" laughs Barbara Baugnon, marketing communications director at the Oregon Humane Society in Portland. Apriori had decided it would do two installs pro bono, and Baugnon launched a successful campaign to make Oregon the second.

"I told him people in Portland would be very interested in this toy," she says. "I just knew they would because we're animal lovers, and we love technology." She was right, too: "I think last count we had over 30 TV stories on it, and it was on the front page of the metro section of the *Oregonian*."

Shelters that want to get in on the fun now will likely find the \$8,200 installation costs prohibitive. However, a wealthy donor looking for a worthy project to fund might be impressed by the results the iPet Companion has gotten in Portland. Since the system was installed, Baugnon says, sponsored donations to Oregon Humane were up by 37 percent, adoption of kittens up by 14 percent, and website traffic up by 52 percent.

Not bad for a gadget that may destroy your work productivity for weeks. **AS**