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Tickle Me Elmo With an Inferiority Complex

The Needies want you to want them . . . or else—just like real-life obsessives

by CHRIS ZIEGLER

Once upon a time, there was Tickle Me Elmo. But this year's hottest holiday toy might just be the Needies, the gift that keeps on taking: a codependent stuffed animal with a supersophisticated computer brain that lets it know when you're paying attention to it . . . and when you're not. That's when a Needie gets jealous. And that's when the guilt trips start. It's a very New York City kind of doll, say designers Daniel Perlin, Brett Schultz and Amos Bloomberg, all recent graduates of an NYU program in interactive telecommunications. The Needies are Furbys with an inferiority complex, or the cast of *Seinfeld* in stuffed-animal form.



Three soft plushy characters and some dolls.
Photo by James Bunoan

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"Our pitch is that everybody loves to be loved and needs to be needed," says Perlin. "The Needies are for people with love to give, or people who need love. Which is everyone."

Which means that the Needies—available in Dannie, Brettie and Mossie models, each with the exaggerated personality and recorded voice of one of the designers—will probably make millions. Like Furbys, Needies respond to attention, "talking" to their owners with an admirable blend of kid-friendly cheer and adult-friendly wit. Unlike Furbys or AIBOs or dusty old Teddy Ruxpins, however, Needies sense and respond to other Needies. They get possessive. They get mean: "Better wash your hands after touching THAT one," sniffs Brettie (the cruelest Needie) when Mossie gets a hug.

Naturally, it's quite flattering to have someone fight just to be near you, even if it's just a pillow and some microchips. There's already been massive online response, from "cute!" to "profoundly disturbing" to "[not] necessarily Satanic." But it's an idea that's instantly intriguing: a computer that loves you enough to want you all to itself, and that gets upset when you're paying attention to the other Needies instead. Simply: a toy that makes you feel, well, needed. By any means necessary: "Throw him!" squawks Brettie as Dannie gets squeezed. "THROW HIM!"

The Needies team—known as Codependent Designs—use the term "bleeding-edge" to describe their toy, and they're right. Emotions are the last real frontier of robot research; as artificial intelligence grows more and more sophisticated, it develops a concurrent capacity for artificial emotions. British futurologist Ian Pearson predicts superhuman machine consciousness—a computer that can think and feel—before 2020. "It would definitely have emotions," he told the *Observer*. "That's one of the primary reasons for doing it. If I'm on an aeroplane I want the computer to be more terrified of crashing than I am so it does everything to stay in the air until it's supposed to be on the ground."

But this sort of research is directed toward something very un-Needie. These are robots able to sense and interpret emotions, like a robot car in Japan programmed to identify and calm an angry driver, or a Vanderbilt University project to create a combat buddy-bot able to call for help when its human comrades are too upset to act. Yet these robots have no emotions of their own—they are simply emotionally literate. The buddy-bot, for example, would react to human fear yet never manifest any fear of its own. Or these are robots, like Pearson's robot aircraft, gifted with emotions for constructive purposes. A healthy fear of crashing—a rational, purposeful emotion. No one is working on an airplane that is capable of feeling unloved, or a battle buddy that gets jealous if the commander is paying more attention to the human troops. Which is to say: no one is designing robots to be emotionally flawed from the moment they are turned on—to be perpetually unhappy.

"Not unhappy," corrects Perlin. "Unsatisfied."

But if you left a Needie alone and never turned it off?

"There's the potential for eternal dissatisfaction," says Perlin. This is the bleeding edge of robo-psychology, too, almost tangent to science fiction. Perlin thinks of a story by Ray Bradbury: "There Will Come Soft Rains," about an automated house that survives a nuclear war, pouring coffee and making toast each morning for humans that have long since died. ("Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree/If mankind perished utterly," goes the poem that lent the story its title.) That's a Needie house, says Perlin: "It needs humans. And if there weren't humans, Needies would still keep going."

Perpetually unsatisfied, of course. Almost a Calvinist stuffed animal, its destiny preordained. (Do the Needies have free will? "No doubt," smiles Bloomberg. "We programmed it right in!") Beneath the novelty of the Needies is a morass of psychology and philosophy, the sort of issues one might find not in Bradbury but in Philip K. Dick: As our machines become more human-like, do we ourselves become more machine-like? The Needies are designed to respond to touch because that's precisely the element their designers felt was missing from their own lives, with actual human contact minimized by mediating technologies (like cell phones or messenger software) that pinch social interaction down to a basic exchange of information. Which is a very machine-like way to interact. As Dick wrote: "We and our elaborately evolving computers may meet each other halfway."

But since the Needies have yet to go into mass production—Codependent Designs is still looking for a manufacturer—no one's needed to ask these questions yet. Except the designers themselves, who wonder exactly what sort of response a million Needies might provoke. And who have already discovered a therapeutic aspect to the Needies they didn't expect.

"It's so much easier to recognize this sort of codependent behavior in ourselves now that it's been amplified in the Needies," says Schultz.

"And all of three of us," says Perlin, "are currently in incredibly healthy relationships."

CHECK WWW.NEEDIES.COM FOR MORE INFO ON THE NEEDIES.

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