

Toys Go Digital, Toys Go Green, But Do Kids Go Along?

by Tiffany Young, Monday, Feb 25, 2008 5:00 AM ET

ONCE UPON A TIME, BEFORE Al Gore invented the Internet, kids played with toys in the real world. It was a dark and dismal world where kids had to use rotary telephones to call friends and ask if they could come over to play. (If your friend had a lot of 9s in her phone number, it could take *forever* to call them!) Rarely was a child seen LOLing or ROFLMAOing. Procuring toys was difficult, too. You had to circle them one by one in the pages of a Sears catalog and wait for Santa to bring them to you. But there were a few bright spots in pre-Internet toys, starting with breakfast.

At last week's International Toy Fair, several reporters noted a "craze" in toys with pass codes to virtual worlds that allow kids to play in whole new way. You've heard the names: Webkinz, Barbie, Littlest Pet Shop VIP and more are diving headfirst into the digital pool in 2008. The real-world toy with online component model is a great way to extend a brand to kids who spend more and more time online. Even breakfast cereals have replaced the toy at the bottom of the box with a code that unlocks games online. Some toy companies are starting to use toys to teach kids about the importance of community and protecting the environment. Pretty heavy stuff, for toys. But unlike the not-fun plant offer in my vintage Life cereal box, current toys are getting it right. Let's take a look at two examples: Xeko and Karito Kids.

With eco-friendly missions in Madagascar, Costa Rica and now Indonesia, Xeko trading cards are designed to increase awareness about biodiversity hotspots. Xeko donates 4% of net proceeds to Conservation International, and the game is made from 100% recycled materials, including its packaging. Kids can even recycle the booster pack wrappers to earn "green stars" that unlock wallpapers and screensavers on xeko.com. Are kids digging the game? Amy Tucker at Xeko says: "Absolutely. Kids are curious by nature, and when they learn that the animals in Xeko are real, they light up. We've designed Xeko to be wildly fun as well as chock full of interesting facts about threatened habitats and how important it is to save them."

Another example, Karito Kids, puts kids in charge of giving back. Karito ['ka-ree'-toe] is Esperanto, meaning "charity and love of one's neighbor." Karito Kids by KidsGive are dolls and books built on the philosophy that children around the world, given the chance, will want to help each other. When you buy a doll and book, they come with a code kids can input at karitokids.com to give 3% of the retail price back to kids for education, healthcare, clean water and more. Kids decide how they want to spend their 3% donation and earn more "World Change" by playing games and activities on the site. It's a pretty neat experience to empower kids to give back, and it recently won Toy of the Year from Family Fun.

Clearly, toys have changed over the years. And, really, so have kids. Xeko and Karito Kids are just two examples of where toys are headed next. In a digital world with immediate access to everything, old toys just won't do. Kids deserve interactive, engaging toy experiences that change and grow over time.

And if they can learn more about the world while they play, all the better. Toys that utilize offline and online channels to help kids take control of their world in new, meaningful ways- while remembering to make them LOL once in awhile-are well poised to become tomorrow's eBay phenomena.