

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.

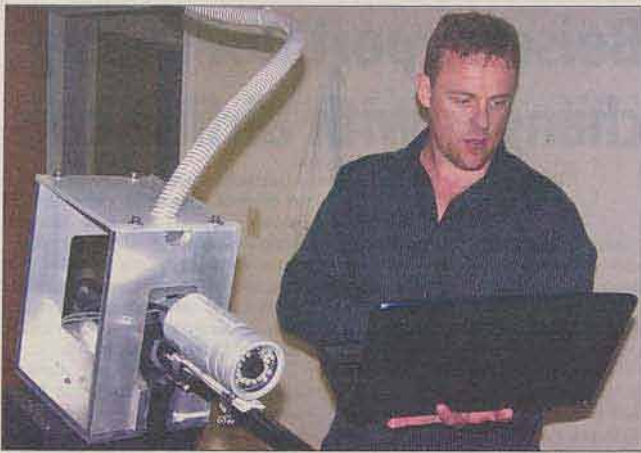
The iPet has been great for the Idaho shelter, Rosenthal says. "For an open-admission shelter that has an incredible success rate here in Boise, but still has old perceptions persisting among a lot of the community, it's part of that paradigm change—hey, the humane society is not a sad place, it's a 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 Bagnon, marketing communications director at the Oregon Humane Society in Portland. Apriori had decided it would do two installs pro bono, and Bagnon 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, Bagnon 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. 🐾



ALLEN/IBR

Scott Harris has developed technology that enables users to shoot the paintball gun in real time from anywhere in the world with a Wi-Fi connection. His Boise-based company, Apriori, is developing the product for Internet gaming and other applications.

Boise inventor blazes new trail on the Web

By Anne Wallace Allen
IDAHO BUSINESS REVIEW

Inventor Scott Harris has worked 15-hour days for more than a year to produce something he believes nobody else has: a Web platform for moving things remotely from any place on the planet that has sufficient broadband.

Now Harris, 36, is in search of the highest and best use for his hardware controller. Meanwhile, he's testing it out in a variety of low-key settings, from shooting paintballs at volunteers in Humane Society cages across the continent.

"It's the marrying of virtual and reality," said Harris of his product, developed by the company he started and owns, Apriori LLC.

People have been moving hardware components from a distance for decades. Robotics technology is now common in many fields. Kids can steer inexpensive remote-controlled cars down the sidewalk; the military uses satellite technology for an array of sophisticated unmanned devices, including mine sweepers and airplanes. Medical robots are controlled from the next room, not from halfway around the world.

But Harris' Web platform is the first, he said, that allows anyone with a computer connection to move certain things in real time.

The key is that there's usually a 7- to 20-second delay on other similar Internet-based applications, said Doug Stone, an engineer with an electronics company in Albuquerque, N.M., who worked with Harris as he was developing his product.

"Scott and his group have made something via the Internet that can appear instantaneous," Stone said.

"It's kind of hard for most people to appreciate it because they don't really understand that distinction" regarding delay time with Internet-based platforms like the one Harris has developed, Stone said. "In a lot of applications it doesn't really matter if you have a delay or not. If you want to open your security gate at work from home, the delay doesn't matter."

But the delay matters for things like live-action remote paintball — a concept

that Harris actually tried, with volunteers gleaned from Craigslist, in November at a studio he set up at a Boise bar. The shooters operated the arrow keys on their laptops to fire paintballs at volunteers in padded clothing.

And the shooters could have been anywhere with good broadband connectivity, Harris said. His tagline for that event: "Go Home. Log on. Take aim."

Somehow, people from as far away as Turkey, Singapore and Italy heard the summons during that two-day paintball trial, and did just that.

"The Internet is a very mysterious thing," said Harris.

A more accessible example of the technology at work is Harris' pro bono installation at the Idaho Humane Society.

To ease the boredom of animals awaiting adoption, Humane Society Director Jeffrey Rosenthal had Harris set up some moving objects such as swinging strings in a room devoted to cats.

Visitors to the Humane Society's Web site — or to the Apriori site — can watch the cats in the room and press buttons to make things move for them to play with. From comments on the site, Harris knows people in England have been making the cats in Boise jump for the string.

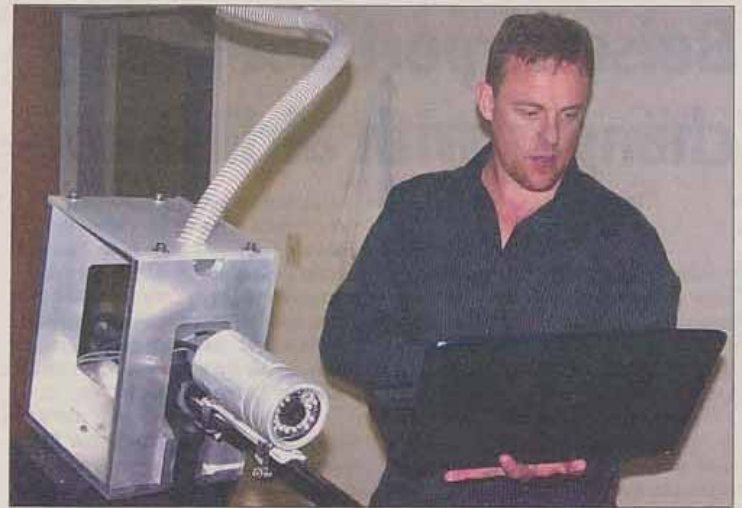
"There's a big potential for his technology in research and in zoos, in fundraising," said Rosenthal. "There's an entertainment aspect to this. It's something that hopefully will draw people to our Web site. And hopefully they'll adopt cats, maybe they'll volunteer for us, maybe they'll adopt our animals."

Harris sees endless possibilities. One of his favorites is the thought of a kid in North Dakota feeding a giraffe at a zoo in Africa. Meanwhile, he has orders from seven other Humane Societies in several other cities across the United States. He's speaking at the United States Humane Society Association annual meeting next spring.

"People are willing to spend a lot of money to keep their animals entertained," said Rosenthal.

Ultimately, Harris believes his technology will go far beyond paintball and stray cats.

"The Humane Society is one sliver of the possibilities of controlling anything over the Web," Harris said.



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Boise inventor blazes new trail on the Web



JOE JASZEWSKI / jjaszewski@idahostatesman.com

Scott Harris has hired several people for his year-old startup, Apriori, which lets people control remote devices via computer. The latest example of his work is called iPet Companion at the Idaho Humane Society. People can use their home computers to watch the felines and operate cat toys in a kitten room. Harris has tested the system from locations in Australia, Italy, Switzerland and Singapore.



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Tech company makes it possible to play with shelter kittens via webcam

November 11, 2010 | 7:51 pm

Users In Queue: 3

Approx. Wait Time: 0:49



SEATTLE — A company that has developed technology for controlling remote robotic arms over the Internet has adapted the system so that people around the world can play remotely with kittens.

The company first tested its system by building a paintball shooting gallery. But while Apriori Control, a tiny Boise, Idaho-based company, waits for paying customers, it's putting its systems through their paces at animal shelters in the West.

Scott Harris, head of Apriori, thought the systems would be used to meld real-world and online gaming, or as part of military

training. A "beta" test drew more than 2,300 people to a website to shoot a paintball gun by pressing computer keys and watch their results splatter in real time.

Afterward, Apriori went to work on software improvements. It also decided to donate time and spare equipment to a good -- and very cute -- cause.

The [Idaho Humane Society](#) and the [Oregon Humane Society](#) now have kitten play rooms equipped with cat toys attached to robotic arms. Web surfers can visit the animal adoption groups' websites, download a browser plug-in and get in line for a turn at moving the toys. While they wait, they can watch over a live webcam as others try to catch the kitties' attention with a flick or bounce of the toy.

The system isn't flawless; a reporter visiting the Oregon site, which went online at the end of September, had trouble with her computer freezing during installation of the plug-in, which requires Internet Explorer and a Windows computer. Once the technology was running smoothly, the kittens weren't -- apparently, kittens can nap through just about anything.

The company has been approached with pitches for "adult" applications, which Harris said he might consider "if I go broke." Harris has plenty of other ideas for future uses of the technology, though, from interactive Halloween haunted houses to dispensing medications remotely.

"I don't want to be known as, 'Apriori, the company that plays with kittens,'" Harris said.

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Sarah Jacobson Purewal - Fri Oct 8, 6:11 pm ET

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Forget LOLcats, these kitties are real--and you can interact with them in real-time! Apriori Control, in conjunction with the Idaho Humane Society and the Oregon Humane Society, has developed a website where you can interact with real cats by controlling robotic toys over the internet.

Apriori Control, a data protocol transfer company, created iPet Companion to help people connect with animals at Humane Societies shelters via robotic control. The application--which requires a one-time download--is free to use.

To play with kitties, click your way over to the Idaho Humane Society iPet Companion page or the Oregon Humane Society iPet Companion page and click the "Let's Play" paw button (at the moment, it's only available for Internet Explorer). The page will prompt you for a download, and then you will be placed in a queue. Each person gets two minutes of kitty playtime. You can control various toys by clicking the "control" buttons or by hitting the corresponding number keys. You can also move the camera around.

Sure, it's not the most useful technology we've seen, but who can resist kittens at play?! Plus, according to Apriori, these installations have helped to bring traffic to Humane Societies' websites, not to mention an increase of adoptions, donations, and save rates.

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New Kitty Technology Lets You Play With Real Cats Over the Web

Sarah Jacobsson Purewal, PCWorld Oct 8, 2010 4:11 pm

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New Technology Lets You Play With Real Cats Over the Web

Apriori's iPet Companion allows users to interact with real cats via robotic toys.

By Sarah Jacobson Purewal, PC World

October 08, 2010 06:30 PM ET

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Use robot toys to play with kitties over the internet

Posted by **John Moe** on October 11, 2010 9:16 AM

Animal shelters in [Oregon](#) and [Idaho](#) have cats available for adoption. And if you can't make it in to see them, you can play with them anyway through the internet.

You have to use Internet Explorer, download an application, wait in line, and then, when it's your turn, you get 2 minutes to play with a kitty. There are toys you can control remotely and you can move a camera around. This has apparently upped the number of visitors to the Humane Societies' websites and increased the number of kitty adoptions.

On a bizarre and vaguely menacing additional note: the company that made this system possible is working on a plan where you'll be able to feed lions at the zoo using meat attached to a robotic arm that you control. So whereas normally the phrase "the lion ate the meat off my arm!" would be a bad thing, soon it will be delightful!

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