

GIZMO

I am not a robot. I am your daddy



You can now be in two places at once. Great for parents – and princes, reports Mark Harris

Some of the world's most famous celebrities are now choosing to travel virtually, as three-dimensional, high-definition holograms. Last week Prince Charles was beamed live to Dubai to address the World Future Energy Summit. Instead of cranking up thousands of air miles and producing the estimated 15 tonnes of CO₂ that his US trip last year generated, the Prince was able to address an audience in Abu Dhabi without leaving Clarence House. And he's not the only one. Sir Richard Branson, Madonna, David

Beckham and the green evangelist Al Gore have all used the Eyeliner projection system, made by the British company Musion, to be in two places at once.

Although its lifesize, lifelike holograms look futuristic, the inspiration for Eyeliner is a stage trick more than a century old. The "Pepper's Ghost" illusion used smoke and mirrors – or, rather, a sheet of glass – to summon up spectral phantoms in Victorian theatres. Its 21st-century incarnation is far more sophisticated, of course. "Our system tensions a polymer screen up to five metres tall," says Ian O'Connell, one of Musion's directors. "This is illuminated by a hidden projector to create a 3-D image that looks as solid and realistic as a roaring fire."

The challenges involved in creating convincing, interactive holograms are immense, according to O'Connell. "We used a powerful full-HD projector and the latest TelePresence technology from Cisco to transmit HD signals over the internet."

The high-definition projection of Prince Charles used a secure broadband connection to deliver sound



The iRobot ConnectR allows remote interaction

and video that is said to have looked better than a Blu-ray movie.

One advantage of an internet-based system is that you're not limited to appearing in just one place. In Musion's Virtually Live project, starting next week, a pop band will be performing "live" in five nightclubs simultaneously.

Unsurprisingly, given its A-list clientele, the Eyeliner system isn't

cheap. While Cisco's chief executive, John Chambers, aims to bring a two-dimensional high-definition TelePresence system to homes within three years for not much more than £500, Musion's holographic setup currently costs £70,000. But a more affordable virtual doppelganger was recently unveiled by the American company iRobot, whose \$500 (£207) ConnectR robot has wheels, a video

camera and a two-way audio link, all of which can be controlled from a web-connected computer anywhere in the world.

That means travelling parents or distant relatives can still play a part in family life, driving their ConnectR round the house, swapping gossip or reading bedtime stories.

ConnectR, which is currently being trialled in the USA and should be on

sale by the summer, needs a home wi-fi network to function, and has the drawbacks that it doesn't look human and can't climb stairs.

These new technologies can't be faulted for their efforts to reduce carbon footprints, travel time and stress. But whether granny will appreciate a robot or hologram instead of an invitation to stay next Christmas is another matter.

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TECHNOLOGY NEWS

SLEIGH 'EM IN THE AISLES

Porsche Kinderbob
€77 (£58) tinyurl.com/29kij2
0049 711 9117 8823

Aspiring Le Mans drivers have to start young these days, and wintry weather should never be an excuse for them to miss their training. This super-swish downhill sled should have junior drivers (weighing up to 60kg, or about 9½ stone) steering and cornering like true professionals, thanks to the integration of a shock absorber, the use of metal runners and – that essential Porsche feature – a very loud horn.



DOCK AND LOAD

Creative Xdock HD
\$399 (£210) www.creative.com

Apple's iPod and iPhone are great for enjoying music, photos and videos on the move but are far less impressive when linked to a TV or hi-fi. This docking station has an HDMI socket for connecting it to an HD-ready television and claims to "upscale" videos bought from Apple's iTunes online store, although upscaled videos will not look as good as real high-definition digital downloads. It also boasts of improving the sound of digital music stored on the iPod to exceed CD quality. It comes with an RF-based wireless transmitter to beam tunes to speakers around your house. You also get remote control of your docked iPod via smart on-screen menus. Available in the US soon.



JUST ADD WATER

HydroPak Portable Power
\$400 (£205) www.millenniumcell.com
001 732 542 4000

The HydroPak combines two processes to generate 270 watt hours (ie, it could power a 25W bulb for more than 10 hours) from a lightweight cartridge costing \$20 (£11). You add water to trigger a chemical reaction that produces hydrogen, which is then consumed in a fuel cell to generate electricity. There are no toxic chemicals or waste products, and the unit is completely silent. The HydroPak has a standard American AC socket and two USB ports and is capable of delivering enough power to charge a laptop, run a mobile phone or provide overnight lighting. HydroPaks go on US sale this summer, aimed at campers. Unlike most battery systems, HydroPaks don't lose their power over time.



DON'T PANIC

NIGEL POWELL ANSWERS YOUR WEB-RELATED QUERIES

Q When I power-off my Windows XP PC, it goes through shutdown procedures but then restarts. Help. Tom Edwards, Ipswich

A This might be due to broken software drivers, problems with USB devices or incorrect power-saving settings. And Windows often reboots because of a system failure. Try right-clicking on My Computer, Properties, Advanced Tab. Under Startup & Recovery, click on Settings, System Failure and uncheck the Automatically Restart box. There's more detailed help at tinyurl.com/cji3

Q Every time I connect my iPod to my laptop, it says the device can perform faster with USB 2.0. How can I get this? Casper Ng, London

A USB 2.0 can be up to 40 times faster than USB 1.1, making music much quicker to transfer. D-Link's Dub-C2 card (£22) plugs into the PC-card slot found on most laptops and gives two USB 2.0 ports. But you might not see huge speed increases with all USB 2.0 devices.

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GAMES



Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom ★★
Xbox 360, £45. Age 16+

Circle of Doom is the fourth instalment of the long-running Kingdom Under Fire series. It serves up relentless hack-and-slash action in the tradition of games such as Diablo, albeit with swish 3-D visuals and an intriguing (if disjointed) plot. There's no

shortage of monsters to kill and, unlike other games of this ilk, it has a wide variety of creatures to fight so you never feel you're slaying an army of clones. At your disposal are numerous weapons, spells and armour, most of which can be upgraded by looting the battlefield after each fight.

Combat is relentless but mainly consists of continually hitting the blue or green gamepad button, and the unintuitive camera positioning results in many a frustrating death. Couple this with the simplistic maps, limited playing area and repetitive gameplay, and the result is anything but magical. Circle of Doom does have its moments, and behind all the faults there is a good game, but unless you're a diehard fan of this genre the overall experience is likely to be underwhelming. Daniel Emery



Buzz! The Schools Quiz ★★★★★
PS2, £25. Age 3+

The maker of the quiz-game series Buzz has teamed up with government experts to produce this version of the game to help children learn. It is tailored for 7 to 11-year-olds and assists them in passing key stage 2 of the national curriculum. The

cartoon-style quiz-show format and simple five-button controllers (which cost £15 extra) work in the same way as in previous Buzz games. You score points for answering questions first or for putting events in the correct order. There are various themed rounds, but the questions now cover photosynthesis or Viking culture rather than Hollywood blockbusters.

The wide range of options makes it easy for children to concentrate on their weaker subjects. The Schools Quiz is certainly no substitute for homework or proper revision, but it is a good way to reinforce what children have already learnt in class while getting the family involved. Just prepare for the odd humiliation as the 5,000-plus questions reveal embarrassing gaps in adults' knowledge too. Stuart Andrews

★★★★★ KO ★★★★★ A-OK
★★★ OK ★★ So-so ★ No-no



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