

Reach Out and Pet Someone



For those of you who've been dying to pet a chicken while you are trapped in your stuffy cubicle at work (c'mon—fess up!), researchers at the Mixed Reality Lab at the National University of Singapore have developed just what you've been waiting for.

When you switch the system on, a toy chicken near your computer comes to life, acting just like a real chicken, while its motions are filmed by a camera connected to the Internet. When you pet the mechanical chicken,

sensors on its body send signals to the computer about what you've done. These signals are then transmitted to a real chicken, which is wearing a special "haptic" jacket that lets it "feel" what you've done to your office-pet.

It may sound a little odd, but its creators have some serious uses in mind. Many sensors, for instance, are touch-deprived. The researchers are hard at work on developing a special haptic suit that could be worn by humans. People could then use it to comfort a parent who is lonely. Someone who is sick and in isolation could still feel the gentle stroke of a loved one. Road warriors are intrigued by the promise this technology holds of letting them hug their children good night while they are traveling. Police officers could remotely signal trained dogs in the pursuit of criminals. And, of course, other uses are suggested by the fact that, as currently envisaged, to cuddle someone far away, both parties would have to wear the special suit and cuddle with a doll wearing the sensors.

While the possibilities are intriguing, it is likely to take many more years of refinement



before the usability of such a system comes close to resembling the real thing. The researchers estimate, for example, that the ability to feel the texture of what you are touching remotely is at least a decade away. And it is not clear at what point the experience will become so lifelike that you could actually, as they say in the fiction business, "suspend disbelief" enough to imagine that you really are touching the remote object. **UX**

—Tema Frank

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Nice Art

I just wanted to tell you that yesterday I received the new *UX* issue and I read it cover to cover. I have one word for you and the team: Wow! Keep up the great work! Aside from the great content, I really appreciate the (finally) highly improved graphic design. Thanks.



Tomer Sharon
Usability Expert

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UX in the Boardroom

A note from the *Does Size Matter?* blog, <http://sizematter.blogspot.com/2005/06/ux-in-board-room.html>

I just received the summer 2005 issue of *User Experience* magazine from the UPA (oddly it doesn't feel like summer here in New Zealand). The cover is about "Moving into the Executive Suite."

Though I'm a fan of usability and of compelling design, I have never been keen on the term "user experience," which sounds woolly minded. (Or maybe it's that it sounds too much like the Jimi Hendrix Experience.) Now, I can imagine UX being the next boardroom fad (we always need a new one), with dazed line staff being told that headquarters wants

to increase user experience outputs. It has the makings of a Dilbert cartoon.

Michael Andrews
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Editor's Response

Michael Andrews noted from his wintery location in New Zealand that we had time-stamped a recent issue of *UX* as our Summer 2005 issue. Clearly we were guilty of a "hemisphero" (akin to a "typo"). We have taken steps to correct this oversight. Think globally, act globally.

P.S. For more of Michael's thoughts on moving into the executive suite, see <http://michaelandrews.blogspot.com/2005/06/user-centered-design-strategy-or.html>