

From 'Greetings from Here!' to VoiceNotes Vaakku



01: The original prototype for the concept of Greetings From Here!.

Exploring the Practices of VoiceNotes
as Part of Informal Family Communications

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Small written notes are popular elements of informal family communications: "Hi mom! I went out, I'll be back at 5." 'Greetings from Here!' started as a test case project in the Mediaspaces project and was brought under the ADIK project to explore how VoiceNotes could enhance the practise of making informal announcements or reminders as part of family communications.

Greetings from Here! focuses on the communication between children spending their days in kindergartens and their parents and on better understanding the social practises and needs related to family communication and coordination when it comes to making small notes, to recording voice messages for themselves and/or for each other.

In the context of Greeting from Here! these questions were explored by developing a working prototype of a toy having the capacity to record, playback and send voice messages as e-mail attachments. The audio toy consists of a toy character acting as a conveyor of audio information, thus as an agent for storytelling and conversation. The character has a built-in audio recorder/player allowing the child to capture sound. The animal can be connected to a computer whereby the recorded audio can be edited. The outcome of this processing can then be exported back to the toy. The audio sequence can also be e-mailed to a friend. It can be stored as a memory fragment or as part of a collection, "Memories from Childhood" (Greetings from Here! was first shown at Media Lab's demo day in May 2005).

Toys are the media of play. The digital nature of our everyday environment is transforming toys and play by allowing old toys to become smarter, new toys to emerge and all toys to be connected. There will be new ways of playing and narration. Play can be seen as an information management and sense-making tool utilized by children, helping them to both individually and collectively construct a sense of their world and the ways in which it works. Play can be seen as the metadesign proposed by Brenda Dervin (Dervin 1999): children assisting each other to make and unmake their information, as individuals who can share the ways by which they have coped individually and collectively with order and chaos. Play involves issues like storytelling, memory management and conversation, and toys are the tools.

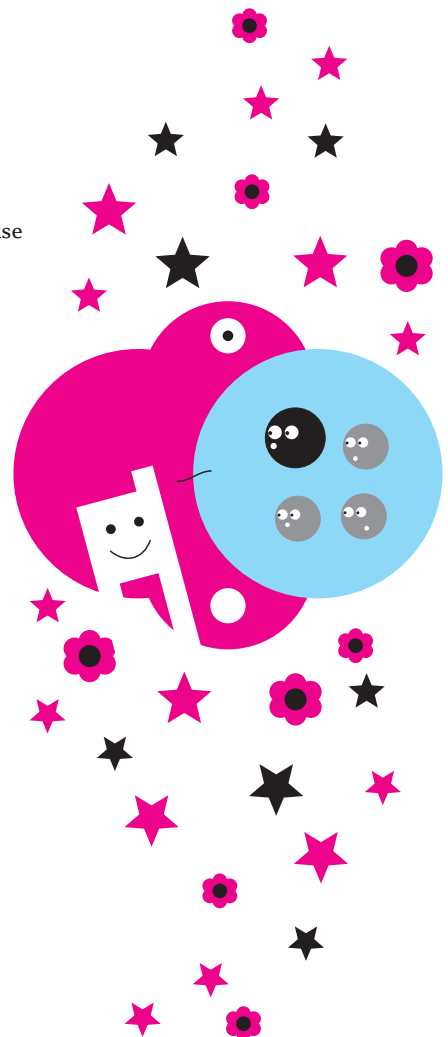
The purpose of the prototype was to explore and encourage children not only to store their narratives and play but to share them with others. By sending their narratives and ideas to their parents or friends they can share their daily routines with them and thus invite them to a conversation, share their ways of making sense of their environment or allow the emergence of new social situations.



02: Whispering a message in the ear of the toy.

In fact, the social situations in which children are involved started to emerge as an interesting direction for the research. Distributed families, for example, represent an important design challenge requiring a re-framing of the user and exploration of their specific needs. For example children living with one of their parents at a time do maintain their close relationship with the non-present parent as well. This means, of course, that they are willing to share their experiences and stories regardless of their physical location. Therefore, a toy can represent a way to deal with the potentially awkward social situations related to dis-united family structures.

03: The toy creates a VoiceNote in the database and displays it on a website.

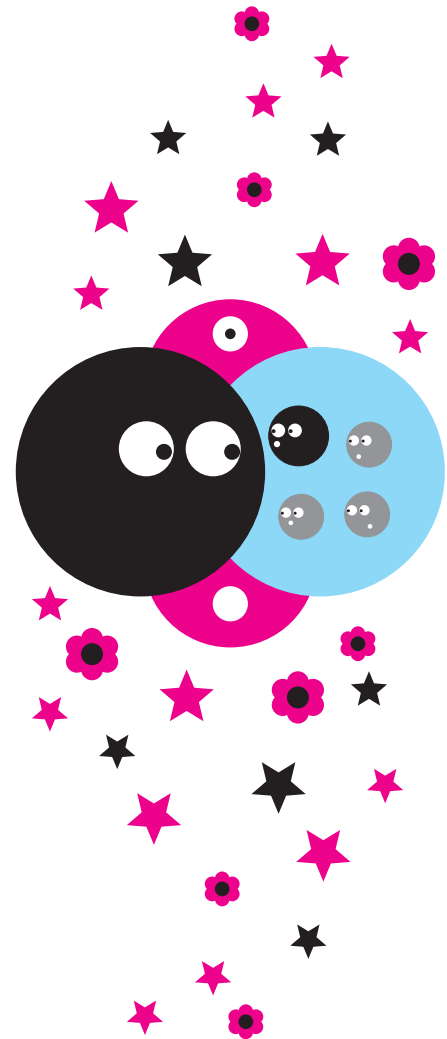


Because of the mobile nature of the social environment, the toy also needs to be mobile. And it needs to be easily operable by children, without the assistance of a grown-up. As a result the concept of Greetings from Here! was revised and a new iteration of the prototype made. Vaakku, as the new toy interface was called, is based on the same concept but has different software components; is small in size thanks to a hacked mobile terminal; and is intuitively manipulated by the children to create messages, due to its simple design.

The vulnerable looking goose-like character soon became the favourite toy of the children involved in the trial!

References:

Brenda Dervin *"Chaos, Order, and Sense-Making: A Proposed Theory for Information Design"* in Jacobson, Robert, (ed.) *Information Design*. The MIT Press, 1999.



04: The VoiceNote is accessible by the parent(s) and can be listened to in a suitable situation.



05: The new mobile prototype Vaakku.