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GADGETS To Win Kids Back, Toy Maker Taps Tablet and Phone Apps

By JARED NEWMAN | @OneJaredNewman | January 4, 2012



It's a familiar refrain among parents of young children: Kids don't want to play with toys anymore because they'd rather play games on an iPad or a smartphone.

Now, some toy makers are trying to adapt by fusing phone and tablet apps with store-bought toys. One of these companies, WowWee Toys, recently showed me some of their prototypes as part of a toy line they're calling "App Gear."

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The nice thing about WowWee's approach is that many of its toys aren't empty gimmicks, but integral parts of the game. For example, one game for the iPad and Android tablets called Zombie Burb requires an undead plastic figurine—to be available in 4-packs for \$10 each—that the player holds at the bottom of the screen. The figurine serves as the player's avatar, moving around the screen while hurling projectiles at mean-spirited humans with the press of an on-screen button. But here's the twist: Players can rotate the figurine left and right to change the direction of fire. That little game mechanic could only be possible through a physical object on the top of the screen. Furthermore, each figurine has its own set of special abilities.



Another example is App Commander, a game played with a smartphone or iPod Touch mounted to a toy gun. Pull the trigger, and you can fire at alien foes without anything touching the phone's screen. Unlike competitor AppToyz, whose AppBlaster gun uses little plastic extensions to tap on the screen, WowWee's gun transmits signals to and from the phone through an audio cable, freeing up the entire display for action. The game requires you to point the gun in all

directions to fend off aliens, using the phone's camera to paint your real-world surroundings as the backdrop.

Not all of WowWee's prototypes wowed me. A game called Alien Jailbreak, in which players tap the screen to shoot enemies around a cube placed on flat surface, seemed overly complicated and I had trouble getting the camera to stay focused on the action. Another augmented reality shooter called Foam Fighters allows players to attach foam airplanes to their phones, creating the effect of a full-sized fighter jet at the bottom of the screen, but aside from that cosmetic effect, the planes themselves don't do much to enhance the game.

I also didn't get to see everything that WowWee is cooking up. One game, called Mysterious Ray Gun, is a collection of parts that can be assembled into unique weapons. Players can scan in these weapons through image recognition, and then use them to fight enemies in the game. Another product, Akodomon, will try to be like Pokemon with real-world collectible monsters, which can be nurtured and bred for battle in the game.

WowWee's not the only company trying to create app toys. Its biggest competitor might be Disney, whose Appmates toys based on the movie Cars allow players to race collectible vehicles on top of the screen. But by creating a whole line of toys, WowWee is hoping to start a new product category that retailers can lump together, making them easier to find. If that's what it takes to get kids excited about toy stores instead of app stores, so be it.

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