

Ghosts of Christmas future?

Patrick

The Winter Holiday season, or Christmas as it's still sometimes called, offers all sorts of opportunities for inventiveness. Carols don't need to be sung of course now that we have the mp3 player and portable speakers. How about a civic-scale Christmas tree formed from a swarm of bioluminescent micro-helicopters?

Mark

You're missing the point of carol singing. Physically, singing is meant to raise your spirits and is an opportunity of showing off a little - just in case some producer, working for the X Factor, is in the congregation. I therefore propose a compromise, a 'mass' Karaoke machine, with multi-mikes.

Bio-what! Would not the 'tree-spirit' make good his escape, via one of the helicopters? For that reason, as they invariably utter on 'Dragons Den' (TV), 'I'm out'. Even so, you have hit upon a very commercial area, be it seasonal, **Christmas trees**. There is certainly an uncommonly good environmental argument for not using real trees, so my simple solution follows:

Collapsible (for storage), cheap and no mess Christmas trees are very popular. I would make mine out of polypropylene sheeting and, print on it, whilst flat, a dressed Christmas tree scene. Crafted into a three-dimensional geometric cone shape, seam welded or stitched, so the artwork emulated a normal dressed tree from top to bottom, 360%. Weighted it at the large end, using a foldable attached plastic ring (similar to collapsible reflectors, used by photographers) to help keep its end shape. The pointed end would have an attachment for hanging it from the ceiling, with either an angel, or star, to conceal the rope/wire. By hanging it, it avoids the need for an expensive pole and stand - also light-weights it for cheaper postage. Add some internal lighting, 8 or 9 placed holes, evenly positioned around the cone, with hooks above each one, for the bobbles to attach and fit into. Starting the first hole near the top and spiralling downwards (like a DNA model) to fit in with the trees branch artwork and, hey presto - you have an instant tree! It's so simple it must have been done this way before. If so, a patent search and pouring through old Christmas catalogues should pick this up.

Patrick

Santa will no doubt be avoiding volcanoes and considering his carbon hoofprints more than usual this year. Perhaps he'll be distributing presents in the form of digital vouchers for virtual goods -sent to your avatar in online worlds. Certainly the sleigh will need an upgrade to electric drive (reindeer instead of turkey, anyone?)

Mark

It will be 'reining' deer, as well as ash, then. I cannot see Santa going green - wouldn't that make him an Elf? He'll be better served with a 'hard-top' sledge, rather than electric, conversion, to avoid ash/sand-blasted cheeks.

The digital vouchers and virtual goods route is for people with little, or no imagination and, no time to spare (like most of us). This is what is also conveyed to the recipient.

Patrick

For those of us left in unaugmented (and usually slushy) reality, gift giving always presents its challenges. I'd like to recruit a desktop scanner to model the 3-D shape of all presents so that an optimal piece of wrapping paper can be cut out (with fold lines marked on the inside surface and glue strips sprayed at the correct locations).

Mark

It sounds like over engineering to me, unless you are very generous or own a gift-shop. As a fee paying upmarket service, it does have commercial merit, particularly if you can personalise the wrapping paper. Although it would cause a just-in-time production bottle-neck on Christmas Eve, when all us chaps buy our presents.

Patrick

There is a big problem with people overeating during the festive season -often it seems because they aren't paying [attention](#) to their meals I therefore suggest a pair of XmaSpex -glasses to be worn by people interested in eating more healthily at Yultide. These have wrap-around opaque 'lenses' which allow the wearer to look down on his or her plate but not elsewhere. They would look like conventional (cool) sunglasses and allow the diner to take part in conversation but also encourage them to concentrate on the taste and texture of the food (so that they will be much more aware of when they are about to become more stuffed than the turkey).

Mark

Christmas is an indulgent time, that's part of its charm - it's a holiday. Over eating is part of that and you certainly do not want to disappoint the cook. Anyway, putting on a few pounds on over the festive season inspires you to go to the gym in January (one months training, out of twelve, is better than nothing). I also disagree with your take on sunglasses. They are meant for outdoors and, never look cool inside unless you are the Blues Brothers.

Patrick

With companies like Ponoko and Sparkfun there to help, consumers are just about at the stage of being able to design and manufacture combined electronic/mechanical products for themselves -using a replicator machine on their kitchen tables. Perhaps by next Christmas, you'll be able to

download personalised plans for all those mobile devices and see them emerge, shiny and functionally perfect on Christmas Eve...or perhaps the usual battle with seasonal shopping crowds will still be mandatory? Enter the shop-bot. The warehouses of big box stores are increasingly automated anyway, so imagine a future in which you send your autonomous vehicle to an automated store (which already knows about your requirement for a giant TV via which to catch up on all those space operas). The car docks with the store and your purchase is placed by the store's conveyor straight into its boot. Think Argos, but without the jostling.

Mark

Being able to design and manufacture for yourself, using replicator machines, excites me. It's the future and is likely to expand into the norm, as machine prices fall, within 5 years. I reviewed, for the IET, a fictional book called 'Makers', by a Canadian called Cory Doctorow, based around this subject and strangely enough, it also had an overeating main character, who may of benefited from your XmaSpex. I still have a vivid vision, from the book, of his description of obese people, as 'desexed marshmallows with faces like inflatable toys' and the only Brit mentioned 'with rat-like front teeth and bad breath'. This made me wonder if he was locked in a dark cupboard by a fat British uncle as a boy.

The 'shop-bot' idea, e.g. Argos, but without the frills - if that is possible, is not new. I am sure it was mentioned on a Tomorrows World programme (TV), way back in the 70's, as something we would all have in ten years time. Some aspects of the future are taking longer to arrive than expected!

Patrick

In terms of toys, I fancy modifying a doll to incorporate two small microphones connected to an Arduino controller. This would direct the eyes to move towards the source of any new noise...guaranteed to keep the attention of my Nintendobsessive seven year-old (for about as long, anyway, as the Queen's speech usually does).

Mark

My young niece was very scared of a clown ornament we had. Doll's eyes that followed her around the room, would have spooked her even more. If the doll does others things, like sing and dance in your direction at the same time, it may work but, and it's a big but, it is a bit like giving a kid a drum, you are making a rod for your own back or the parents. Children should be seen and not heard and need no extra encouragement to make noise.

Patrick

Christmas crackers provide a pretty harmless icebreaker at festive events: vying for plastic junk and wearing silly hats makes intrafamilial conflict marginally less likely. So, how about an electronic upgrade? Each table

would have only a few cracker devices: basically a plastic tube with a female USB connection at both ends. Diners would bring their own usb memory sticks to the table and insert these in pairs into the cracker. Two guests at a time would then attempt to withdraw their thumbdrives.

Just as with real crackers, the winner would be the guest who supplied mostly nearly the optimal tension vs time profile (Pull too hard or too gently and you come second). This would be monitored by the cracker itself which would release the loser's stick, generate a loud cracking noise (via eg a .wav file), a short pulse of light and display a message on a screen on the cracker's side saying "Congratulations." It would then equip the winner to read a displayed joke aloud and pass a prize url to his/her memory device...allowing a small prize to be claimed later online. It might even take a quick snap of the smiling victor.

Two, preloaded, compressed paper hats would also be spat onto the table each time, made perhaps from sliced paper mesh (as in expandable metal [sheets](#)). Everyone could get to pull a cracker with everyone else and there would be much less cleaning up required of the resulting waste paper.

Mark

I liked the idea of reusable crackers to reduce waste, but not your high tech, alienate Granny (bring your own usb stick) solution. Why make something that is easy and fun, complex and boring?

My solution

I suggest using stronger reinforced plastic sheets rolled into three tubes, one being slightly larger (for the middle section) with an internal male 'Velcro' strip, sawn into the inside, in two off central positions. This leaves a compartment in the middle when the two end rolls are inserted. Add your own prize, joke and hat in this area and then insert the other, tailored to the normal shape of a cracker, smaller tubes. Their two ends having a female 'Velcro' end, to be captured in the main tube, and internal plastic caps (to create the sealed compartment).

As they are pulled apart, in the ritual, only one side will give way and will also make an audible pop (being close fitting). My only reservation is how will we be able to gauge how posh people are, as exposed by their crackers, the way we do presently?

<http://lifehacker.com/5614939/keep-your-eyes-on-your-food-to-avoid-overeating>

<http://www.ponoko.com/make-and-sell/electronics>

<http://kn.theiet.org/magazine/issues/0921/books-0921.cfm>

Mark Sheahan: www.squeezeopen.com

Patrick Andrews: <http://iotd.patrickandrews.com>

A search carried out by the British Library Research Service (www.bl.uk/research) on 'Hanging Christmas Tree' revealed 4 patents, US6350499(B1), US2006186300(A1), US6435463(B1) and US4106228(A1). Re-usable Christmas Crackers revealed 3 patents, WO2007065194, GB2383000 and GB2243306, which can all be viewed on Espacenet. Readers can send their own thoughts to engtechmag@theiet.org

