



Nathan Johnson, son of Tuck professor M. Eric Johnson, director of the school's Center for Digital Strategies, plays with a Kid-Tough digital cam-

era made just for kids at the center's "Top Tech Toys" for 2006 demonstration on Thursday.
VALLEY NEWS — JAMES M. PATTERSON

'Is That Cool or What?'

Tuck's Center for Digital Strategies Demonstrates Year's Best Tech Toys

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HANOVER — You probably know about a few of them. Indeed, you may be thinking about pitching a tent at the mall to beat the stampede to buy, say, the latest, extreme incarnation of Tickle Me Elmo, the way toy-shoppers were lining up for Sony Playstation 3 gaming console last week.

Or maybe you're scanning buy.com or atomicpark.com or eBay in hopes of scoring one or two Nintendo DS video games or Fisher-Price's Kid-Tough digital cameras during your — or your boss's — lunch hour.

Unless you're a real technophile, though, or an intune 11-year-old, you might not have heard of some of the other top tech toys for the coming kids' gift-giving season, as rated by a group of MBA candidates at Dartmouth College's Tuck School of Business.

At least not yet.

Take the Fly Pentop Computer, one of three products in the Tuck ratings from a company called LeapFrog. That is, if you can pry the computer-in-a-pen, designed for ages 8-14, from the far-from-cold, far-from-dead hand of professor M. Eric Johnson.

Last week in his office at Tuck's Center for Digital Strategies, a few hours before the students in Tuck's MBA fellowship program unveiled their favorite toys

at a benefit for the local Toys for Tots campaign, Johnson was demonstrating the Pentop — and smiling like a kid under the Christmas tree. The Pentop, which retails at around \$100, was reading aloud while he passed it over the diagram of a calculator keyboard that he'd just drawn on a piece of paper — numbers, equal sign and symbols for addition, subtraction and multiplication.

"Is that cool or what?" Johnson said. "This is almost unimaginable to me, even a couple of years ago. ... To get it at a price point that people would buy, that's where the real magic comes in."

That's the magic his MBA fellows were looking for

See TUCK—E5



Tuck student Kristen Rolf of Birmingham, Mich., feeds Baby Alive! as Hannah Johnson of Lyme, 11, and MBA fellow Allan P. Hui of the Center for Digital Strategies watch during Thursday's demonstration

of the "Top Tech Toys" of the year. Hannah's father, Tuck professor M. Eric Johnson, is the director of the Center for Digital Strategies.

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Tuck Center Demonstrates Top Tech Toys for 2006

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while scrutinizing hundreds of toys in department stores and on Web sites. Some, like Butter-scotch, a plush pony from Hasbro's menagerie of interactive Fur Real Friends, were reluctantly bounced from the list.

"From what we have seen, it has a lot of cool technology," second-year MBA fellow Allan P. Hui wrote in an e-mail message last week. "But at prices much greater than \$250, we don't think many parents would be willing to spend that amount."

Indeed, the Nintendo DS Lite, which goes for about \$130 minus accessories and is aimed at ages 7 and older, costs the most among toys on the list. For plush toys aimed at infants of 6 months and up, the students picked LeapFrog's \$20 Hug and Learn Baby Tad, a plush frog that sings songs for different times of the day, depending on which quilted symbol you push on its chest.

"I think it's important to encourage interactivity when playing with tech toys," Hui said in his e-mail. "This can be done by intentional toy design using existing technology such as sensors and actuators. Toys interacting with other toys could encourage kids with toy A to play with kids with toy B. This is win-win because kids would interact and play in different ways, and at the same time, toy companies can expect these types of toys to market themselves virally: 'He's got one, I should get one so our toys can interact.'"

Johnson, who has consulted with and written case studies on Mattel and Hasbro, and whose books include *Learning From Toys: Lessons in Managing Supply Chain Risk from the Toy Indus-*

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try, Hui and the rest of the Tuck fellows are as interested in the way toy manufacturers think and act as the way kids think and act.

"We've been studying the toy industry for a while now," said Johnson while a cow mooed from the barn housing Leap Frog's menagerie of Fridge Farm refrigerator magnets. "Toys are kind of like fruit flies. Biologists study fruit flies, which tend to have a short life span, and we study toys."

Tuck often brings executives and experts from high-tech companies like Cisco Systems and Hewlett-Packard to meet the grad students, and "we feel these companies can learn a lot by looking at toy companies," Johnson said.

Hui, for example, thinks they could learn a lot from the Kid-Tough digital camera, a sturdy, purple-plastic-encased device with a minimum of buttons that sells for about \$70.

"I was surprised by it not because of the technology (it's been around for almost 10 years) but the business concept — taking an old technology and repackaging it for kids who love to take pictures," Hui said. "Before the toy, parents hesitat-

ed (in) letting children put their hands on the \$200-\$300 family digital camera. Now, parents can let the children run free. ... The toy allows children to go wild with creativity and allows the parent to see through the eyes of the child, which parents often don't see, and collect them digitally."

In the process of looking through those eyes, the students also are looking through the eyes of the toymakers for lessons of their own.

"They stake everything on this product they're going to kick off next Friday (the day after Thanksgiving), till December 23 or so," Johnson said. "There are companies where 90 percent of their sales are going to occur during that time."

"I think it's one of the riskiest businesses out there."

Hasbro, for example, is rolling the dice that the mothers of kids ages 3-5 will remember a doll of the early and mid-1970s, fondly enough to buy the 21st-century incarnation for \$50.

"Where's my baby?" Johnson said, racing to another part of the office to scoop up Baby Alive! — a be-bibbed, blond girl with big blue eyes, long dark lashes on moveable eyelids. She burps, says, "Excuse me!" and wears a disposable diaper that she really, really needs.

"My 12-year-old daughter said, 'It's so real, it's unreal,'" Johnson recalled.

(To check out the Tuck students' picks for the new reality in toys, look on the Internet at www.tuck.dartmouth.edu/digitalstrategies).

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