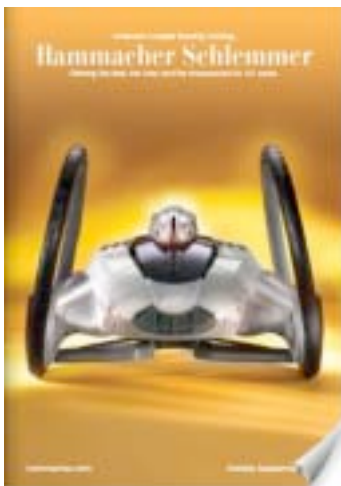




September 28, 2009

Wade Roush 9/28/09

## **Robonica President, an Ex-Hasbro Exec, Hopes to Put Boston Back on Toy Industry Map with Rolling Robots**



Boston is home to a huge cluster of hot game companies, from Harmonix to Turbine to 38 Studios. But you might be surprised to learn just how deep the region's gaming history goes. If Xconomy had been around a century ago, we probably would have been writing about Parker Brothers, which got its start in Salem, MA, in 1883 and went on to create Monopoly, Clue, Risk, and Trivial Pursuit, to name just a few of the company's blockbuster board games.

As Parker Brothers' star gradually dimmed—it was absorbed by General Mills in 1963, then Tonka in 1987, then Hasbro in 1991—Boston's prominence in the game and toy business waned as well. But today the Parker Brothers gaming legacy is re-emerging—and fusing with another local industry, robotics. The link? Tom Dusenberry, a lifelong game industry insider who got his start working on the Parker Brothers loading dock and eventually rose to become the founder and CEO of Hasbro Interactive, the video game subsidiary of toy giant Hasbro (NYSE: HAS). This week the multinational startup Robonica, where Dusenberry is now president, will launch its first product: Robini-i, a novel wheeled robot packed with sensors, radios, and a fully programmable onboard brain.

Roboni-i is arguably the biggest thing to hit the robot-toy business since the uber-popular Lego Mindstorms. And the new robot is emerging just a few miles from Salem, in Beverly, MA, where Robonica is headquartered. But there's also a South African side to the story: Robonica CEO Johan Poolman, an electrical engineer by training, is the founder of a series of technology companies in the Johannesburg area, and works from the company's R&D and manufacturing facilities in Centurion, a suburb of Pretoria. The company has 45 employees in Centurion, and obtained 100 percent of its financing from a pair of technology investment funds run by the South African government, Dusenberry says.



Sometimes, all a smart startup needs to succeed is a lucky break, and Robonica has caught a huge one. Hammacher Schlemmer, the specialty gift merchandiser, decided to feature the Roboni-i on the cover of its Holiday 2009 catalog, which is being mailed out to millions of consumers starting today. ("How cool is that?" Dusenberry cracks.) The robots are also available starting today from Robonica's website, and will be stocked by FAO Schwarz, the

Fry's Home Electronics chain on the West Coast, and some Toys R Us stores, as well as Amazon and other e-retailers.

Dusenberry says the primary target audience for the Roboni-i is 13- to 17-year-old boys, for whom the remote-controlled devices will provide, in his words, "a killer interactive entertainment experience." But after watching a demonstration at last week's MassTLC Tech Tuesday event at Microsoft's NERD Center in Cambridge—and, I admit, after taking the Roboni-i for a spin myself—I think it's safe to say that the nimble little machines will appeal to gadget lovers of all ages.

Roboni-i comes pre-programmed with six action games that, in the words of a company announcement, challenge players to "beat the odds, race against time, manage resources, neutralize threats, execute special effects and collect bonus points to improve score." Using the remote control, players can maneuver the robots around pylons, saucers, balls, and other accessories; the units also have sensors that allow them to navigate autonomously or interact with other Roboni-i devices. (You need to go and watch the video on the Robonica home page to really get it.) For players who want to continue the experience online, there's an entire Web-based game built around the foot-high devices—which somehow manage to look menacing and cute at the same time.

And for serious amateur roboticists, the units come with a USB cables and PC-based "command center" software that allows users to rewrite the robots' basic instructions. "We think there's a huge secondary market among people interested in artificial intelligence and robotic science and people who love programming and modifying products," says Dusenberry.

Dusenberry left Hasbro in 2001 after the company sold the interactive subsidiary he headed to French publisher Infogrames. The Robonica story started two and a half years ago, when he got a phone call from Poolman. "He said he had a new product idea and he didn't know if he was on the right track, but that he had read about me, and he'd love to show me the project and get some feedback,"

Dusenberry recalls. Poolman eventually wound up on Dusenberry's doorstep, prototypes in hand.

"I was wowed by the man and by the product idea, and I felt it could be revolutionary," Dusenberry says. "It was about physical play and interactive entertainment being brought together in an interesting way, and with an immersive online component. Two years later, I'm proud to say we have a product that is ready to ship to consumers."



Dusenberry, who's been working on electronic toys and video games since the 1970s, says he and Poolman didn't want Roboni-i to be like other remote-control toys, most of which have a small bag of tricks that get boring fast. "My life has been all about interactive entertainment, and what that really means is that you want the consumer to play with your product for a long time," Dusenberry says.

"With Roboni-i, the major differentiator is being able to go in and customize and personalize the robot so that you can change the game experience. Where we differ from every other robot on the market is that we're providing the source code and encouraging people to modify the actual C++."

Dusenberry says he hopes that Robonica can tap into same kind of enthusiasm for hands-on engineering experiences that has catapulted the FIRST Robotics Competition, the creation of New Hampshire inventor-entrepreneur Dean Kamen, into the global spotlight, with hundreds of student teams competing every year. "We think FIRST is beyond awesome, and we totally support that whole program," he says. "From the point of view of our product, we are contacting local high schools to go in and meet with classes. We hope that they see that this could be a great tool for learning about robotics pretty cost-effectively."

Dusenberry also hopes to build more connections between Robonica and the dozens of other robotics companies around New England. "I was blown away when I went to the RoboBusiness conference at the Hynes [Convention Center] in April and realized how big robots are in Massachusetts," Dusenberry says. "But I also realized how small a role consumer robots had in the grand scheme of things, aside from iRobot, which is obviously the global leader in the home robot area. My hope and dream is that Robonica will become a success and that the Massachusetts robotics community will really get behind us. We just haven't done the proof points yet to be able to play with the big boys."

That proof could start to come over the next few months, as Robonica tests the holiday gift-buying market. The suggested retail price for Roboni-i is \$250. Interestingly, however, Hammacher Schlemmer is asking \$299; the company told Robonica that it thought its customers would respond better at the higher price point, Dusenberry says. "In all my years of selling consumer products, I've never been in a situation where I was criticized by the retailer for having a price that's too low," he says. "That gives you a story about how powerful they think the product is."

<http://www.xconomy.com/boston/2009/09/28/robonica-president-an-ex-hasbro-exec-hopes-to-put-boston-back-on-toy-industry-map-with-rolling-robots/>