

NOVALIA PAYS ATTENTION TO THE FINE PRINT!

Link Art technology brings true interaction to printed materials

Imagine purchasing a happy meal where the box converts into toy, perhaps a fire-engine with flashing lights and a siren to amuse your child on the long drive home. A process for creating low cost printable electronics has been developed by Cambridge scientist Kate Stone and promises to revolutionise consumer packaging.

A passion for both art and technology led Kate Stone to develop 'Link Art', a unique process that adds functionality to printed items by integrating interactive circuitry into a traditional printing process. The process is applicable to posters, packaging materials, books, in-store displays and menus, and the opportunities are limitless.

"This is much more than simply a card that plays a tune!" explains Kate. "For instance, we have designed a greetings card with a birthday cake image on the front. When you pick up the card, the candles light up. Blow once, and some will go out, but you need to blow a second time to put out all the candles."

"Although this involves some clever circuitry and cutting-edge components, we were able to produce it simply in a standard-thickness greetings card, at an acceptable price point, because our system uses proven printing techniques and does not require the addition of complex wiring."

"Our designs offer true two-way interactivity, using a range of inputs. The beauty of our technique is that the finished product is no different – in terms of thickness, weight or rigidity – than its conventional counterpart."

Novalia's designers begin with the graphics for the finished product and incorporate silver lines into the design which will form the circuit to drive the interactivity. Sensors, LEDs and audio devices can be added but critically, no extra wiring is required. A small controller unit which also contains the power supply is manufactured separately and attached during the production process. Currently a few centimetres in size (but very thin), the company hopes to shrink this to make it the size of a postage stamp – and as easy to apply.

“The technology opens up new opportunities that were previously impossible. For instance, a basic mobile phone could be produced using printed components and used as a promotional giveaway. Using standard technology the cost would be prohibitive, but our technology suddenly brings it into the realm of the possible,” says Kate.

“Children’s magazines could have poster pull-outs with fun, interactive games, instead of just photos of the latest teen star.”

The technology also has more serious applications in pharmaceutical packaging, where safety and security influence pack design as much as aesthetics. “A patient could potentially interact with a box or an inserted leaflet to be reminded what dose of the medicine to take, and when. The interactive packaging could also highlight any safety precautions, which are usually hidden in the small print.”

Taking inspiration from materials as diverse as crisp packets and banknotes, Kate is determined to bring a new level of interactivity into the most mundane everyday items. “Imagine if the packets in your cupboard alerted you when they were nearly empty,” she says. “It’s closer than you think!”

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