

Tech pushed to supporting role in toy innovation

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The folks who make Bananagrams like to pitch the anagram game as an alternative to sitting in front of a video screen while working a joy stick.

There is no board, just lettered tiles. Players use them to make connecting or intersecting words, and the first one to use all his tiles wins.

"People need a break from the computer," said Anthony George, a sales representative for the Providence company.

A moment later, though, he lets slip that **Bananagrams International** has not rejected computer technology. Facebook users can play each other online, and the game is also available as an iPhone application.

A visit to the American Specialty Toy Retailing Association's recent trade show at the **R.I. Convention Center** on June 14 and 15 suggested Bananagrams may represent a trend. The association is dedicated to the promotion of high-quality toys – often with educational themes – sold in small stores, not mall giants. There were no video games on display amid the 200-plus exhibitors, but there were plenty of games and toys that use the Internet or other technology to enhance playtime.

Yomega, based in Fall River, offered a yo-yo with added gadgetry – a centrifugal clutch that can be turned on or off.

"We've engineered the frustration out

of the toy," said marketing director John Marcantonio. "Turn on the clutch and the yo-yo returns to your hand automatically. ... Turn it off, and the yo-yo is in free-spinning mode. It only comes back when you call it, so you can do the more advanced tricks," some of which are displayed on the company's website.

Astrojax, sold by Active People Toys of California, takes a similar approach. The toy consists of three balls connected by a string that can be swung in orbit around each other, or used for other tricks.

"Kids can go online to our club ... and post videos of their tricks," said Jason Sweazy, sales representative.

Young Scientists Club, based in Jamestown, takes the website angle one step further. The company's **Star Pilot** teaches children and adults how to recognize the night's constellations. It resembles a microscope, but it's trained on a small blue globe decorated with stars. The globe can be turned in almost any direction, to reveal views of both the southern and northern hemisphere skies.

The **Star Pilot** is small enough to take outside, allowing the user to study constellations with the toy, and then look for them in the sky. But one can also go online, to the **Star Pilot** website, which provides connections to three large telescopes located in Australia, Chile and the Canary Islands.

"Children in Providence are able to see what the stars look like over the southern hemisphere," said company owner Esther Novis.

The show also included some fun stuff with a different techie twist.

Rufus Seder, president of Eye Think Inc. of Waltham, Mass., demonstrated a toy that combines Victorian Age technology with that of

today. The **Strobotop** was inspired by the zoetrope, an animation device.

A strip of pictures showing action figures – perhaps galloping horses – would be inserted in a cylinder, and by spinning the cylinder and peeking through small slots, the user would see the horses appear to move. Seder scrapped the cylinder for pictures printed on a disk, which can be spun like a top, and he uses a

strobe gun to make the images appear animated.

"The strobe only works when you point it down, so you can't flash it in your kid sister's eyes," he said.

Thames & Kosmos, based in Providence, displayed science kits that go way beyond the chemistry sets of yesterday.

"We have some pretty cool alternative energy kits," said Christa Cronin, director of customer service, "including a fuel cell car that uses a solar panel to split water into hydrogen and oxygen. The fuel cell then uses the hydrogen to run the car.

Of course, there was no shortage of toys that eschewed technology entirely, something the promoters predicted will be a trend this Christmas.

Little Kids Inc., based in Seekonk, featured a pitching machine that tosses foam balls, which are hit with a foam bat or hockey stick.

And **Back Alley Traders**, based in Cumberland, promoted Gigamic games, which feature wooden pieces and board.

"There's been a lot of discussion in the news about more people staying home for good, old-fashioned family nights," said company president Ken Lonngren. "They're playing strategy games that get the kids away from the television and the computer." ■