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Cute Friends to Collect, and Plug in to the Internet

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With their new crop of products that plug into the Internet, toy makers are placing heavy bets on the longstanding enthusiasm among children for collecting things.



The Webkinz stuffed animals are not only cute to line up on a bed, but they also unlock a succession of fun places in cyberspace as more of them are accumulated. Similarly, the more accessories a child buys for the forthcoming BarbieGirls doll, the more activities she will be able to explore on the toy's Web site.

One new product that will lean particularly hard on this theme is U.B. Funkeys, a set of collectible vinyl figures that connect to a computer via a base with a U.S.B. port. The

U.B. Funkeys starter kit — which is being shipped to stores in the United States — contains a hub that can accommodate several of the colorful little figurines, each of which looks vaguely like an animal or a space alien.

The hub also comes with two Funkeys characters, which transmit data to the base when placed on top.

Once the Funkeys are set up, their owner will be able to go to www.ubfunkeys.com (which is not yet operational) and enter Funkeys Town. There, each Funkey on the base will appear in avatar form on the screen, ready to play games. (The U.B. in the name is meaningless, the game's creators say, but it distinguishes the product from others that use the name Funkeys.)

As the Funkey figures explore the town, they interact with other Funkeys and avoid Henchmen, unlocking and playing minigames along the way. The game has an overarching story line that has to do with trying to rebuild Funkeys Town's transportation system and save it from Master Lox, the bad guy. There is also an incentive element, with players winning coins they can use to decorate their "crib," a personal area that can be adorned with furniture, wallpaper, electronics or pets.

U.B. Funkeys was created by [Radica Games](#), a subsidiary of [Mattel](#), with software designed by Arkadium Games, a game design company. A starter kit is expected to sell for \$19.99, and an individual Funkeys figurine for \$4.99.

Christopher Wilson, vice president of marketing for Radica, said that Radica's market research showed "there had to be a struggle of good versus evil" for children to get involved in the game, but Radica "wanted to avoid violent altercations." If a Funkeys comes into contact with a Henchman, the Henchman steals the Funkeys' coins. There is no other penalty or combat.

Radica will try to fuel interest in the collecting of Funkeys by releasing them in batches, and making some more rare to collect than others. The company plans to introduce 42 Funkeys at the outset — all of them the same size, but each with its own appearance and biography.

Parts of Funkeys Town will be inaccessible with the starter kit. To reach the other parts, a child will have to buy more Funkeys, which will be distributed in different quantities, and place them on the base instead of the original (owning a Funkeys confers indefinite access to the online places it unlocks).

The most desirable items and minigames will only be accessible through the rarest Funkeys.

Mr. Wilson said U.B. Funkeys represent "an evolution in the way kids play." Children "need that physical connection with something," but they also want the stimulation of a video game.

Radica will market U.B. Funkeys with a viral campaign that includes soundtracks for characters that can be downloaded on iTunes, commercials on the Disney Channel, the Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon, and displays in comic books and toy stores.