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Screen all my calls

By Lia Timson

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A nutty idea ... an intelligent robot, the Squirrel can answer your mobile phone calls when you're busy.

A squirrel to answer your mobile? Yes, that's right.

Forget message banks, sometimes what you really need is for someone to pick up your ringing mobile phone, look around to see if you are available, then decide whether to answer, divert or take a message. Sadly, not everyone can afford a personal assistant. Enter the Squirrel, a new device ready to screen your calls.

The cutely intelligent robot detects when you want to answer your mobile phone by reading your body language.

Still in development, the prototype Squirrel (and its cousin, the Bunny) connects to your phone and overrides the handset's ring if it deems the moment is inappropriate.

It does this by collecting information wirelessly from sensors worn by others in the room to help it interpret when to catch the owner's attention. The sensors are about twice the size of a sim card and pick up sound, vibrations and the owner's gaze. Next it waits for a non-verbal cue, like a gesture, to decide whether the call should be answered, noted or redirected. Users can also bypass the intermediary and answer the phone.

It may seem like a prank, but the device is a serious business for its creator, Stefan Marti.

The PhD graduate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US has two masters degrees (including psychology) and several devices to his name. The gadget has taken three years to perfect and operates as a personal minder (web.media.mit.edu/~stefanm/phd/cellularsquirrel).

"I've always been very interested in combining psychology with technology," Marti says. "The Squirrel is a combination of the two."

Marti spent time working in speech interface and human-to-computer integration both in his native Switzerland and the US. He has developed other devices capable of managing incoming text, voice and fax messages on behalf of the user, or projecting laser script onto a wall so users don't need to squint to read a small phone screen.

He even built a shoulder-mounted parrot prototype that interprets its owner's reactions before deciding whether to interrupt with messages received from various sources wirelessly (web.media.mit.edu/~stefanm/research.html#CF).

Marti sees the technology being used to gather information from things such as a home-linked website that controls household appliances, for example, before deciding whether to interrupt the user at work.

If it sounds like science fiction, that's another source of Marti's inspiration.

"In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, there was this ambiguous thing talking very smoothly, very scarily to them. It was only voice and one light. I'd take it to a level of semi-human-like interaction."

The technology would work in robotic human-like devices, but that would raise expectations of its performance so it is not something Marti wants.

"People would expect it to have human intelligence then. That's dangerous."

Instead, he says the technology may one day be embedded in accessories such as Bluetooth ear phones, watches and necklaces, just in case adult users felt silly carrying a plush toy around.

"Right now the Squirrel is attractive to someone under 14 years old or in an Asian country where they are much more receptive to animatronics and robotics.

"But this will change dramatically in the next five to 10 years. People will begin to accept you talking to your phone or to something semi-lifelike on your desk or on you," Marti says.

But don't expect the technology to be built into phones, like an on-screen prompt, because that would be no different than what is already available.

"It's very important that it's visible to others as well as me, because the Squirrel communicates with me and with others around me. If it sat on a (meeting) table it would probably work," he muses.

Marti recently moved to San Francisco and is evaluating offers from research labs, toy and computer manufacturers for his technology.

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