

**Who Let the Dogs Out?**  
**Reflections on the Kids Market**

**By Paul Kurnit**

Kid Power Xchange

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Well the new millennium is finally here. Last year was the hoopla, the excitement, the celebration, the fear of Y2K. But, for the purists among you, this year is the true beginning of the millennium, the new century, the new ideas, the new vision. And, what do we have to show for it? Dogs. Yup, that's the big news in the kids world as we concluded year 2000 and face our toyetic future. Man's best friend – Dogs!

Beyond Razor scooters, new video game consoles and the continuing return of classics, the big “breakthrough” in the toy business this past year was a plethora of new animatronic, walking, barking, talking, doing tricks, fetching dogs. They can do it all, and you don't have to walk them. Although technically that could be accomplished, too. Just wait and see. *My Puppy Poops* is certainly toy possible.

“*Who Let the Dogs Out?*” This very popular ditty of a song (by the Baha Men) became a party anthem for numerous audiences around the world in 2000. Not only was the song a top pop hit, but it also sums up the celebration that has been the toy tech pooch craze. Where did this new phenomenon come from? Nurturing is classic. Dogs are classic. Technology brought it all to life.

Tamagotchi started it with little key chain creatures who needed, demanded and sucked up kid attention. Add fur and character appeal and Tickle me Elmo became an interactive phenomenon followed by Rock 'n Roll Elmo and now Role-Play Elmo. Kids favorite characters performing different human behaviors. From Tamagotchi and the Elmos, adding fur to technology, Microsoft Actimates gave us Barney and others who did all kinds of things, but at price points above \$100. Take the technology, bring down the price and voila, Furby in a \$30 range became a 3 year

phenomenon (only just now pulling its life cycle fade). And, giving way to what?

You got it. Who let the dogs out! “Parallel marketing” in 2000 gave us at least 9 different electronic puppies. Yes, every kid wants a dog. Most parents have serious reservations about who’s going to care for the puppy. So, battery operated makes the dog request easy to fulfill.

And, like real dogs, this past year they came in all shapes and sizes and lots of different price points, too. From \$29.99 to, believe it or not, \$1500.00, the dogs came ready and able to perform all kinds of doggie tricks and eager to learn more. They came in robotic form and puppy plush with a range of names and backgrounds that included

**Mega Byte Cyber Watchdog** from Wow Wee International at \$24.99

**Poo-Chi** from Tiger, the people who brought us Furby at \$29.99

**Tekno the Robotic Puppy** from Manley at \$39.99

**My Dog Shadow** from MGA Entertainment at \$59.99

**Big and L’il Scratch** by Trendmasters at \$59.99

**Robotix 2K-9** from Learning Curve at \$99.99

**I-Cybie** the Tiger step up at \$129.99

**Rocket the Wonder Dog** from Fisher Price also costs \$129.99.

**Aibo** from Sony at \$1500.00

So, choose your “breed,” select your price and get ready to have doggie fun. Across the wide range of puppy play, these mongrels can do all kinds of things. For the dog purists among you they sit, walk, stretch, beg, wag their tails, nod and move their heads and mouths, look around, wiggle, wave, flap their ears, blink their eyes and eat. They make all sorts of doggie sounds as they yelp, pant, whine, whimper, growl and bark.

They get emotional and/or fussy if you don’t play with them. They express happiness and love, confusion and anger. They respond to scolding and praise, display fear, surprise and excitement. For the dog trainers among you they can recognize your voice, respond to your commands to the name you give it, and obey multiple commands – come,

sit-up, speak, stay, tug o war, drop it, wanna play and are taught new tricks via interactive websites. For the technical among you they come with as many as 20 motors, are voice activated, touch sensitive and can be “trained” to undergo multiple stages of development.

So, who let the dogs out indeed? In one year from out of nowhere, these canine wonders do all sorts of things. What’s left for the imagination of kids? The creativity of their interaction? What’s left for the next generation of dogs? We’ve already seen so much in so little time. Well, surely more interactivity at lower price points (although \$29.99 is a good gateway for all the stuff some of these canine characters can perform).

You can well imagine that play futures is in robotics. Amazing Amy and Ally have already been talking non-stop for the past two years. It’s clear that the age of the robot is upon us. It won’t be long at all until the science fiction image of working robots performing useful tasks for all of us kids will be a reality in our homes. For now, we’re all pumped up when a Lego robot can fetch a newspaper or, better, a can of beer. Imagine when these smart machines will be able to clean the house and cook a meal. This is by no means mere child play.

So, welcome to the true new millennium. This will be a century when tweens who have abandoned the traditional toy industry will come back in droves. But, this time they’ll be joined by their older siblings and parents alike in an industry where toys are by no means mere child’s play and where technology will blur the line between play and lifestyle.