



Inci Mutlu

The Wattbug Variation

Inci Mutlu's Wattbug promises to transform how we see and understand our everyday energy uses.

Wattbug is a friendly creature-comfort for a domestic need that people ignore at their peril. Conceived of by a Turkish industrial designer, Inci Mutlu, the Wattbug looks disarmingly similar to a mechanical firefly, and as with its unusual real-life relative – the only insect that illuminates in certain conditions – the Wattbug lights up, luminous green, amber and red, depending on the use of electricity, and hence energy-use in a home setting. So, if a household use is low the Wattbug chirps along with a green tail, as well as a smile on its bugface. If, however the meterage rises steeply the Wattbug gradually changes colour until, with heavy overuse its tail turns a deep red, its smile turning to a frown.

Inci Mutlu originally hit upon the concept while doing a design project in her student days, which revolved around communication in 1992. She realised that our energy environment is one where communication is absent, which has meant that energy-use remains generally an abstraction. By designing a feedback device into the system, both the abstract quality of energy, and hopefully its very real use, is reduced. She devised the system with engineers, so that householders can opt for different levels of usage, essentially five classes depending on size of family, home and the like.

Although Inci left the project to one side after it was completed, in 1998 she saw the American Cybergreen design network, Viridians, asking for entries for a design competition around exactly these sorts of feedback interventions into our energy footprints. Realising that a realistic design would need to be consumer friendly, she came up with the notion of pets, inspired in part from the then current Japanese craze for cyberdogs, and thinking that if she did 'something cute' it would translate into interest. Hence the Wattbug, and Mutlu won the Viridian competition.

Since then there has been interest from Phillips and Siemens, and over a hundred on an orders list, plus people wanting to distribute and manufacture the creature gizmo, but alas, no-one's willing to invest in the first stage – product development. At present the Wattbug is among a variety of eco-friendly projects Inci has developed, although there isn't any other that short-circuits the glaring absence in the public's awareness in its energy consumption quite like the Wattbug. When, rather than if, the Wattbug makes it into the market-place, it will help turn a corner in developing people's on-the-doorstep eco-awareness about our own energy consumption habits; habits that have remained a blind spot for too long. *OL* www.inciutlu.com