

Nickelodeon

Nickelodeon's SpongeBob Skill for Alexa Entertains Kids with a Voice-First Memory Game



Nickelodeon is a global entertainment brand whose mission is to make the world a more playful place. It is the top-rated TV network for kids with a global reach of 550 million households. The brand's reach extends beyond television with more than 60 mobile games and three TV apps, including Nick, Nick Jr., and Noggin for preschoolers.

Stefanie Schwartz, senior vice president of Nickelodeon digital and business development, says Nickelodeon's newest digital experience aims to follow its mission while moving the company into the world of voice technology.

Throughout our history, we've developed many iconic properties like Blue's Clues, Dora the Explorer, and SpongeBob SquarePants," says Schwartz. "Now, with a parent's consent, kids can ask Alexa to play the [SpongeBob Challenge](#), which helps develop memory skills while entertaining them with the zany characters they know and love."

A Memory Challenge Filled with Characters and Sounds Kids Love

Darren Brelesky, senior vice president of product and technology, says Nickelodeon chose to build the skill around SpongeBob SquarePants because the show has such a deep narrative with so many memorable characters. The animated series is about an optimistic sponge who lives with his friends in an underwater city called Bikini Bottom. The show has been a top-five animated program for 17 straight years and is loved by more than 270 million viewers around the world.

Like all of Nickelodeon's games, the SpongeBob Challenge skill is about engaging with the company's young audience and building a relationship. The SpongeBob Challenge has more than 80 memory challenges, and is filled with over 70 characters including Patrick,



"Alexa, start the SpongeBob Challenge"

Plankton, Squidward, and Mr. Krabs, as well as hundreds of music and sound effects from the show.

The skill places kids behind the cash register of the Krusty Krab where they take orders from a host of strange but hilarious customers. In each session, kids face three challenges in which they have to remember the details of each customer's order—no matter how odd the customer's cravings may be. Was that a single Krabby Patty combo, or a double? Did Patrick order a large kelp shake or a large order of kelp fries?

"To engage the kids, we leveraged the rich soundscape of SpongeBob SquarePants by including its iconic music, colorful sound effects, and beautiful, rich audio transitions, not to mention SpongeBob's crazy laugh," says Brelesky. "We've enveloped all these in the game in fun ways to recreate the Bikini Bottom experience."

Nickelodeon Knows Designing Game Skills for Kids Is Different—And Rewarding

Aside from authentic scripting and rich soundscapes, Brelesky says designing a skill for kids between ages 6 and 10 is quite different from designing a skill for adults. One challenge is dealing with how kids respond to failure. Brelesky says kids come to the Nickelodeon brand at varying ages of development, and while some enjoy quick mastery in gameplay, others take a while to learn the ropes. It's crucial to replace frustration and doubt with fun and confidence for those kids, to turn a potentially negative experience into a warm, positive one, says Brelesky.



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That's why the SpongeBob Challenge skill is loaded with hilarious moments, regardless of whether the player provides the correct answer.

Another point to remember in designing the game skill is that today's kids are born into a world with voice interaction and are quick to embrace the form, says Brelesky. Kids also respond to prompts intuitively and trust that the device will understand. Trying to account for every possible thing kids could say to the skill presented a challenge. To address this, Nickelodeon designed the skill to pose questions with clear multiple-choice answers, limiting the number of replies to manage at any given point. Even so, the team needed to anticipate as many answers as possible.

"We spent a lot of time testing, listening, and writing those edge-case scenarios into the design, to have the skill be continuous and responsive to the way kids will actually use it," says Brelesky.

Bringing the SpongeBob Challenge to Life

To get the project started, Nick focused on its core strengths: the brand's irreverent sense of humor as well as its show and cast of characters. Several cross-functional teams were involved in the brainstorming sessions. These teams included show production, brand creative, design and development, and digital production. Naturally, they focused on creative ideas that would resonate most with young Nick fans.

A number of contributors helped ideate, create, and implement the SpongeBob Challenge. First, Nickelodeon's Digital Product Team, led by Brelesky, handled all the creative work and served as the primary driver. Second, Brelesky's team worked very closely with the SpongeBob SquarePants show writers to capture the voice of the show.

"This was an amazing opportunity. The show's writers wrote a

lot of the lines themselves, incorporating iconic moments and elements of the show directly into the skill's script," says Brelesky. "That's why the skill feels so richly and uniquely SpongeBob."

To build the skill, Brelesky turned to [PullString](#). PullString's authoring tools have helped developers create, test, and host rich and engaging computer conversations for Alexa skills, chatbots, and other interactive conversation avenues. For Nickelodeon, PullString took the kid-approved content and built a voice-first experience for Alexa.

"It's incredibly exciting to have helped bring SpongeBob to Alexa using PullString's software and Conversation Cloud," says Mike Houlahan, Head of Enterprise at PullString. "Our close collaboration with Nickelodeon's digital and creative teams has created an immersive skill that SpongeBob fans of all ages will enjoy."

'Voice Opens Up Tremendous Access'

Schwartz says the new SpongeBob Challenge skill enables Nickelodeon to provide a whole new way to interact with its young audience. And Brelesky says Nickelodeon is just getting started with Alexa.

"This is just the beginning of voice experiences for Nickelodeon," says Brelesky. "Voice opens up tremendous access to Nick shows, characters, and content by lowering that discovery friction found in many screen-based experiences."

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