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ARTICLE

Disposable love

The rise and fall of a virtual pet

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Abstract
One particular toy, the Tamagotchi, is analyzed as a cultural artifact which incorporates the latest in computer and video technology and virtually engages players in the most basic of nurturing relationships. Here one day, and gone the next, the Tamagotchi is seen as a symbol of its times in which even the most intense connections are disposable. The essay examines how this object relates to popular culture and to other children's playthings in particular, and what it signifies in terms of relationships, gender identity, and existential predicaments. As a consequence, it raises a number of questions concerning the role that these and similar toys perform in the socialization of children and of society in general.

Key words
children • disposability • relationships • Tamagotchi • toys • virtual games

INTRODUCTION: A VIRTUAL PET CALLED TAMAGOTCHI

How our children spend their time and what influence this will have on the adults they will become is a topic of deep concern among social researchers, educators and parents, cutting across cultural, religious, social and educational boundaries. Awash in an ocean of commodities, many adults attempt to filter out those elements which can genuinely contribute to our children's emotional, cultural and spiritual development from the spurious

offerings of today's consumer culture. Children's toys and games merit special attention as social mediators between the imaginary world of children, in the Lacanian psychoanalytic sense, and that of adult reality. According to Turner (1986: 95), in sociologist Georg Simmel's view, '. . . any item of culture can be the starting point for sociological research into the nature of the totality . . . Nothing is trivial, because everything is related'. We have chosen here to examine one particular toy which provides a rich opportunity as a case study, and as a symbol of its times.

A song by the rock group 'Daze', entirely devoted to the Tamagotchi, illustrates the popularity of this particular toy in western culture. Significantly, the lyrics of the song position the Tamagotchi as a child, demanding to be cared for and to be given siblings by its parents, the owner. This further reinforces the cycle of consumption of the object.

We wish to suggest that this object is the ultimate toy of our period; it incorporates the latest technology of computer and video games, with the timeless narrative of the cycle of life and it rose to popularity as fast as it plummeted into oblivion. Its significance as a cultural object lies in the premise that toys perform an important role in the socialization of children, and hence of society. Thus, we are interested in looking at what this artifact may say about society and what may be learned from such a message, or, in other words, what the Tamagotchi may have taught society.

What is a Tamagotchi?

For those who managed to miss it, the Tamagotchi was first conceived by a Japanese mother for her children, since limited space precluded the introduction of an actual pet into the household (McMahon, 1997). The toy consists of a hand-held liquid crystal display screen, depicting a cartoon-like fantastic creature, encased in a brightly colored plastic container with a number of tiny push-buttons on it. Once the game is turned on, the virtual animal is hatched from an egg (the name 'Tamagotchi' being an endearing, diminutive form of the word 'tamago' or 'egg' in Japanese) and grows up. In order to sustain it and maintain its health, the Tamagotchi requires virtual care, when necessary, in the form of sleep, a regular supply of food and drink, washing, play, teaching, scolding and medication. The various possibilities are indicated by miniature icons appearing along the side of the screen and the buttons are used to select the appropriate choice. Whenever it requires something an alarm is sounded or an icon appears on the screen. Its progress and needs can be assessed at any time by pressing a button calling for a report which includes its weight, age, temperature, the extent of its hunger and thirst, mood and the like. It should be noted that more than one generation of the toy exists, as well as a variety of spin-offs and models manufactured by different companies.

The plastic case with the small screen embedded in it can be worn as a

bracelet/watch, suspended from the neck, or from a key chain. It was billed as a 'virtual pet' by its original manufacturers, the Bandai Corporation of Japan, when it made its debut in late 1996.

Its lifespan differs according to reports – some claim it can live up to 32 days (McMahon, 1997), while others maintain that 26 days is a record (Bandai Corporation Homepage, 1998). After 'death', the game can be reset to begin again and a new Tamagotchi hatched. In addition, there are versions in which some eight different Tamagotchi figures can be played with in one toy.

Numerous web sites revolve around the Tamagotchi, among them those giving notice of new versions, relating stories, offering tips and exchanging views, as well as those providing virtual burial sites. Moreover, dozens of spin-offs of the original Tamagotchi were manufactured by different companies, while several generations of the toy were put out by the Bandai Corporation itself, in addition to the inevitable total marketing products, including stationery, clothing, bedding, bags and the like.

How the Tamagotchi became available

The Tamagotchi first arrived in the United States on 1 May 1997, where a variety of marketing manipulations seem to have been used in order to further enhance sales.[1] Like certain other US imports – such as philosophies (from the Frankfurt School to postmodernism), psychologies (from Freud to Piaget), musicians (from the Beatles to the Spice Girls), dance (from the Lambada to the Macarena), foods (from pizza to pita bread), products (from the Sony Walkman to Benetton clothes) – true acceptance of a cultural product seems to come from crossing the Atlantic and becoming a success in the United States. In what we have dubbed 'the megaphone effect' items seem to acquire an ever-expanding sphere of appeal, extending out from the United States to other parts of the world. It appears that the aura of American success lends the cachet of approval to a concept by endowing it with the glamour of association with the United States and all its connotations of the modern world. This aura is the antithesis of that discussed by Walter Benjamin (1973) in the context of a work of art with its awesome beauty and the inspiration it provides. Whereas Benjamin (1973) speaks of the aura of the authentic and genuine object, in the case of the Tamagotchi it surrounds something which represents the epitome of a mass produced article, whose purpose is to transpose relationships experienced in 'real life' to a preprogrammed item, divorced of all meaning in and of itself.

The rise and fall of the virtual pet

Although, in the past, many toys have had rapid gains in popularity only to lose favor relatively quickly, pundits in the business world maintain that the Tamagotchi was extreme in this respect. Manufacturers and distributors

claim rarely to have seen such a meteoric rise of a product followed by such a phenomenal crash; where practically overnight, the situation changed from one where demand could not be met, to one in which there were difficulties getting rid of the product at a price far below cost. According to one source over 30 million were sold worldwide (Kay et al., 1998), while another claims the figure is as high as 40 million (press release of the manufacturer, cited in 'Critical thoughts about Tamagotchi: Background', p. 2).

Demand for the toy so far exceeded supply that the Bandai Corporation ran advertisements in Japanese newspapers apologizing for its inability to meet demand and assuring the public of increased production in the near future. It was suspected, however, that this was merely a marketing ploy.

From the start, the Tamagotchi appears to have been a toy sanctioned by parents:[2] it had a certain allure as a toy with educational value, teaching responsibility, and allowing a child to use modern technology – heretofore used in computer games primarily to destroy targets – to develop and practice nurturing tendencies. This parental support can also be inferred from the fact that, at a cost of approximately $15 to $20 per unit – and frequently more, depending on where, when and how it was purchased – the item would have been outside the reach of the average child's pocket, thus necessitating adult sponsorship in many cases.

As the toy grew increasingly popular it became reified, to the point that it was invested with human attributes and an almost cult-like devotion developed around it. All of this was manifest, perhaps more than anywhere else, in the behavior that could take place upon a Tamagotchi's 'demise': evidence of this occurs most blatantly on internet burial sites, and, apparently at 'real' cemeteries as well. Newspapers around the world featured the picture of a number of adults and children standing in a cemetery in Hungary as they weep next to a surface on which there are a number of candles and what seem to be small covered egg cups (Reuters, 1998). The accompanying article is entitled 'Laying to rest ceremony for a Tamagotchi'. In other words, there has been a blurring between the meaning with which the object is invested and its actual, inherent attributes. In semiotic terms, this might be compared to a lack of distinction between the signified and the signifier.

LOCATING THE TAMAGOTCHI ON THE TOY SHELF

Fleming (1996: 40–1) speaks of four dominant themes in today's toys: 'the theme of the machine' in the form of toy vehicles and construction sets; Barbie as a representative type, standing for 'the theme of young womanhood embodied by a doll'; 'the theme of animality realised in hard plastic or soft fabric'; and 'the imaginary play space inside the computer's video-chip'. He later identifies these as '. . . four divergent semiotic

dimensions'. Based on this model, the Tamagotchi can actually be seen as a mixture of some of the elements in all four themes, brought together in a single toy.

Certainly, it represents the theme of the machine, by its very nature and in its appearance. Yet interestingly, the actual game played with the Tamagotchi – that of caretaker – is anti-mechanistic. Similarly, the Tamagotchi is portrayed – in the guise of a chick, a puppy, a turtle, a dinosaur, or the like – as a character which is essentially cute, innocent, lovable and 'good'. Nonetheless, the Tamagotchi also resembles the world of science fiction, in which life is created and lived in a virtual space. These seemingly conflicting characteristics suggest that although the Tamagotchi is, indeed, a machine, this is quite the inverse of what the virtual pet is intended to signify. Moreover, with its insistent beeping and its variety of 'needs', the Tamagotchi is the very antithesis of such toys as 'Barbie' and what Fleming (1996: 46) terms dolls that '. . . offer an image of childhood rendered ascetic – little people as empty vessels, nothing troublesome within, unruly flesh mortified in plastic but smiling back at us and being good'. By contrast, '. . . the computer game character has a machine-transcending non-rigidity and flexibility and, even though constituted by merely a few hard screen pixels, can hardly be thought of as ascetic' (1996: 47).

Fleming (1996: 148–9), further speaking of 'the new concept of toy', says that as a result of the media culture of the late 20th century, each toy exists within a system made up of interrelated pieces which tie back to one another through a '. . . dense overlapping and interweaving of texts in several media to constitute an endlessly self-referential popular culture . . .'. Thus, like the pieces of a puzzle, each toy is related to every other one, fitting into a shared overall pattern. While there is no tie-in between the Tamagotchi and, for example, a particular television show in the most basic sense of intertextuality Fleming (1996) describes, the contextual and cultural framework in which the Tamagotchi came about should not be ignored.

Livingstone (1998) describes today's changing media environment and its impact upon young people. The Tamagotchi was 'born' into a world where video and computer games and virtual reality are commonplace. At the cultural level, the Tamagotchi was conceived in Japan and devised as a space-saving compensation pet, tailored to an environment in which homes are small and living quarters are at a premium. Referring, specifically, to the subsequent Japanese craze, the 'Lovegety'[3] and the cultural provenance of the virtual pet, a newspaper article stated:

> You gotta love those Japanese. There's something about this nation that constantly drives them to find rational technological solutions to the most

> illogical human biological and psychological urges. Who else could have come up with the Tamagotchi . . . . (Sommer, 1998)

Its cartoon-like features bear a strong resemblance to the ever-popular figures in Japanese 'manga' comic books with their schematically designed likenesses, which often bear only iconic resemblance to any particular animal.

The Tamagotchi as the anti-doll

The Tamagotchi creature itself has little or no actual character in the sense of comic book or cartoon figures. In an analysis of Disney cartoons, Dorfman and Mattelart (1975) describe two genres of characters: one represents an innocent 'noble savage', the object of pathos and patronizing affection, such as Bambi; the other is a crafty, resourceful figure, such as Donald Duck or Mickey Mouse. To some extent, the Tamagotchi resembles the former, who, say Dorfman and Mattelart (1975: 47) '. . . just stays put and never wins anything'. At the same time, with the intervention of the player, the Tamagotchi starts to resemble the latter, modeled on the cunning and competitive adult, or even a naughty child. Yet by and large, the Tamagotchi has neither character nor personality in and of itself.

In his discussion of postmodern toys, Fleming (1996: 166) says they '. . . offer many parts for the child to play and to feel, recalling an older more stable identity but also promising other things'. These toys are inextricably linked to the world of television and video games. What was once symbolized by small animals and toy soldiers, says Fleming (1996), '. . . has migrated through toy machines into the ultimate machines, the TV and the video game; the former briefly offering a dispersal of the power to make meanings, the latter apparently a concentration and lack of choice' (1996: 167). As a result, images of the child's self have become reflected in the artificial intelligence of electronic toys, where power, although contained, is at its ultimate. Here children are positioned both as players and as spectators (Kinder, 1991). In other words, they are both active and passive at times. With the Tamagotchi, if an individual functions as a player, she or he is interacting with an object which at times can seem either quite helpless or somewhat mischievous. Whichever the case, the player is actively involved and therefore at least partially responsible for what transpires. If a person assumes the position of a spectator, however, she or he gives up all responsibility and, as far as the Tamagotchi is concerned, metes out its death sentence. In an interesting twist on dolls, and frequently on real life as well, where the most severe damage tends to occur through active intervention, or 'sins of commission', for the Tamagotchi, danger comes from the player's assumption of the passive role, or the 'sin of omission'. Moreover, it is clearly easier to kill the two-dimensional screen toy from neglect than to harm a three-dimensional toy figure.

Tamagotchis and three-dimensional fuzzy toys

Contrary to many other toys, the external form of the Tamagotchi bears little resemblance to the pet it presumably represents; the outer casing of the object is made of hard plastic, rather than soft, fuzzy material. The similarity between the Tamagotchi and an inanimate fuzzy toy rests upon the fact that both can be cared for, but whereas in the case of the latter the activities depend upon imagination, the computerized toy physically demands what it needs while supplying the means by which to provide it. The rules of the game are set and known in advance. Moreover, there are different levels of abstraction involved in playing with a Tamagotchi as opposed to a stuffed animal, for example; the first is primarily two-dimensional while the last is three-dimensional. Since it is not up to the player to invent the sequence of interaction, the toy is less personal and less creative due to the predetermined lexicon of activities and possible responses entailed in playing with it. Thus, it supplies fewer opportunities for challenge and use of the imagination since it limits the child's fantasy world, forcing the play into a mold of ready-made, limited options, with no scope for personal enterprise and improvisation. At the same time, the Tamagotchi can also be considered more interactive and more immediately exciting since its requirements are less foreseeable in the short run.

The Tamagotchi as a cybertoy

It is within the perimeters of the frame delineated by the Tamagotchi's miniature screen – as in the case of televisions and computers – that the controlled action takes place. However, the Tamagotchi differs radically from most other types of computer games, since the very nature of playing here takes place within the meta-narrative of the nurturing theme, rather than within the framework of a competitive game of destruction or conquest (such as in action–adventure or sports competitions). Other non-violent computer games do exist but they tend to function at a societal level, for example, recreating history or establishing a culture, rather than functioning at the individual level. As a consequence of the inevitable intertextuality described by Fleming (1996), we would like to conjecture, that theoretically, a connection could be made to other types of computerized games, enabling players and spectators alike to draw the conclusion that it is possible to 'have fun' with a computer-based game whose aim is not destructive or competitive, nor as ambitious as restructuring society itself.

The fact that the Tamagotchi is a miniaturized[4] toy and can therefore easily be held and transported seems to be of great importance in its ability to elicit feelings of affection. Certainly, there have long been computer-mounted versions of pets – incorporated into the larger screen – which have not seemed to draw much reaction. As a result of this tactile or mobile element, children can stand in clusters each holding their own Tamagotchi,

comparing qualities and deficiencies, as well as their own caretaking behavior and what they have or have not administered to their virtual pets. Furthermore, it is easy to show to others, providing them with the opportunity to boast of their acquisition, thereby becoming members of an 'in-group' of those children socially attuned to and with access to current trends. Moreover its small size permits them to hold it in the palm of a hand, to cuddle it, to take it to bed with them and to hide it in a pocket. In other words, the Tamagotchi allows for a relative sense of intimacy in relation to its owner. It is here, then, that the unscripted action takes place.

THE TAMAGOTCHI AND RELATIONSHIPS

This paper is an attempt to deconstruct the symbolic meaning of the Tamagotchi, from the intellectual perspective of an adult. Three themes emerged in the analytical examination of relationships with the Tamagotchi after tracking its path in daily life in several different cultures, in the popular press and on the internet, as well as holding informal discussions with marketing personnel, players and parents and drawing on personal experience. The first concerns the nature of interpersonal relationships in today's world, the second has to do with gender identity, and the third is about existential predicaments.

Interpersonal relationships

Life à la Tamagotchi is disposable and so are attachments and relationships. If the game does not work out the first time one can always try again. If one is tired, bored or quite simply negligent, there is always another chance, limited only by the longevity of a replaceable battery. Indeed, typically, it seems that a person's interest or patience will wane before the battery wears out. If the toy interferes with other commitments or desires it can be disposed of. Much in accordance with Toffler's (1970) *Future Shock*, the Tamagotchi represents the postmodern notion of transience. Not even such relationships as those with one's 'offspring', to which a player has given 'life' and for whom she or he bears total responsibility, is everlasting.

Toffler (1970), as a futurist, was well ahead of his time when he discussed the possibility of pre-designing the human body, chemically programming the brain, cloning ourselves, creating new life forms and the like. Another related theme dominant in his work, is the concept of disposability in terms of things, people and even relationships. Nothing endures, remains stable or is permanent: marriages collapse, people move to different parts of the world, they change homes and jobs, once treasured objects are thrown away, individuals redesign their faces and bodies, they have sex change operations and they vary their clothing styles and hair colors with the greatest of ease.

We have become accustomed to a 'culture of the disposable'. We are referring here not only to a lifestyle consisting of objects that render life

more 'convenient', through the use of paper plates, plastic utensils, disposable diapers and the like, but to objects which once had a value when used, and were even passed down from one generation to another, including jewelry, watches and clocks, pens, cameras, clothes, linens, books, furniture and even toys. In today's fast changing world, any machine becomes obsolete almost before it can be sold in a shop. With the advent of mass produced goods made of cheaply produced materials, many people in the developed world find it more cost effective to simply dispose of an object than to have it repaired, should the need arise.

This state of affairs conjures up much of the literature on late modernity. This era is characterized, among other things, by fragmentation and discontinuity (interestingly, some models of the Tamagotchi can be temporarily 'put on hold' and then reactivated when convenient). In his work *The McDonaldization of Society*, George Ritzer (1996) contends that we are not living in a postmodern era, although it has many of the characteristics of Jameson's (1984) discussion of postmodernity as a late stage of modernity. Ritzer's (1996) description of the four dimensions of McDonaldization – efficiency, calculability, predictability and control – are also applicable to the Tamagotchi. Similarly, the Tamagotchi is efficient, providing an effective method of meeting a variety of needs, in its capacity for satisfying the desire to provide care, such as for a pet, while incurring no ongoing expenses and employing minimal space. The Tamagotchi offers calculability, where quantity and speed are emphasized over quality or personal satisfaction, in its development pattern and through its ability to be reborn, repeatedly and identically. Predictability, whereby events are predetermined and offer no surprises, is manifest in the Tamagotchi through its preprogramming. Finally, control, in which events are determined by nonhuman technology, is precisely what one side of the interaction with the Tamagotchi entails.

In his writings on the postmodern period, Baudrillard (1983) discusses simulacra whereby identical copies are mass produced where no original ever existed. Under these circumstances, everything becomes replaceable, or, alternatively, disposable. Ritzer (1998: 125) speaks of a world in which it is perceived that '. . . everything is available for communication, signification, banalization, commercialization and consumption'. Fleming (1996: 198–9) points out that the logic of consumerism is '. . . buy it and then look elsewhere for the next fix'. Certainly this may be said of the Tamagotchi as well; like all fashions, the Tamagotchi has given way to the next innovation and indeed, as we write, the Tamagotchi is a fad which seems 'dated'. At this time, at the dawn of the new millennium, its place has already been taken by a new plaything, known as 'Furby', and we can safely assume that by the time this article is published yet another toy will have become the latest craze.

Fleming (1996: 198–9) maintains that the speed of change in the relationships between children and their toys today is:

> . . . a commentary on how children now experience time, their own place in it and the transitory nature of each attempt to grasp what is happening out there . . . for today's children the very scale of data acquisition required of them may make slowing down and reflecting almost impossible to achieve – without assistance. The momentum that carries them from Transformers to Turtles to Power Rangers to whatever, is simultaneously the momentum of the consumerist drive and . . . the momentum of minds trying to keep pace.

In fact, even in the actual play with the Tamagotchi, events take place very rapidly and efficiently. In essence, the Tamagotchi scans certain superficial characteristics of relationships and the behaviors these entail (e.g. feeding, teaching, etc.), and requires zapping from one to another at a rate that parallels the short attention span for which children, particularly in today's world of technology, are notorious. Harvey (1989: 189), who views postmodernity as the continuation of modernity, says that what began in the former as the compression of time and space, has become all the more so in the latter, to the point that it has '. . . a disorienting and disruptive impact.'

In a culture of disposables, interpersonal relationships and attachments, like material products, are disposable. In such situations, we would argue, simulated interactions might even become indistinguishable from relationships with real, sentient beings, and indeed, the former become more real than reality itself, or 'hyperreal', in the language of Baudrillard (1983). Ritzer (1998) describes the blurring between simulated and authentic interactions in the context of customers and employees and carries the analogy over to the realm of fast food where, for example, McDonald's hamburgers have become the essence of what a 'real' hamburger is, or chicken McNuggets constitute a wholly invented type of food for which no original ever existed.

A Reuters correspondent in Vietnam reported that the chase for virtual pets reached new heights in Hanoi. Here, in an ironic twist, life appeared to be imitating virtual reality: the local press reported unprecedented sales of newly hatched chicks to children who, much to the dismay of school officials, took them along with them everywhere, just as occurred with the 'real' Tamagotchi. The 'Tamagotchi compatible' creature, as it was referred to, cost approximately 25 cents, whereas the virtual pet sold for the equivalent of about $30 US (Reuters, 1997).

The Tamagotchi adds to this the disposability of 'life', and not just of any life, but that about which, supposedly, one has cared, and presumably, to which one is attached, albeit temporarily. According to Simmel (1978: 296), in a world where value is represented by money, interpersonal relations become more abstract and the personality that lies behind an individual becomes far less important than his or her achievements or functions in

society. From here, it is possible to make the claim that in a consumer society, personalities are of less importance than the roles people play. Thus, the Tamagotchi, which plays the role of a loosely defined 'dependent', whether a child or a pet, does not need to have a specific personality, making its replacement in the next 'game' a logical move.

Ritzer (1998: 132) maintains that 'We are largely on our own in the postmodern social world in general, and in our relationships with the new means of consumption in particular.' In playing with the Tamagotchi, an individual becomes a consumer of a certain code – she or he enters into the realm of the current fad. Much like the referendum Baudrillard (1983) discusses, the actual choices are outlined in advance: on one hand, the selections available within the constraints of the game itself are constrained by its machine-like nature; on the other hand, the choice of whether or not to play with the game is a socially based decision. In the case of children, frequently, it is peer pressure that leads a girl or boy to consume a certain product. To acquire the Tamagotchi and to play with it is to be a part of the community of players in the postmodern game of life.

The concept of 'para-social interaction' has been employed by several scholars in attempting to theorize about illusory relationships and the blurring of boundaries between interpersonal and mediated communication. In research related to children, it has been distinguished from identification (or the process by which one person shares another's perspective, participates in their experiences, desires to be like that character, emulates their behavior and the like). Para-social interaction relates not so much to a desire to resemble characters as it does to wishing to achieve 'intimacy' through the imagined interaction with personalities and becoming acquainted with them, according to the original description of the term by Horton and Wohl (1956). Some researchers have suggested that the process of developing para-social relationships is similar in many ways to the means by which people come to know others in real life and to the gratification derived for those involved (Hoffner, 1996).

While para-social relationships concern people in the media and those viewing or listening to them, the case of the Tamagotchi is quite different. Here it is the personification of a machine with which people perceive that they are having an interpersonal relationship, thus removing the illusion yet further from reality.

Moreover, by contrast with para-social interaction, in the case of the Tamagotchi, real actions in the real world (i.e. pressing a button) affect the other party at a virtual level (e.g. feeding). Indeed, the very existence of the virtual partner to the interaction depends on responding to its demands; put differently, to play the game is to interact with the other. Thus, while 'real' interaction is reciprocal, para-social interaction is unidirectional. Virtual interaction is a combination of the two: real in one sense but illusory in the

other, since by definition, the Tamagotchi's response is preprogrammed. In this sense, the Tamagotchi is symptomatic of interactive technologies in general, the case being all the more acute since it is a socializing instrument intended for use by young children.

It is difficult not to observe the irony of a world where it is possible to starve a market of a virtual creature that requires nurturing, while elsewhere real people, not to mention animals, starve for lack of basic requirements as well as nurturing. The key, perhaps, is in the very notion of play where one is in control, as opposed to reality where this is not always true, especially in the case of children. To play at nurturing is one thing, since it can be ceased at any point, and it is the player who is in control, much in the same way as Fleming (1996: 60–2) citing research on child psychology, points out that children will gleefully destroy a tower they have constructed but will not appreciate its accidentally being knocked down by anyone else.

Out of numerous internet sites concerning the Tamagotchi two interesting discussions are worth mentioning. One source (see 'Critical thoughts about Tamagotchi' Analysis: 1) quotes individuals discussing the Tamagotchi to exemplify how different people might conceive of it. For some, it seems to represent a living creature, while for others it is a learning device, both concepts ruling out the framing of the Tamagotchi as a game or a toy. Citing Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of metaphorical extensions, the article explains how certain entailments could result from each of these conceptual structures. Thus, if the Tamagotchi represents a toy, then the owner is engaging in self-entertainment, successful playing implies skill, and unsuccessful playing indicates lack of skill. If, however, it is considered a learning device teaching responsibility, then its user is a student, intent on self-improvement, and while successful learning improves responsibility, unsuccessful learning shows irresponsibility. Finally, if the Tamagotchi symbolizes a living creature, then the owner is an altruist, devoting him or herself unselfishly to the other. In such a case, success means life, while failure represents death, both being the individual responsibility of the owner. Clearly, however, there is no evidence to show whether or not children experience any of these roles or their implications.

Citing French philosopher Levinas, another internet source (Bensky and Haque, 1997) discusses how the Tamagotchi '. . . reinforces one's own identity by engaging the owner into [sic] a dialogue with an Other. Identity is reaffirmed because the relationship emphasises the distinctness, as well as the co-dependency of owner and pet.' Moreover, contrary to mere idol worship, such as the Japanese virtual star Date Kyoko, in which a fan's narcissistic fantasies were projected upon the idol, '. . . there is a shift from simple "projections of desire" to a more sophisticated "acceptance of otherness" ' (Bensky and Haque, 1997: 1).

Certainly, the Tamagotchi is made to seem as if it has the needs of a

sentient being, with semi-human values, and that it can be trained to respond in certain ways; the mere fact that it requires affection and scolding implies this, not to mention that one of its qualities is the ability to 'study' and therefore to learn. Thus, it is as if mutual learning were taking place – while the owner is learning how to care for it, the machine is, supposedly, learning as well, both from its studies, as well as from its training by the owner.

In sum, we argue that the Tamagotchi is a metaphor of our times, representing the blurring of boundaries between real reciprocal relationships and surrogate, one-way imaginary ones. It highlights the dominant role of technology in our lives; no longer simply a tool for use in science and industry, but now a substitute for human relationships.

Gender relationships

The Tamagotchi has implications for issues of gender and children's socialization. As Fleming (1996: 7) points out: 'Toys mean a great deal to children and, as the process of being a child has everything to do with the kinds of people, women and men, which we become, it would seem not at all unlikely that toys have much to do with identity'. Indeed, in his discussion of the new toy, Fleming (1996: 161) points out that male identity is persistently placed at the center of the system. Among the questions he poses are: 'Do children actually start out from these positions within the identified system? Do girls begin inevitably in Barbie's corner and find themselves fenced in there? Do boys begin in the centre?'

A growing literature on children's consumption of media suggests that girls and boys derive different pleasures from the variety of media available to them, and that they differ in their readings of popular texts. Roe (1998), for example, in his study of 9- to 12-year-old children, found that these differences became even more salient as children grow older. Boys and girls, he argues, 'inhabit different media worlds'. Similarly, in an integrated review of the results of a comparative study of 12 European countries, Lemish and Liebes (in press) have found that boys watch more television than girls and are heavier computer users. Girls, on the other hand, listen more to music and read more. In addition, boys have a greater interest in television and computer action genres, while girls are heavier consumers of televised series and romances.

A major difference between boys' and girls' media consumption seems to a large extent to relate to their attitudes toward violence. Girls have less of a preference for violent television programs than boys and enjoy it less. Although they seem to be less affected by television violence as they grow older, they are frightened by it more easily and they express less approval of it (Van Evra, 1990). Similarly, studies suggest that girls show much less interest in violent interactive video and computer games than boys (Lemish et al.,

1998). The absence of aggressive females as role models on television, video and computer games, and girls' early socialization into normative female behaviors and tastes may account for these differences (Lemish, 1998).

The Tamagotchi, as a medium, offers a unique blurring of these traditional role divisions. In one respect, the Tamagotchi is a computerized game, privileging traditional male technological skills. However, in contrast to most computer and video fare, the content world of the Tamagotchi is that of caregiving rather than destruction, nurturing rather than vanquishing, prolonging life rather than killing, facilitating rather than competing. In this sense it may be seen as what the author of an internet article describes as the continuation of a shift in video game modeling from those based on 'conquest and succession' requiring '. . . temporally limited tasks with set goals attainable through skill and reflexes', such as Pac Man and Super Mario Brothers, to those concerned with growth and maintenance, such as SimCity and Civilization, where the user's ultimate goal is to make a particular area (city, ant colony, world, etc.) flourish ('Critical thoughts about Tamagotchi' Analysis: 5). The authors end on the comment that: 'The Tamagotchi differs from the Sim-model not in spirit, but in execution. Pets (like house plants) are under our direct supervision, and so they take on more personal importance than entire cities or worlds. Consequently, we tend to feel more directly responsible for the welfare of a virtual animal that we "care for", than for the welfare of a community we virtually govern' ('Critical thoughts about Tamagotchi' Analysis: 6).

The process-oriented nature of the Tamagotchi is much more in line with psychological analyses of the feminine than it is with the typically goal-driven masculine games. In some respects, the Tamagotchi can be seen as the blurring of the gendered nature of the toy itself: it is neither a fuzzy animal nor a vehicle or a mechanical toy, neither a soft plastic doll nor a violent computer game. In short, it does not lend itself to any particular gendered stereotype.

This line of argument supports some of the claims put forth in the much-debated discussion over female versus male discourse: while males use language in a more pragmatic goal-oriented manner to convey information, females are more concerned with the meta-communicative aspects of language. As Tannen (1990, 1993) has argued, men approach conversations as individuals within a social hierarchy, with the aim of attaining a certain status and maintaining their independence. Women's conversational ambitions, however, are to maintain closeness, to provide support and to encourage agreement within a social network. A similar argument can be made in relation to the Tamagotchi, since it is a computer game whose success depends on processes rather than on the attainment of goals, and on growth rather than on achievements.

These unique characteristics of the Tamagotchi provide an opportunity to

challenge the assumptions underpinning much of the literature on gendered computer use. By providing girls with gender-relevant content areas, and an alternate means of handling them, they will become as interested in the technology and as proficient in its use as boys. Some initial support of this claim comes from other research. Lemish and Liebes (in press), for example, present evidence which suggests that similar levels of interest in computer games exist among young boys and girls when the most popular genres consist of animated and educational games. Similarly, among teenagers, while internet use is generally much heavier for boys, specific content areas – such as surfing and joining chat groups – attract many girls as well.

The same argument can also be advanced differently. Although the Tamagotchi was more popular among girls than boys, quite a few boys found it equally attractive. It is possible that introducing female caregiving activities to the male-dominated framework of technology can serve to socialize boys toward changing gender roles, possibly represented later in life with the growing involvement of males in the upbringing of their offspring.

Finally, attention should be directed to the gendered nature of the context. Care of the Tamagotchi, which is part of the private realm, is brought out into the public, to schools, children's clubs, work places and malls. Although it is designed to be played with in solitude, it elicited much discussion, and, like nannies gathering in the park to discuss their charges, children frequently tended to cluster around their Tamagotchis comparing notes. One result was that ownership and use of the Tamagotchi became so prevalent in many parts of the world that schools found the phenomenon created a disturbance in the normal routine. As a result, many institutions have adopted ad hoc rules according to which no caregiving activities are allowed during classtime. In some schools, teachers collect the Tamagotchis, taking over their care during school hours. In other schools, a stricter policy has completely forbidden bringing Tamagotchis onto the premises altogether. This, in fact, constitutes a 'death sentence' for the lovable virtual creatures which cannot survive a full day without care. While clearly a disciplinary decision on the part of the school, this policy raises interesting issues in an industrialized society where the modern trend is towards facilitating mothering in the workplace, such as by the establishment of day-care centers in or near offices, permitting nursing mothers to bring babies to work during breaks, flexible work hours for parents, allowing both partners to share paid maternity leave and the like. The school policy restricting Tamagotchi play seems to legitimize and to continue to socialize toward traditional, anachronistic values of separating the public and the private domains. The message thereby conveyed to children is that 'caring' belongs in the private realm, and is off-limits in the public one, since it 'disturbs' the normal routine. This is clearly in line with the traditional gender division between the domains.

Existential Relationships

Playing the Tamagotchi involves a specific narrative, paralleling the 'story of life'. There is a sequence involving birth, day-to-day life, and eventually death. The player is put in the position of 'the creator', albeit one who is provided with all the tools in advance: by activating the start button, the Tamagotchi owner begins the game of life, and ends it, within the confines of the preconceived parameters of the game. In a manner similar to that attributed to God and to earthly parents, caring for the Tamagotchi apparently requires selfless devotion, a manifestation of altruism which reaffirms the player's own importance. But unlike most earthly parents, Tamagotchi players have the option to neglect their creations incurring no negative sanctions and suffering no emotional consequences from their loss, since they are invested with the power to recreate life at the push of a button.

As a result of this ability to reactivate the game of life, the Tamagotchi is played within a cyclical timeframe: certain elements repeat themselves with regularity, not only the daily caregiving routines, but even birth and death. By contrast with the mystical concept of reincarnation where the spirit is preserved only to take on a new physical shape, in the case of the Tamagotchi, the same entity reappears again and again. In what seems like a parody of life, reminiscent of a cartoon, death is virtually reversible.

Certain religious authorities have actually been forced to make a distinction between virtual and social responsibilities. In Israel, the Rabbinate determined that it is not permissible to play with the Tamagotchi on the Holy Sabbath, even when this is a matter of life and death for the object, contrary to the world of humans in which *pikuach nefesh* or the 'saving of souls' takes precedence over observing the Sabbath (Suissa, 1997). The mere fact that religious authorities found it incumbent upon them to make such a ruling indicates the fuzzy distinctions between reality and virtual reality.

Not all players take the deaths of their Tamagotchi lightly. Bensky and Haque (1997) make reference to a 'virtual temple' and funerary bulletin boards where offerings can be made and prayers left to accommodate those whose Tamagotchis have virtually left them. Indeed, a number of chat sites exist, much in the manner of support groups, for owners of both 'live' and 'deceased' virtual creatures. The authors go on to say that '. . . the act of "going to temple" legitimises the relationship and distinguishes it from a mere plaything' (1997: 1).

In conjunction with religion and worship the concept of fetishism comes to mind. Sebeok (1994: 93) describes the early use of the term 'fetish' as that of an inanimate object worshipped for its inherent magical powers or its animation by a spirit, or generally 'something irrationally reverenced', a claim which might be made of the Tamagotchi, in connection with the

intensity of emotion it elicited. Furthermore, Tester (1995: 58) citing Marx (1938: 43) argues that the world of commodities is comparable only to the world of religion: ' "In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, entering into relation both with one another and the human race." ' The Tamagotchi, as a product of consumer society, recalls the cliché cited by Fiske (1989) equating consumerism with religion, with its own sites of worship (e.g. malls), its own rituals (e.g. shopping sprees), its own holy days (e.g. sales) and its own gratifications and sense of purpose. Playing with the Tamagotchi is thus an act of joining a community of those who share in the reverence of a specific object in a common virtual world.

CONCLUSION: THE TRANSIENT LIFE OF THE TAMAGOTCHI

This paper has attempted to deconstruct some of the meanings inherent in the Tamagotchi by showing how it toys with some of the most essential relationships along three different dimensions: the interpersonal, the gendered and the existential. Placed within the context of late modernity, typified by commercialism, globalization, privatization and individualization, the Tamagotchi can be viewed as a sign of the times (Fornäs and Bolin, 1995). The Tamagotchi was a phenomenal commercial success which spread its popularity globally, as a privately owned technological toy, played on a solitary basis by individuals. Moreover, we would maintain that the Tamagotchi symbolizes the transition from the modern to the postmodern: on one hand it represents the illusion that technology and science can bring about happiness and salvation for humankind; on the other hand it is the ultimate threat to the modern world, since it pushes the idea of technology to its limits, subversively replacing life with a machine and fostering a relationship of the most human kind between a person and an object. The glorification of technological relationships over human ones can, in fact, be seen as a cynical critique of bio-technology and all the genetic sciences (the reproduction of sheep, for example, or the replacement of human organs); in technological relationships, only one living organism is required to virtually create and to recreate life.

The Tamagotchi offers players a stylized version of the game of life, a claim which could, indeed, apply to other toys as well, especially in those games that involve life and death. In the case of the Tamagotchi, needs are overt, and responses are of one kind (i.e. pressing the required button), making interaction with it simplified. Changes in the Tamagotchi's life occur within a far more limited time span than they tend to for pets or humans in reality, typically in increments of minutes rather than in days or years. Although gratification is not instant, it is more immediate inside the virtual world than out, catering to a short attention span typical in this era of

television zapping and action packed computer games. Even the most intense emotions conjured up by this artificial relationship are transient: one day the Tamagotchi elicits a frenzied devotion, only to be discarded shortly thereafter. Moreover, this is not a case of outgrowing a toy, meaning that it can then be passed on to younger children as with dolls, for instance; here, once discarded, the toy apparently does not even leave the traces of affection accorded to a once-treasured pastime.

In the new and improved version of life offered by the Tamagotchi, the possibility exists to restart the cycle once the game has ended, consequently affording players second, third, and many more chances to create life and develop temporary relationships. Through the opportunity to start the cycle over at any time, life itself can be seen to be devalued together with the relationships that accompany it and hence the entire process is trivialized. Once again, however, we have no knowledge of whether or not children do, in fact, perceive the matter in this light.

In other ways too the Tamagotchi represents the postmodern, characterized as it is by the blurring of traditional boundaries and the erasure of dualism and of certainty (Lyotard, 1984). This plaything exemplifies how it is possible to confuse the distinctions between numerous polarities: subject and object (the player and the toy); childhood and adulthood (carefree play and responsible commitment); nature and civilization (life and technology); emotional expression and rational action (love and a reset button); the masculine and the feminine (vanquishing and cultivating); past and future (traditional caring and technological maintenance); real time and virtual time (life cycle and momentary leaps); moral and immoral (care and neglect); inseparability and alienation (intense attachment and consignment to oblivion). Rather than an entity which is one of its kind, never to be repeated, the Tamagotchi represents serial reproduction, presenting a model of life which is not unique, but recycled.

Playing the game of life with the Tamagotchi is a recreational activity; by definition, it is to be indulged in so long as it is amusing. The mere fact that creation and nurturing are treated as a type of fun to be done away with at whim may have attitudinal implications since it is possible that everything that a toy symbolizes may, theoretically, have an effect. This effect may emanate both from the cultural framework of play created by adults for children, as well as from the connection between these toys and others within the network of different types of games inside the realm of popular culture (Fleming, 1996). Because of the fact that the Tamagotchi is primarily aimed at children, its potential socializing effects should be considered, particularly if, as we have assumed due to its price tag, it is a toy whose purchase is sponsored by parents, and consequently endorsed by them, presumably in the interest of fostering socially desirable behaviors and

values. Indeed, it is primarily for this reason that such objects merit intense scrutiny.

In view of the popularity that the Tamagotchi enjoyed the world over, we may ask if it represented a case of virtual socialization, or, in view of the nature of the toy, was it a case of a virtually socialized world? Given the extent and the intensity of Tamagotchi worship, how can the toy's subsequent decline in popularity be explained? Two possibilities suggest themselves: first, the fate of many objects in today's world as part of the culture of the disposable is to lose their appeal as soon as they have been, literally, 'consumed', falling into oblivion by the time the next series of innovations appears. The second explanation is that a type of natural disenchantment occurs when children, encouragingly enough, appear to realize the distinction between a live pet and a virtual one. In other words, the very machine-like nature of the object, with the provision of set options from which to choose, is recognized by children, who subsequently comprehend its limitations.

Future research could contribute a great deal toward an understanding of the potential socializing effects of virtual toys by investigating them from children's perspectives. How do they view them? What meanings do these objects hold for them? Why is it that they tire of such games when they do? How do they make the distinctions between the real and the virtual? Perhaps it is specifically through interaction with these toys that children learn to make the distinction between the virtual and the real world, and learn to understand the nature of relationships in each. As parents, educators and social researchers we need to understand the role they play in our children's lives.

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Notes

1 Some of these tactics included: relatively small numbers delivered, irregular supply schedules; unconventional methods of delivery (i.e. well-publicized use of an armored Brinks truck providing stock to FAO Schwartz in San Francisco); packaging the same object in different colored cases and generating shortages of certain colors, resulting in price scaling ('Critical thoughts about Tamagotchi' Background: 4)

2 It is worth noting that although children have, apparently, been the primary market, Tamagotchis were, and are in some cases still, owned by adults as well. As stated in an article on the internet, 'Critical thoughts about Tamagotchi' Analysis: 2: 'A large number of adults have found the challenge of maintaining a Tamagotchi while holding down a steady job somewhat taxing. Anecdotal reports are everywhere of businessmen

postponing or prematurely adjourning important meetings in order to care for their "virtual pets". Office workers sneak off to the bathroom in order to use the device without being noticed.' Moreover, Tamagotchis, naturally affect adults even when owned by their children, beyond the initial financial outlay if they purchased the product for their children, whether because of 'caretaking duties', disrupted schedules, complaints from school, and the like, or children's distress at their pet's demise.

3 The 'Lovegety' is an electronic 'matchmaker' whereby small pink machines, for females, and small blue machines, for males, can be used to indicate their owner's desire for karaoke, a talk, or romance by sending signals to the opposite sex's machine, within a five meter radius (Sadeh, 1998; Sommer, 1998).

4 The term 'miniature', in itself, connotes the concept of a toy. Indeed, one of the original meanings of the word 'toy', is a miniature representation of something, whether animate (e.g. 'toy poodle') or inanimate.

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