

to the identity of its cultural producer (Japan making it in a market hitherto dominated by the United States: global kids' trends). In the next chapter, I move to another Bandai toy property, *tamagotchi*, that sold profitably and popularly around the world in the late 1990s. Similarly constructed around a principle of transformation, this one featured not humans, however, but virtual pets that engender a play of interaction and attendance (as in raising a pet) rather than identification. How, why, and with what implications such a fantasy construction from Japan became a global fad on the eve of the millennium are the questions I ask there.

6 *Tamagotchi*

The Prosthetics of Presence

Congratulations! This is a very special day for you because you now have your very own Tamagotchi! And just like you, your Tamagotchi needs some very special care to grow up into something you can be proud of—something that's nice and well behaved and won't embarrass you in front of your friends. That would be terrible. . . .

One thing to remember, more than anything else, is to pay close, close attention to your Tamagotchi. The more you do what's right for it, the better it will grow up and the longer it will stay with you. Being a caretaker to your Tamagotchi is an adventure you're going to remember for the rest of your life.

From *Tamagotchi: The Official Care Guide and Record Book*
(Betz 1997:7, 8)

From Heroes to Pets: Raising a Portable Plaything

At the peak of its popularity in the late 1990s, the *tamagotchi* was called "the world's most popular toy" (Berfield 1997:33), a "sensation around the world" (WuDunn 1997:17), the "current craze" (Clyde 1998:34), and the "next Japanese gadget to sweep the continent" (Pollack 1997:37).¹ An egg-shaped device that hangs on a key holder, the *tamagotchi* is a portable game with a liquid crystal screen whose purpose is to raise virtual pets. Targeted first to eight-year-olds, the electronic play pal took off with teenage girls and adults when it was launched in Japan in December 1996. With its crossover appeal and multiple functions—a toy that is simultaneously pet, gadget, game, fashion accessory, and virtual reality—the *tamagotchi* sold out in Japanese stores only days after hitting the market. Saving Bandai, its manufacturer, from a slump in toy sales, the product became a hit both at home and abroad, where it was exported much more quickly than earlier waves of Japanese kid properties had been.² (The lag time was only five months for its debut in the United States, for example, in contrast to three years for *Sailor Moon* and eight years for *Power Rangers*.) Hitting the U.S.

marketplace at FAO Schwartz in May 1997, thirty thousand *tamagotchi* items were sold in three days, and three million were sold in three months.³ By May of the following year, the game was selling in more than eighty countries and had produced revenues of more than \$160 million.

The *tamagotchi* also generated a craze of virtual spin-offs: "pets" in a range of shapes—from dinosaurs, gods, and babies to fish, chimps, and dogs—marketed by a host of companies (Fujitsu, Tiger Electronics, Sega, Casio, Playmates, PF Magic). The medium migrated as well, from handheld toys, digital petdom spread to computer software, television games, and cell phones (the *tamapitchi*, for example, is a cross between a PHS cell phone and a regular *tamagotchi* that, for 45,000 yen, or \$500, allows callers to send digital images of their virtual pets over the phone to friends). In what became a global fad on the eve of the new millennium, the *tamagotchi* is regarded as the ur-form. If not the first virtual pet of all time, it is the form in which this cyborgian fantasy was popularized and (re)produced as mass culture.

Simulating petdom—sprouting a lifelike image of a pet that users interact with as if it were alive—was Yokoi Akhiro's aim in creating the *tamagotchi*.⁴ As he relates in his book (1997) on "birthing" the virtual pet, Yokoi was inspired by a television commercial he saw in which a young boy packing to go away on vacation, puts his pet turtle in the suitcase. As an animal lover himself (with an apartment and office stocked with "real" pets), Yokoi says two aspects of the scene touched him: the boy's attachment to his pet and the limited mobility of flesh-and-blood animals. Yokoi's story of creating a "pet" that could travel everywhere with kids is reminiscent of Moria Akiō's reputed inspiration for the Sony Walkman. Walking the streets of New York and wishing he could listen to music the way he could at home on a radio, record player, or hi-fi, Morita was possessed by a vision of mobile music. Like Yokoi, he was driven to create a machine that could move along with its owner.⁵ Portability was key in both cases, as reflected in the product names that resulted: "walk" in Walkman and "watch" in *tamagotchi* (the original idea was that the pets would hatch from eggs, *tamago*, that would be carried on *watches* = *tamagotchi*). But movement, in this age of flux and mobility, was only one concern. Equally important to both men was what their nomadic machines would do for their users: namely, expand personal access to something—music, pets, intimate attachments—that would otherwise be limited to specific places and times. In the case of virtual petdom, access moves out of the home into a space that is more fluid yet, coincidentally, more grounded as well—a handheld egg with a digital screen that is carried in the pocket or backpack or on the key chain of its owner.

As Mitsui and Hosokawa (1998) have written about karaoke, one of the greatest innovations in what they call the cultural technology produced by postwar Japan is its (re)organization of space and body. Blurring the distinction often made between technology and culture, they see in the invention of karaoke a mechanical system that also becomes the conduit for cultural production. As a technology, it allows for not only the reproduction of music but also the (re)staging of songs popularized by well-known stars, whose voices are deleted and replaced by that of the karaoke singer. And, as a global pastime, karaoke has traveled around the world from Nepal and Columbia to Italy and the United States (where even a McDonald's in Ohio features karaoke). Given its interactivity, karaoke is engaged differently in different places, often incorporating (and remaking) very local traditions of participatory singing. In this sense, the globalized practice of karaoke does not produce a homogeneous culture, and neither Japan nor Japanese music may be explicitly referenced in karaoke clubs outside Japan.

Still, karaoke is far more than a "hard" technology. It is not only a medium for expressive culture (the personal and interpersonal staging of songs), but also a technological advance that enacts, embodies, and spatially expresses this culture. The word means empty (*kara*) orchestra (*oke*). In as it fills this space up with new ones. Giving an elasticity to the borders of musical performer/performance, karaoke allows anyone to be a singer and the stage to be a restaurant, bar, or family room. Body and space are both malleable, reshaping the experience and production of performative singing. The same is true of the Walkman, writes Hosokawa, as music becomes part of the everyday "walk act" (deCerteau quoted in Hosokawa 1984:175-76) and sound comes from a system wired to the body itself. As the person holding the Walkman moves through the course of her everyday routines, she listens to music that at once decontextualizes the outside world and recontextualizes it according to her own customized tastes. The activity is both private and personal—situating it ambiguously between autonomy and autism (Chambers 1990:2). This effect extends and also mutates the body, turning the music-listening experience and the Walkman itself into a bodily prosthesis. "Whether it is the Walkman that charges the body, or, inversely, the body that charges the Walkman, it is difficult to say. The Walkman works not as a prolongation of the body . . . but as a built-in part or, because of its intimacy, as an intrusion-like prosthesis. The Walkman holder plays the music and listens to the sound come from his own body" (Hosokawa 1984:176).

The realignment of the intimacies of music onto the geography of body

and place is the great innovation of the Walkman and karaoke. It suggests a reconfiguration of not only body and space but also subjectivity: what Deleuze has called the "singularity" of the postmodern subject that, distinct from the individual, is "anonymous, impersonal, pre-individual, and nomadic." Plugged into technology like the Walkman, "singular" subjects connect to their environment (and others) in a relationship at once distant and intimate, akin to the "intimate alienation" I discussed in chapter 3 and what Deleuze labels "positive distance" (Hosokawa 1984:169-70).

The same is true of the *tamagotchi*, though a different aspect of life is realigned here. Whereas music is an experience or performance, a pet, at least as it is conventionally conceived, is a living organism—usually an animal. One of the most noted characteristics of the *tamagotchi*, however, and one that contributes to its popular and global appeal, is the uncanny sense of presence it generates in players. Owners repeatedly comment on how their *tamagotchi* feel "real" and how they interact with these pixilated images as if they were "actual pets." Much like music, in fact, it is the experience (in this case, of having a pet) that Yokoi Aki emphasizes in his descriptions of crafting *tamagotchi*. The physical appearance of the pet is less important than the personal relationship one forms with it. As Yokoi claims from his own experience, cuteness matters most when a person first buys a pet. After that, a bond is formed mainly by taking care of the organism: endless chores and duties (*mendō*) that Yokoi implanted in a game sequence meant to mimic those involved in the raising of a flesh-and-blood pet (Yokoi 1997:70). By manipulating buttons on the toy and icons on the screen, a player attends to her *tamagotchi*'s needs and desires (for food, play, discipline, medicine, attention, and poop cleanup). According to how attentively the player follows this script, the *tamagotchi* "grows up," assuming one of several possible forms (some more desirable than others, according to the information that accompanies the toy). But the player needs to be constantly vigilant. And these menial labors constitute play in the context of the *tamagotchi*: what gives "life" to the virtual pet and intimacy to the bonds formed between people and their machines/*tamagotchi*.

This playscape differs from the imaginary realms I have been exploring in the two previous chapters: stories of superheroes who look human and fight as moral warriors against evil that are enscripted in mass-media productions (television shows, children's magazines, comic books). With *tamagotchi*, we are dealing with a toy whose characters are not recycled from a popular kids' show or comic—what Bandai exploited with such success in kid hits like the *Power Ranger* series and *Sailor Moon*, and a marketing strategy whose payoff was beginning to diminish by 1996. Yokoi Akihiro set

out to design a new kind of toy, and, indeed, the corporeality of the *tamagotchi* characters is different altogether from the *mecha* (male) Rangers and fleshy (female) Scouts. After an initial empty screen, the *tamagotchi*'s image fills in gradually, as in karaoke, in response to a player's input. The likeness is sketchy even when the pet has fully matured: a smiling amoeba, a head on two feet, a flower with eyes and beak, in a pot.⁶ The *tamagotchi* are neither humans nor heroes, and the shapes they assume are meant to be weird. This makes them more interesting to children, according to Yokoi (1997:83), who aimed to design "strange living beings" (*henna ikimono*): a queer (and postgender) subset, as it were, of phenomenal life.

This is the cyborgian frontier that we have encountered already in morphing superheroes who shift from human to machine mode with bodies that transform and translate into weapons/vehicles/robots/jewels. With the *tamagotchi*, though, the interface has shifted. Because the cyborgs here are pets rather than heroic humans, they invite an imaginary relationship other than identification. Further, the materiality of the image is different. Rather than being pregiven forms projected onto a television screen or comic book page, the *tamagotchi* result from an interactive game held and adjusted by the player herself (who has various options, including "killing" the pet). In that cyborgs are both tools and myths, the mythology given their use-value shifts here as well. Superheroes are cyberweapons programmed to serve collective interests: defending the homeland (and friends) by destroying aliens bent on conquest and change. *Tamagotchi*, by contrast, are a strange new life-form designed to be the virtual pets of their owners. The mytho-play dynamics move here from the grandiose (saving others) to the personal (raising cute pets), and from humanism (protecting earth and humanity) to the posthuman (suturing attachments to digital icons). A different logic—and fetishization—of bodies, powers, and the human-nonhuman contact zone is at work in the *tamagotchi*, reflecting, and refracting, something different in the world, the imagination (with which to play and escape "reality"), and global marketability. For the child player, the characters invite a relationship not of mimesis (mimicking the morphin stances and performativity/sexiness of the superheroes) but of ownership, caregiving, and pet-dom.

Permeable Borders:

Widening the Fan Base

The *tamagotchi* is a fitting toy for the post-cold war era of the new millennium. This is a world in which clear-cut divisions between friend and enemy

no longer exist. Borders are more permeable than permanent, and identity—whether of nation, gender, or race—is difficult to anchor in any one spot. As reflected in the *tamagotchi* game, forging alliances between self and other is emphasized over distinguishing (and defending) these as bounded entities. And this interface becomes a play zone: one that represents postindustrial confusion as much as fusion in connections between organism and machine, human and pet, labor and leisure. Accordingly, the *tamagotchi* are represented according to the rules of fantasy, not realism. Drawn as ironic, iconic sketches, the lines are recognizable but assembled with a syntax that is both disorienting and enchanting—a rose with eyes and feet, a head with poochy lips and a tail. As Haraway (1991) has written about cyborgs, there is a progressive potential to liberating bodies from nature when nature is used ideologically to assign power and privilege to bodies of only certain types (white and male, for example). As if trying to assure such liberation, in a global marketplace long dominated by the United States, Bandai came up with a toy that featured neither humans nor the realistic style long held to be Hollywood's cachet in entertainment (particularly film, but also television).

As will be recalled, Bandai's experiences with marketing *Power Rangers* and *Sailor Moon* in the United States were fraught with difficulties. Network works refused to take on *Jyū Renjū* for eight years, and when Fox Network did make an alliance with Tōei Studios, the condition for acceptance was radical reconstruction. Only after all the sequences of the Rangers in their human, premorphed forms had been reshot with American actors in California (and then spliced together with the action footage from Japan) was *Power Rangers* reborn in hybrid form. The assumption, by the Americans managing the property, was that American children would not identify with Asian heroes on-screen. Any sign of cultural difference, including the show's origins in Japan, was effaced for U.S. transmission. As we have seen, this remade version—with its American rather than Japanese identity and actors—is the form in which *Power Rangers* traveled around the world as a global hit. *Sailor Moon* was a somewhat different case, given that its medium was animation rather than live action, a fact that made alteration of the images more difficult even though, in appearance at least, the cartoon characters could pass as Anglo-Americans. But in the portrayal of lifestyle and dramatic intrigue, the show—as is commonly assessed by those in the business—was too little altered for American audiences to succeed in the channels of mainstream kids' TV, though it did fine in other countries like France, Spain, and Hong Kong and generated plenty of American fans when it was broadcast on Cartoon Network. (This discrepancy is an issue I return

to in the following chapters on *Pokémon*.) In either case, launching these properties in a global marketplace has been dictated by American productions and tastes and involves major issues around cultural translation/transformation.

Such has not been the case, however, with the *tamagotchi*, a toy that configures body and place very differently. *Tamagotchi* are not only something other than human, they grow up in a world deterritorialized from any geographic place. The only context here is that of cyber interactions that mimic the biological rhythms involved in the care of a flesh-and-blood pet. This "biology" is itself a (cultural) construction, of course, since cleaning up poop or turning off lights is hardly hardwired into the care of animals around the world. Yet whatever of "culture" is at work here is far less overt than it is in the case of morphing superheroes. Virtually biologic (or biologically virtual), the *tamagotchi* realizes Bandai's corporate policy for the late 1990s: creating toy merchandise that "transcends time and space, and goes beyond national boundaries" (Bandai Kabushikigasha 1998:5). The company's aim, both in the products it sells and in the markets it sells to, is to stretch borders. Because its business of character merchandising "depends on knowing to which specific groups a particular character is likely to appeal" (4), the goal is to make characters that will appeal to as broad a consumer base as possible. In its corporate guide for 1997, Bandai uses the *tamagotchi* as an example of this very principle. Targeted first to senior high school girls in Japan, it attracted a much wider fan base in both the domestic and global marketplace than previous products. As Bandai says proudly: "These characters have now become the close friends of many, many people" (4).

In the form of this virtual "friend," Bandai has come up with a toy commodity that has transcended national boundaries with remarkable ease. In doing so, the *tamagotchi* reflects shifts in the way place both figures in and is configured as entertainment in global kids' trends. The place of Japan has greater prestige in the economy of the imagination these days, challenging (as other countries have) the hegemony once held by U.S. culture and its cultural industries. Yet the construction of place itself as it is imaged and imagined in commodified play is changing as well. In an era of space-time compression—intensified speed, movement between borders of various kinds, communication and travel across time—the parameters of place become fuzzy. But this does not mean that place no longer matters in how people experience the world. Rather, homes and intimacies remain important even when their mapping and mooring shift. The proposal by cultural geographer Doreen Massey to redefine place in terms other than rigid boundaries or unique identities is relevant here: "What gives place speci-

ficity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus" (1994:154). Place is both fluid and anchored, held together at both junctures by what Massey calls social relations.

The idea of petdom, even when it amounts to a virtual creation, engenders relations and interactions. In Massey's sense, then, the *tamagotchi* is a new kind of place that produces new sets of relationships—global commodity flows, postindustrial kids' trends, mobile and imaginary attachments. Both its power and its appeal come from combining movement with the groundedness of relationship—a convenient pal, portable intimacy, traveling pet. How does this contradictory mix work in practice?

The Discipline of Play

The *tamagotchi* (or *tamagotch*, as it is also called in Japanese) sold for about eighteen dollars in stores and came in various colors and styles. These included a proliferation of species—angels, dinosaurs, chickens, ocean and forest creatures—and, to tweak this nurturing toy more toward boys, the Digimon version, featuring monsters that can be hooked up to a buddy's *digimonchi* (what the Digimon *tamagotchi* is called) to fight in what is called the "dock 'n rock" function.⁷ To start the *tamagotchi*, the player presses the reset button on the back, adjusts the time, and pushes the middle one of three buttons on the bottom (figure 28). Immediately a pulsating egg appears on the liquid crystal screen, which hatches five minutes later as a smiling face, in white or black, named *Bebitchi* (Baby-tchi) or *Shirobeitchi* (white Baby-tchi). Significantly, these Japanese names remain on the toy's worldwide. In the English-language official Bandai guide, they are given phonetic rendering in parentheses—for example, *takotchi* (taco-tchee), *tamatchi* (tama-tchee), and *kuchitamachi* (koo-chee-ta-ma-tchee).⁸ Lit up on the screen now are the all-important caretaking icons: symbols that standing for the pet's needs, the player must attend to in order to raise a happy and healthy *tamagotchi*. A fork and knife signifies food, for example, and a rubber ducky stands for cleaning up poop. Altogether the player responds to eight icons by working the buttons at the bottom. These are food (dispensed in both meals and snacks), lights (that must be turned off when the *tamagotchi* is sleeping), play (transacted through games), medicine (given when the *tamagotchi* gets sick), cleaning (the follow-up to a poop, which appears as a Hershey chocolate kiss on the screen), the health meter (a scale that registers how happy and healthy the *tamagotchi* is at any one time), discipline (administered by pushing a button), and attention (lights

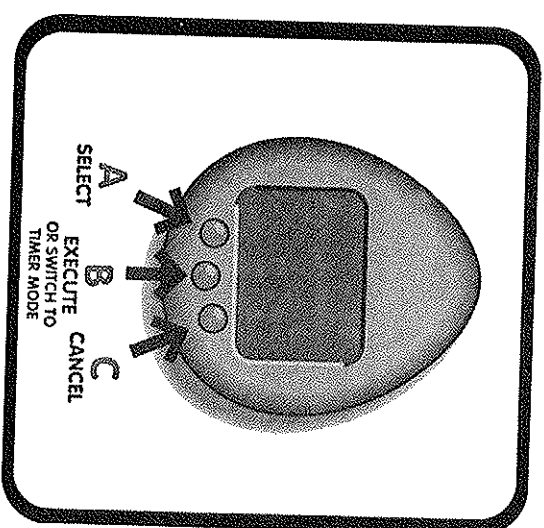


Figure 28. Prosthetic presence: the *tamagotchi* as egg. (TM & © 1997 Bandai Company, Ltd. Tamagotchi and all related logos, names, and distinctive likenesses herein are the exclusive property of Bandai Company, Ltd. and Bandai America Incorporated. Licensed by Bandai Entertainment Incorporated. All rights reserved.)

and beeps from the *tamagotchi* indicating that it needs something or, as the Bandai guide suggests, is just being bratty).

As a game, the basic routine is as follows. After the *tamagotchi* hatches as a baby, the player needs to interact regularly with the toy by keeping the pet happy and healthy. How well the *tamagotchi* is doing can be determined by reading the health meter, which displays its current weight and age (one day in *tamagotchi* time equals one year of earth time), as well as three scales registering how happy, well fed, and disciplined the pet is. Each scale appears on the screen as four hearts that indicate an optimal situation when they are filled, and encroaching danger when they are empty. To keep the hearts filled, a player feeds the pet by doling out meals or snacks; disciplines it by simply pressing the discipline icon, and gives love and stimulation by playing games (the player guesses whether the *tamagotchi* is going to turn right or left at the play mode and must win three out of five guesses to earn credits for playtime). In addition to these regular interactions, there are also

more intermittent demands. These include remembering to turn off the lights when the *tamagotchi* falls asleep, administering medicine if the sick sign shows up on the screen, cleaning up at the sight of a Hershey poop, and figuring out what the *tamagotchi* needs when it beeps for attention. As Foucault would note, play here is a disciplinary regime in which players become disciplined into assuming the subject position of (virtual) caregiver.

The overall objective, at least if one plays according to the official directions, is to keep the *tamagotchi* alive as long as possible and to raise a pet with socially desirable characteristics. To achieve these goals, a player must constantly interact with the *tamagotchi*: giving it food and love, keeping an eye out for sickness and mess, and being as mindful about discipline and moderation as kindness and devotion. As the instructions on the package for the *tamagotchi* angel clearly state: "It's up to you to raise your Tamagotchi Angel with just the right measure of love and attention. If you're successful, your Tamagotchi Angel will fly home to be rewarded with its wings. If not, well . . . you can always try again!"

In the case of the original *tamagotchi*, successful parenting is measured by the personality the pet assumes in developing through different stages of growth. The infant phase, which occurs about one hour after hatching, is said to be the crucial time for determining a *tamagotchi*'s adult personality. As it says in the English-language version of Bandai's *tamagotchi* official guide that sold in U.S. bookstores for \$5.95, "Honey or brat? Nice or nasty? What you do at this stage makes a big difference in how your Tamagotchi turns out" (Betz 1997:35). By the childhood stage (figure 29), three to seven years old (*tamagotchi* time), differences are already apparent: the frisky *tamatchi* and the energetic *tongaritichi* bear the signs of great caretaking, but the sluggish *hashtamachi* and the happy-go-lucky but unattractive *kuchitamachi* suggest lax parenting. By the adult phase of middle age (appearing after about six or seven days), the range of personality types—fourteen in total—has broadened further. *Masukutichi* is quiet and spies on everyone; *gimjivotchi* is empathetic and independent; *kusatchi* loves nightclubs and heavy metal; *mametchi* is mannered and brilliant; *hoshizotchi* has disgusting food habits and little energy; *kuchipatchi* is laid-back and dull-witted; *zuketichi* tends toward meanness and hyperactivity; and *minitchi* is witty, charming, and a math wizard. The shapes, too, now come in an interesting assortment. Each is an assemblage of physical traits—ears, lips, beaks, tentacles, leaves, feet, eyes, legs, masks—that, familiar on a dog, badger, or rose, come together here in a grammar that remixes the virtual and the real. These pets are, at once, both naturalistic and strange. Takotchi is an octopus (*tako* in Japanese) with a rounded beak, one eye, and a periscope on its head

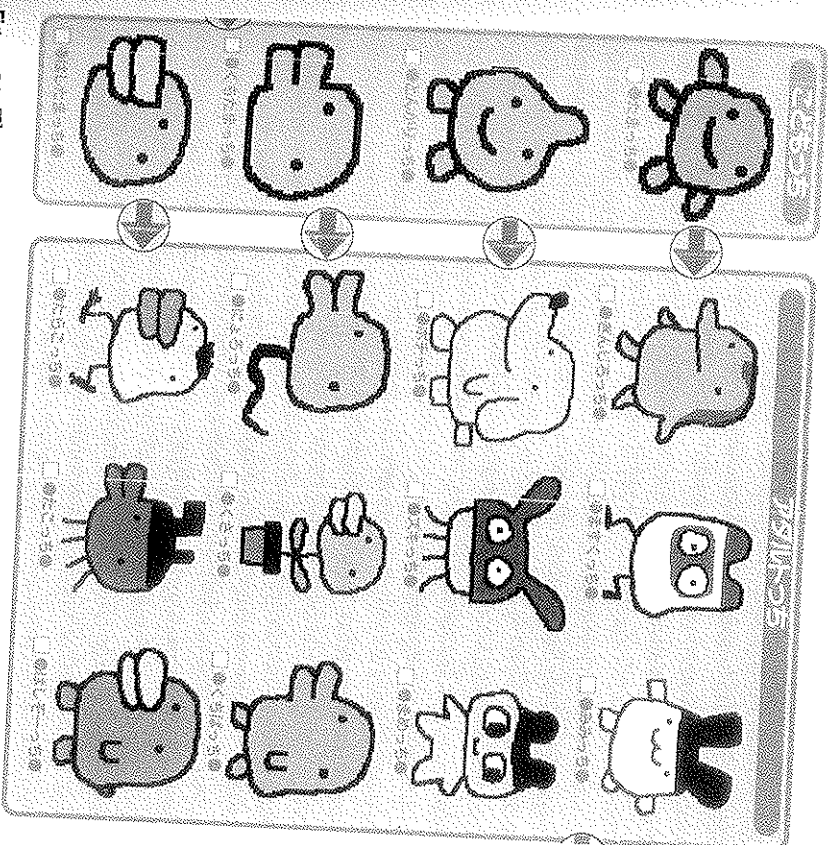


Figure 29. The *tamagotchi* grows up: a range of childhood and adulthood stages. (Courtesy of Bandai Company, Ltd.)

Nyorotchi (after *nyoro nyoro* for squirming) is a spermlike blob with a wiggly tail, big lips, and an eye; Bill is a human head with a stylish beret sitting atop a pair of legs.

The general wisdom in *tamagotchi* culture is that certain adult forms are better than others. For players I spoke with, these superior forms were usually the better "behaved," more active, or rarer *tamagotchi* (for example, both Bill and Zach are "secret characters" that appear as the last, rare stage). According to the official Bandai guide, desirability stems from behavior alertness, cheerfulness, and independence; it disapproves of others (laziness, mysteriousness, dullness, and weirdness). And, consistent with the game's

play logic, a direct correlation is made between "good" caretaking and positive traits in *tamagotchi*. The guide applauds, for example, the appearance of Manerchi, who boasts an IQ of 250, saying it "shows that you've really paid a lot of attention to your Tamagotchi" (Betz 1997:41). But, for Takarotchi—with smelly feet and a mysterious personality—it notes, "If you have been neglecting your Tamagotchi, it may turn out like this" (38).

This script is most apparent in the Japanese edition of the Bandai guidebook. Entitled *Tamagotchi Boshitecho*, it is designed like the health records—distributed by the ward offices and called *boshitecho*—used by Japanese women for charting the growth of their babies.⁹ In the *tamagotchi* edition, advice for raising the pet is clearly articulated in terms of becoming a mother and keeping a "bright [akurui] family." These suggestions range from the basics in toy maintenance (feed, play with, and attend to your *tamagotchi* promptly) to the ideological in imaginary family making (maintain your own health as a mother, never intentionally kill your pet no matter how it develops, remember that all *tamagotchi* are brothers and sisters, so never mistreat one). The guidebook concludes with a list of parental ideals whose scope has been broadened even further: raising *tamagotchi* with a social consciousness. As the guide recommends, bring *tamagotchi* up as "members of society" to be individualistic but also cooperative, with a keen appreciation of nature, science, the arts, and morality. The last item on this list sums it all up: "If *tamagotchi* is raised by joining love with goals, it will be able to contribute to human culture and peace as a national citizen" (Bandai Kabushikigaisha 1997:1–9).

One might wonder to what "nation" the *tamagotchi* is to be enjoined in citizenship, given the very global territory Bandai intended for this playscape. The suggestion seems paradoxically (if playfully) excessive. Indeed, I have never encountered a player of any nationality who conceived the virtual identity of a *tamagotchi* to be anything approaching that of upstanding citizen. Yet the fantasy of a bond developing between *tamagotchi* and player that feels humanlike even if it fails to mimic human life completely is not Bandai's alone. One commentator reporting on the *tamagotchi* craze for *AsiaWeek* attributed some of the intensity *tamagotchi* owners described feeling for their pets to the fact they serve as substitutes for real pets, which few families in crowded living conditions can afford (Berfield 1997). In a related vein, Nagao Takeshi, a Japanese journalist, linked the popularity of toys like *tamagotchi* and games like *Pokémon* to contemporary lifestyles of Japanese children, who are lonely, busy, and pressured by school. A toy they can interact with when they are alone, and one from which they can gain

some measure of feedback, response, and—in these senses—life, is highly appealing (Nagao 1998).

A number of psychologists in the United States claimed instead that the popularity of *tamagotchi* arose from the sense of empowerment they gave children in being responsible for the care and fate of their virtual pets (Berfield 1997). This perception also led to a debate about whether these positive feelings outweigh the sense of loss experienced by some children when the *tamagotchi* dies (Lee 1997:264). On both scores the psychologist Andrew Cohen described the *tamagotchi* as "the most powerful product I've ever heard of in terms of what it demands from a child" (cited in Lawson 1997:A18). Others also viewed the *tamagotchi* as a type of breakthrough product that builds on old play forms of mimesis and pretense but propels these kinds of experience into the new dimension of cyberspace. Here the relationship with a virtual pet can be, in some ways, more interactive and more continuous than with flesh-and-blood pets that stay, for the most part, at home. *Tamagotchi* accompanied their owners everywhere—a fact much reported on because of the disruptions caused in the classroom, where the beeps and demands of needy *tamagotchi* led to a widespread ban (in Japan, the United States, and many countries where the toy was a fad) on their presence in school. Even here, though, a number of teachers and parents found the caretaking demanded of the *tamagotchi* and the nurturing it therefore elicits to be positive play qualities encouraged by the toy.

The type of intimacy children formed with a *tamagotchi* was healthy in another way, according to Heather Kelley (1998), director of online development for GirlGames (a company that makes video games for girls). The care taken by children in raising their digital pets encouraged a degree of personalization and emotional closeness with cyberretechnology previously unseen with kids. Here the mode of operation is nurturance, in contrast to the more competitive stance demanded by fighting and action that is the prevailing motif in the bulk of video games even today. This focus draws in more girls to an electronic game field still dominated (in the United States, at least) by males.¹⁰ The *tamagotchi* is also a toy that not only stands in for but also bleeds into other social relationships. In the voluminous response Kelley received to a posting about the *tamagotchi* on her Web site for girls, many spoke of the toy in terms of relationships with parents or friends. Whether they were leaving a pet in the care of friend or family, swapping advice, or sharing pet-raising experiences, there were numerous stories about *tamagotchi* as a medium for interpersonal relations between humans. In the end, no matter how diligent a player has been or what kind of re-

lationship has been formed, the *tamagotchi* is terminated—or, in terms of the life conceit fostered by the game, it dies. In the early period of life, this can occur in less than an hour if a pet is left hungry, unhappy, sick, or not cleaned. As the *tamagotchi* matures, however, it becomes more independent and can be left unattended for longer stretches. Eventually, however, players will ignore their *tamagotchi* long enough that they die. The average life span is about fifteen days; the record, reputedly fifty-nine days, was set by an eleven-year-old schoolboy in England (Clyde 1998). When the end comes, it is signaled by a gravestone and cross in the Japanese version (using Western symbols that may serve to mark the virtual, playful rendering of “death” here).¹¹ Because virtual death was thought to be too traumatic for American kids, however, this finale was rescripted for the U.S. edition. Instead of passing from life, *tamagotchi* are said to pass to a different world—an alien planet—marked on the screen by an angel with wings (incorporating comfortable allusions to heaven). Despite this change, a *tamagotchi*’s demise is interpreted, even by Americans, as death, and users across the world have “played” with this loss in a variety of ways. There has been a host of virtual memorials—obituaries, graveyards, funerals, and testimonials—printed mainly over the Web but even in obituaries published in regular newspapers. There are reports, as well, of *tamagotchi* mourning counselors. Another twist to the death routine is that some users purposely try to kill off their *tamagotchi*, a practice that has sprouted chat rooms, Web sites, and user groups devoted (both for and against) to the issue of sadism against *tamagotchi* (Berfield 1997).

Resonant with this age of replaceable parts and flexible accumulation, the *tamagotchi* can also be restarted after it has died. If the player pushes the reset button on the back, another egg appears, and the whole life cycle begins again. Until the battery runs out, the *tamagotchi* can be endlessly reborn, though most users I have spoken to say their interest in the pet usually runs out first. Then the *tamagotchi* becomes less a pet than an object: a plastic egg on a key chain that decorates a backpack, holds a key, or is simply shoved to the back of a drawer.

Sociality and the New Work of the Imagination

The *tamagotchi* is a toy that produces a pet whose existence, in visual form at least, is contained on the screen. In this sense, it deals with the realm of the imagination when we define that term, as does the *Random House Dictionary*, as forming mental images of something not actually present, and believing or conjecturing this thing’s existence. In the case of the *tama-*

gotchi, of course, the images formed are digital rather than mental, but the game plays with the same borders as does the imagination itself: between an image, not in and of itself materially “alive,” and a phenomenal existence that is read into and out of the imagistic form.

The way in which the *tamagotchi* plays with the boundaries of the imaginary is symptomatic of the social reality we inhabit: one in which virtuality is becoming increasingly integrated into everyday life and movement, of both people and things, is rapid and intense. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has argued that conditions of deterritorialization and media proliferation have changed, and heightened, the work of the imagination today. I apply this thesis here to the *tamagotchi*. How does a virtual pet both reflect and shape an imagination that not only fits these postindustrial times but also helps kids adjust to a world where the border between the imaginary and the real is shifting so quickly? Because I find Appadurai’s argument so useful (though not without its limitations), I take the liberty of laying it out in some detail. Afterward, I apply this model to the *tamagotchi* and its play logic of imaginary life that effects a reimagination of sociality, subjectivity, and space.

In *Modernity at Large* (1996), Arjun Appadurai argues that the world we live in today is characterized by the new role that imagination plays in social life. This state of affairs has been brought about, he says, by a historical rupture in recent times triggered by two separate but interrelated developments. These are the rise of electronic media (technologies that represent and reproduce the world by stories and images) and the increase in migrations (the movement and displacement of people away from “home” to someplace else). Linked together, these changes have produced a new order of instability in the world today because images as well as people are in constant, though not necessarily overlapping, circulation. As Appadurai describes it, the work of the imagination inheres in the social condition itself; societies have always transcended and reframed ordinary life by recourse to mythologies of various kinds. The effect of this work is to imaginatively deform and reform social life, or what Émile Durkheim analyzed in his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1961)—the rituals that ritually rehearse, or perform, to use Judith Butler’s word (1990), social norms, tightening the social in the minds and lives of individuals. In the format of a rain dance or initiation ceremony, a community is physically brought together and also symbolically expressed. The expression is less literal than symbolic and articulates the logic of a place in highly imaginative terms: shaved hair, blood-red tattoos, immersion in water. While the meaning is abstract (abstracting society into ritual), the experience is emotionally and sensually in-

tense. Beating drums, chanting cheers, ingesting intoxicants—ceremonies are special, in both time and space, creating an atmosphere dislocated from everyday routines. Given that the ceremonial is also social, carried out by and for members of the community, the feeling of hyperaliveness it triggers helps connect individuals to their society. These flights of the imagination, in fact, are as important for sustaining the social as is the materiality of production, reproduction, and cohabitation as a group. Durkheim's great insight, adopted by Appadurai, was that sociality depends on the imagination as much as it does on anything "real."

For Appadurai, the operation of imagination today is distinguished by the conditions that David Harvey (1989) and Fredric Jameson (1984) attribute to late capitalism and its cultural state of postmodernism. In an economy of continual downsizing, outsourcing, robotization, and flexible accumulation, people are constantly driven, out of need or desire, to move and remake their jobs, identities, relationships, and communities. Ruptures to self and social networks occur frequently, and distance and alienation are commonplace of everyday life. Technology, too, is continually altering and reordering the dimensions of human existence, remaking bodies and remapping the ways in which people make a living and experience the world. As machines become embedded ever more deeply into life and even flesh, the line between human and nonhuman increasingly blurs. So does that between material reality and the image making we rely upon to see, know, and interact with our world(s)—cameras, video players, televisions, computers, ultrasound, game systems, movies. It is in the electronic production and reproduction of materiality—what I call virtuality—where Appadurai locates the role played by imagination today. Just as the print media were a prerequisite for imagining the nation at the moment of modernity, as Benedict Anderson (1983) has argued, electronic media produce the images that imagine community, reality, and self in today's postmodern era. Appadurai gives the example of diasporic migrations—how people, displaced from their home communities, will hold on to these places through the imaginaries made available by CNN, photographs, movies, and videotapes. As he points out, these images—of the world, homeland, place, and ethnicity—are shaped as much by desire and longing as they are by anything real. What Appadurai means by imagination, then, is a vision of a life-form—a community, a human, a pet—that feels real and is related to, but is not the equivalent of, material reality.

How does this notion of imaginative "reality" tally with the way Appadurai also depicts the more generic processes of imagination fundamental to any society—the reframing and transcending of ordinary life by means

of ritual and myth? Both processes entail reimagining everyday sociality at a distance, but the nature of this distance has shifted. Ritual entails assembling a community in a space that is symbolically distinct from daily routines; the postmodern imaginary involves involving community across time and space via images that stand (in) for the phenomenally "real." In Appadurai's mind, a historical shift has indeed occurred. Whereas once it was sequestered into special ceremonies, ritualistic events, and sacred objects, imagination is now part and parcel of quotidian life. It still involves an ordering of play, performance, creativity, and myth, but now these impulses are scattered throughout the everyday, just as the collectives that the imagination is attached to (diasporic communities, for example) are scattered as well.

For Appadurai, place and imagination are directly related; it is the deterritorialization of the world over the past two decades that has led to the diffusion of the imagination into everyday life. That is, as people have physically dispersed, moving out of and between places whose borders were once tighter, they come to rely more on images of place, identity, and sociality that become, or blur into, their experience of the world. But the relationship between place and imagination is limited neither to people who literally migrate nor to images of places that people identify, in whatever sense, as their own home. Deterritorialization refers to a much broader slippage of the local—to a world in which people are encountering difference and dislocation much more frequently than ever before. The places where we materially live, play, and work and the constructed spheres representing and imagining life both feature people, ideas, and things from different, shifting worlds.

The imagination, in my reading of Appadurai, is what captures and re-creates a sense of sociality in a world fissured by dispersal and encounters with difference. Sociality—our sense of connectedness to people, communities, humanness, and life—is what centers subjectivity. Today, sociality is in a radical state of fluctuation and change; uprootedness from bonds that constitute home, place, and belonging is a commonplace. But opportunities to form new kinds of ties with distinct, sometimes different, sets of pleasures are also present. This duality lends to sociality a sense of what Appadurai calls schizophrenia (Jameson [1984] uses the same word to refer to postmodernism, as do Deleuze and Guattari [1977] in reference to the lived experience of capitalism today): locating roots, attachments, and identity in places that are familiar and long-standing as well as different, fragmented, and new. Thus imagination, as the mechanism people use to ground themselves in an increasingly ungrounded world, is inherently schizophrenic as well.

Appadurai's theory of the imagination provocatively links deterritorialization to the proliferation of images—two phenomena that indeed characterize conditions of global capitalism—and posits (new) constructions for subjectivity and intersubjectivity: what he collapses under the term *imagination*. There are also problems with his thesis; it is overly schematic, too rigid in its postulation of a historical rupture, and sketchy on the issues of both power and production (how precisely is the imagination produced, by and for whom, in what forms, and with what vested interests?). It is his formulation, nevertheless, of a schizophrenically charged force positioned between groundedness and mobility that I find extremely useful here. For this is the rubric of the *tamagotchi*: a pet that goes virtually anywhere but whose existence is rooted in, and mimetic of, corporeal upkeep.

Evocative Objects and Labor-Intensive Toys

In the *tamagotchi*, imaginary petdom is coupled with the banality of cleaning up poop, dispensing food, and turning off lights. When it came out, observers called it a new kind of toy because of its admixture of virtuality with a caregiving so intense to be unprecedented, according to some, in an era of cybertechnology better known for saving labor and enhancing human powers. *Tamagotchi* require so much work, in fact, that adults have been typically confused as to what is fun about them at all. Indeed, Bandai rejected the concept initially because the pleasures of the toy seemed too overwhelmed by the menial chores it entailed (WuDunn 1997).

Yet *tamagotchi* succeeded and became immensely popular as a playtoy that transforms duty and responsibility into enchantment and entertainment. For whom, how, and why is a toy that doubles as work compelling? Players were children as young as five (more girls than boys the world over), and adults of any age (particularly in Japan, where *tamagotchi*, first targeted to teenage girls, were also popular with young working women and even *sarariman*).¹² What fans said they liked about the *tamagotchi* is that it feels more serious, meaningful, and real to them than other toys do. It "relies on me," one eleven-year-old American boy told me; "it's as if it were really alive," a ten-year-old American girl said. "This play literally changes the player's life," a reporter for the Japanese magazine *Dime* noted after keeping his own *tamagotchi* alive for close to three days. In reporting on the phenomenon, he also quoted a Japanese girl who, when asked to define what a *tamagotchi* was on Japanese TV, answered that it was "life" (*inochi*), a sensation that came to her after six straight hours of caregiving (*Dime* 1997:1110). In his explanation of the toy's magically earthy appeal, the re-

porter noted that *tamagotchi* players are in a space hovering between the imagination and reality, and that while this is also true of other entertainment media (movies, anime, TV), what distinguishes the *tamagotchi* is its mobility.

Imaginary pets go almost everywhere, inserting themselves into a child's everyday routines and continually asserting their presence by demanding, over and over, attention and play. This, of course, can get boring or burdensome. When it does, however, detachment comes as easily as attachment once did. A number of kids I interviewed said they felt little pain in seeing their pets leave the screen. A few, in fact, said this was part of the fun: eliminating a source of work and annoyance even if this was a "pet" to which they had once been deeply attached. One rowdy ten-year-old American boy went further by announcing, "I love killing off my *tamagotchi*"—an admission that seemingly fazed none of the other kids assembled in my interview group.¹³ In this sense, *tamagotchi* fluctuate between presence and absence; the player shifts between engaging the virtual pet as if it were alive and disengaging from it as if it were dead, nothing but a machine, a discarded plaything to be put aside in a drawer (and retrieved when the urge to play returns). As Appadurai (1996) has suggested about the schizophrenia characteristic of the imagination these days, *tamagotchi* alternate between different states of being and also between being different things: alive/dead, pet/machine, virtual/organic. This intermixture defines the very (promiscuous and flexible) nature of virtual pets that, by name alone, borrow on two ontological realms—the material world of flesh-and-blood life and the electronic world of cybernetic image making. In shape, *tamagotchi* are reminiscent of, but also not exactly like, pets (such as cats and dogs) and plants. In personality as well, their traits combine behaviors at once humanlike and imaginatively playful: intelligence coupled with smelly feet, hyperactivity along with a craving for café mocha. And in terms of life cycle, virtual pets live and die like organisms but can be reset and restarted as only machines can be.

Significantly, it is human labor of the most mundane and meticulous kind that grounds the life of a virtual pet. Or, to be more accurate, an electronic game set, run by a battery and programmed by digital icons, is wired to be interactive. And the mode of interactivity mimics that of raising a flesh-and-blood pet: an imaginary construction that makes players feel not only as if their *tamagotchi* were alive but also that their caregiving has life-and-death implications. At one level, this is nothing more than playing house by mimicking the duties and responsibilities of adults (particularly mothers) in child rearing. Surely this is the earliest and most universal form

of children's play (Goldman 1998; Sutton-Smith 1997). But what is "old-fashioned" here is propped onto a New Age media technology. This is a move that resembles what Freud called *anamnisis*: how one activity turns, and is a conduit, into another (such as a baby's nursing on a mother's breast that moves from feeding to also being an interbodily site for pleasure, intimacy, and communication). In the case of the *tamagotchi*, the propping goes both ways: tending to a machine as if it were a dependent child/pet invests it with "life" and warmth but also flavors the latter with hipness and trendy cachet. Indeed, in an age when the Japanese state is anxious about its low birthrate and the increasing reluctance of Japanese women to marry and procreate, the *tamagotchi* could serve as a promotional toy for reproduction (an ideological message encoded in Bandai's *Tamagotchi Boshitecho*). And in Japan, the United States, and other marketplaces where it was a fad, the *tamagotchi* has been praised for the attentiveness (to a dependent other) it enscripts in the play. The demands it places on players and the fact that these demands cannot be ignored at the risk of "killing" one's pet have also made the *tamagotchi* a valuable pedagogical tool for birth control (as it has been used in sex education and social science classes in the United States).

In Appadurai's thesis, the imagination always refers to a social body, imaginary or otherwise. This is true both of the more fundamental type (ritual enchantments in which a community is reimagined at a symbolic distance from everyday life) and of its newer form (recouping and reinventing signs of sociality in an age where people are physically dispersing from geographically anchored homes). What, in the case of the *tamagotchi*, is the social referent, and why is labor (of such a caregiving sort) so critical to its imagination? Making the toy labor-intensive from the minute it hatches was part of Yokoi's design, intended to make players attach immediately to their "pets." Indeed, the first hour of the toy's "existence" was made to be particularly intense, both in the care demanded by the newborn and in the tentativeness of the *tamagotchi*'s life after birth. In this way the interface between human and machine is modeled after birthing/raising a biological organism: *tamagotchi* are "troublesome," instilling "worry" in their owners (Yokoi 1997:72-73). Speaking from my own experience, I became emotionally involved with my *tamagotchi* immediately and panicked that I might kill the thing off before it even grew to childhood. Checking in every five minutes to ensure it was well fed, poop-free, and cheerfully entertained, I became deeply attached to the plastic egg and the constant neediness issuing from it to me as its caregiver.

Yokoi intentionally designed the *tamagotchi* to foster this very sense of intimacy by refusing to install a pause button (which would allow players

temporary relief from the demands of their pets) and insisting that, if neglected, the *tamagotchi* would soon die.¹⁴ On both scores, Yokoi believed a "tension" would be produced in players that would make them invest in, and emotionally attach to, their *tamagotchi* as love objects rather than in machines. This aspect of the playtoy has been much cited by fans and commentators: how relating to the *tamagotchi* as if it were alive produces a bond that is deeply personal, intimate, and social (in the Appadurain sense of attaching to others, albeit, in this case, an electronic machine). In the case of the *tamagotchi*, of course, it can be reset multiple times, making the time line of life and death reversible—something Yokoi himself was adamantly against precisely because "real pets" cannot be mechanically restarted. Because a reset button could not be easily taken out of the generic game program, however, on this issue technology in virtual petland trumped "nature." Still, as Yokoi (1997:69) notes in his book, the *tamagotchi* was designed to efface the border between organism and machine by engineering "love" as would a turtle, rabbit, or dog (and "sadness" over its loss/death). Indeed, his own fantasy is that someday *tamagotchi* will be sold alongside cats, dogs, and hamsters in pet stores.

Children I spoke with who had been or were *tamagotchi* fans kept mentioning the emotional closeness they felt with these toys. Some added that, unlike a more passive object like a pet rock or action figure, the *tamagotchi* acts with a mind of its own, as it were, demanding a reaction from its owner. Sherry Turkle (1994) has called cybertechnology (computers, MUD programs) an "evocative object" because, while it can be distinguished as an object outside the self, it also evokes something deeply personal in users.¹⁵ Besides this inner connection, the *tamagotchi* also evokes the sensation of an interpersonal relationship, something children told me keeps them company in what, as Appadurai and others have noted, is an age rife with dislocation, flux, and alienation. Two twelve-year-old American girls—at the time, players (off and on) of *tamagotchi* for two years who both lived apart from one parent and spent a great deal of time alone—described the companionship that a *tamagotchi* afforded them. It went with them everywhere and kept them distracted and plugged into something meaningful, they said, even when no one else was around. In this way, *tamagotchi* can fill in for the absence of human contact or relationships just as do other compensatory objects—flesh-and-blood pets, for example—or what Winnicott calls transitional objects.

But the *tamagotchi* can be used to reimagine sociality in other ways as well. A virtual companion, the *tamagotchi* is scripted to mimic a particular kind of social relationship—a hierarchical one between caregiver and cared-

for dependent. Any user will be familiar with this script from, at the very least, her own experience as a child. With the *tamagotchi*, however, roles are reversed; here it is the child doing to another what is usually done to her—turning off lights, administering discipline, injecting shots—producing an aura of control kids so often feel deprived of.¹⁶ This labor of caregiving can remap other social situations as well. Yokoi, for example, mentions the case of a Japanese OL who, oppressed by her work situation and particularly an overbearing boss, relieves her stress by taking *tamagotchi* breaks. As she describes this pattern, periodically throughout the day she will flee her desk and run to the toilet; once there, she pulls out her *tamagotchi* and cleans up its poop. What is metaphorical of her situation at work—feeling like crap—is expressed here in an act that conjoins the bodily wastes of woman and *tamagotchi*. In this ritual—the imaginary limning of the real—the woman feels both needed and “healed.” Laughing out loud in her toilet stall, the woman is reanchored, through a fantasy of banality, in what is at once a flight of fancy and a quotidian act of the most basic sort. At the end of the day, she goes home on the train with the pet riding in her pocket. “My *tamagotchi* is with me all the time,” she gushes. “It relieves my loneliness” (Yokoi 1997:141).

Body figures prominently here; the imagination is routed through bodily intimacies—of the *tamagotchi* accompanying the woman even into the toilet and of the woman cleaning up the poop of her pet. All this is mediated, of course, through a technology of disembodiment in which digital images are reproduced on the screen (with a tactility limited to the electronic). But virtual reality is an evocative medium, producing the (imaginary) sensation of being elsewhere even as a person stays, physically, in place. Better known for transporting players to vistas less earthy than earthly divine—skiing in the Swiss Alps, deep-sea diving on the Great Barrier Reef—virtuality goes in the other direction here. Rather than traversing imaginary distances to what is (physically and experientially) sublime, the *tamagotchi* retreats to what is most carnally elemental inside the body—sleeping, eating, eliminating. These rudiments of bodily upkeep, though, offer something comforting, familiar, and (seemingly) universal that in turn is commodified into a global playtoy that anyone, anywhere “can get.” This returns us to Appadurai’s observation about the schizophrenia of the postmodern imaginary. In a world that—because of movement, dispersal, and technologization—is or feels increasingly groundless, there is a desire to find grounding in some semblance of place, community, and relationships.

Walter Benjamin made a similar observation about the changes wrought by modernity; even as we turn to new media and machines to navigate a

shifting universe, there is a tendency to return to (or take along with us) the stodgily familiar in bodies, places, and myths. Thus, in the “attempt to master the new experiences of the city in the frame of the old ones of traditional nature,” the first railroad cars were shaped like stagecoaches, and the first electric light bulbs, like gas flames (cited in Buck-Morss 1997:110). Indeed, in the case of the *tamagotchi*, it is almost as if the toy is a reminder of the most basic biology of bodily maintenance: the very needs and demands that, as Freud told us long ago, make us human and represent the juncture between our bodies and the world, and ourselves and others with whom we have relations.¹⁷ And this is at a moment at the cyberfrontier when technology is increasingly liberating humans from the constraints of biological life.

Sandy Stone (1995) has coined the word *tokens* to refer to a similar process in the practice of phone sex, in which workers try to reproduce the sensation of bodily sex acts through the very disembodied medium of the telephone. As she notes, phone sex tends to be intensely graphic precisely because there is a total absence of other bodily props. Bodies are thus imaginatively evoked—described, visualized, narrativized, fantasized—all through tokens that stand in for, but also differ from (because of the very medium in which they are enacted), embodied sexuality. They adhere, in other words, to an embodied construction of sexuality despite the fact that the condition for phone sex is the material absence of bodies altogether. Tokens, then, like fetishes, operate as both an absence and a presence, referring to what is (not) there by imaginary devices that evoke (or construct) the real.¹⁸ This intermingling is what Appadurai would call schizophrenia and what Sherry Turkle (1998), borrowing from Donna Haraway, has labeled “irony”—the holding together of incompatible elements, real and imaginary, that kids become fluent in today through the cybermedia that structure so much of their study and play.¹⁹

Importantly, what this amounts to is not, as I interpret it, a mere fusing of disparate parts that confuses the discrete identity of any one part—a process of hybridization. Rather, it is more akin to what Jameson (1984) has called the pastiche effect of postmodern culture. Or, to speak from recent trends in children’s toys, the logic of transformation consists of a delight taken in things being constantly in flux, transforming from one state into another. Within these chains of body shifting, there is no one, real, or authentic self. Rather, as in *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, a human morphs into a Power Ranger, a dinosaur, a flying machine, or a weapon and then morphs back into a human again. What is ironic or schizophrenic in such play is the refusal to locate identity or authenticity in one particular place—the human body over the morphed body, for instance. Both identities are

equally present (though not at the same moment), with neither (nature/architecture, mechanical/biological, virtual/real) trumping the other. And what is true of cyberplay is true as well of how subjectivity and sociality are being organized in this moment of flexible accumulation, fragmented demand, and postindustrial capitalism: identities and relationships are as easily assembled as they are disassembled and reassembled.

Besides implanting tokens of biological life into virtual play, the *tamagotchi* does something else with bodies. It becomes embedded within a player's everyday routines: from getting up in the morning and commuting to work or school on the train to shopping for dinner and going to the bathroom. In lives that are becoming increasingly mobile, nomadic machines like the *tamagotchi* become a person's constant companion almost more than anything outside the body itself. They fuse with, and offer distraction from, the intricacies and intimacies of daily existence. In this sense, tending to the "natural" needs of a virtual pet (con)fuses the two kinds of imagination laid out by Appadurai. On the one hand, these are rituals of enchantment that relieve, and reimagine, social everydayness. As kids often told me, playing five minutes with their *tamagotchi* in the midst of studying, school, dinner, or chores was a pleasant, even meaningful, break. (Parents and schoolteachers, by contrast, often viewed these breaks as disruptions.) It could make them feel "relied upon," "important," or "loved" when, otherwise or in other contexts, such emotions were scarce. The social referent here was not so much a community united by common history, traditions, or culture as the child herself plugging into what many commentators (on *tamagotchi* and other toys, like *Pokémon*) have called a "space" of her own. This is an imaginary world that kids can and do use for momentary diversions from the real. It also is one that is shared by an entire fandom of players, making the *tamagotchi* a language or tool that fosters communication, *communitas*, and even identification with others.²⁰

On the other hand, the *tamagotchi* not only provides a momentary escape from the ordinary (as do ritual ceremonies demarcated, in time and space, as special) but also becomes part and parcel of the ordinary itself. As Hosokawa (1984) has said about the Walkman, it is a bodily prosthesis. The latter works not as an extension of the human body but as a built-in part (rebuilding the very parameters of the body and how they operate as containers of and for life). The sound comes from inside, not outside, the Walkman user listening to her music. Thus, what is transmitted (in this case, music) penetrates the skin, inverting the (modernist) mapping of body. Pores become portals incorporating, as much as opening toward, the world outside. But unlike the Walkman, the *tamagotchi* is interactive, demanding

a response from its owner. In this sense, a player must enter into the screen, filling it up—as does a singer in the "empty orchestra" of karaoke—with her own presence, which merges with that of the machine. This is what Sandy Stone calls the "prosthetics of presence," which, as she rightly points out, is not a mere stand-in for something else more "real" (1995:400). Rather, a prosthetics bleeds into the flesh, becoming part of a (new kind of) entity, body, and social network, no matter how tentative or temporary this connection is. In this case, what is bred is a companion, "partner," and pet: an imaginary creature with which, thanks to its technological simulation of life, a player can both mimic and create a "social" relationship.

Needless to say, this is a strikingly different way of organizing sociality than a community ritual that, participated in by people who share residence or collective identity, performs a symbolic rehearsal of their shared bond. It differs, too, from the New Age communicators (phone, e-mail, video) that Appadurai cites as keeping and producing social connections (among flesh-and-blood people) in this age of heightened diasporas and migrations. With the *tamagotchi*, the social bond is with a virtual construct, and the relationship formed is generated from an electronic egg, activated and played by an individual. In the words of some observers, the *tamagotchi* is like a constant shadow or ghost, attaching to whatever the child is doing and wherever the child is physically present. This is an imagination that spills onto everything, as mobile as the body carrying it and as ordinary as bodily waste. It also involves an interface, a circumstance that invites a different kind of response, and subjectivity, than does mass media/entertainment (film, television, newspapers, books) in which the projected image or story is not affected by the audience's reaction. In our postmodern era of technologized labor and play, people acquire subjectivity not through seeing or thinking of themselves as whole beings (interpellation through mirroring) but through interactive relations (interfaces as in chat rooms, Internet, e-mail) that split and shift. As Joseba Gabilondo and others have noted, identification today is more ghostly than mimetic—the ghostliness that adheres to images not of "us" per se but of interactions in which "we" appear as only a part (1995:429). This is true of the *tamagotchi*, whose "strange" looks can become strangely "cute" and which is dependent on the caregiving it receives from the player. *Mimitchi* bears the marks of a good parent, for example, but *hishizotchi* the signs of a parent who has been lax. As a queer (postgender, posthuman, postmodern) life-form, then, *tamagotchi* are amalgams of not only the real and the imaginary (including flippers, leaves, feet) but also of the player and the machine. This is *mecha* fetishism taken to the realm of the interactive and prosthetically social.

Beyond Tamagotchi: Electronics Go Soft (and Sociality Goes Virtual)

As quickly as it emerged, the *tamagotchi* craze died off. By spring 1998, forty million of the toys had been sold (twenty million in Japan and an almost equal number abroad); by the end of the year, however, sales had fallen off, leaving stocks of unsold merchandise and a loss to Bandai of 6 billion yen. Like many trends, this one had peaked.²¹ But the mechanical fantasy it gave form to—techno-intimacy—has only intensified in the years afterward, coming to constitute one of the biggest and hottest fashions in the millennial toy market, both in Japan and in the United States. Furby, for example, came out in September 1998 from Hasbro's Tiger Electronics (marketed by Tomy in Japan): "a soft, loveable, teachable virtual pet" that, chip-enhanced, can respond to human touch as well as talk, giggle, and move (open and close) its eyes. Operating through crude infrared signals, the Furby was relatively cheap (\$30) and interactive: a responsive, talking electronic pet.²² A huge hit, more than thirty million had been sold by January 2000. Equally sensational was Sony's release in 1999 of its high-tech (and high-priced—\$2,500) AIBO (figure 30): a walking, talking computer-robot whose various motors, sensors, and circuitry enable it to perform multiple movements, recognize up to forty voice commands, and respond to (as well as exhibit) a range of "emotions." Using highly sophisticated software to program, and mimic, body language, AIBO "does an effective personification of a cute and frisky puppy," from yawning and scratching itself to lifting a leg and responding to praise as well as punishment (Pogue 2001:D1). Its name stands for Artificial Intelligence Robot, according to Sony, but *aibo* also means "pal" in Japanese (the term of affection to which the robot responds when called by its owner). By the new millennium, more than one hundred thousand AIBO had been sold worldwide.

Three years after *tamagotchi* hit the market in 1997, the biggest new trend in the toy industry was electronic companions: what booth after booth of toy manufacturers at the Tokyo Toy Fair in March 2000 advertised as "pet robots" (*petto robotto*), from Poochi by Sega Toys (Tiger Electronics in the United States—an electronic dog that sings and moves and is called a *robo paru*, "robot pal") and Takara's three "human/thing communication goods" ("pet robot," "home robot," "NEW *hāt*")²³ to Maruka's Robo Inu ("robot dog," a small, inexpensive electronic dog) and Sony Entertainment's *dokodemo isshō* ("everywhere together," a video game apparatus) for PlayStation to Sega Enterprise's Seaman (a TV game from Dreamcast where, via complex software and a microphone attached to the controller



Figure 30. "Entertainment robot AIBO": Sony's advanced cyberdog. (Copyright © 2004 Sony Corporation.)

pad, users can "talk" with the pets hatched on the screen, including Seaman, a fish with a human face that talks about life). The big theme in the toy fair, which I attended, was "communication" (*komyunikeshōn*): mechanized play properties that, often shaped like animals (dogs or cats), are promoted as pets, partners, and pals. Said to be fun and interesting to play with, as well as warm and heartfelt as companions, this new trend is a morphing of earlier (and still popular) robot fads—the humanoid Tetsuwan Atomu in the 1950s and 1960s, the cyberwarriors who fuse with their robots (the Ranger series, *Mazinger Z*, *Gundam*) starting in the 1960s, and "beautiful female heroes" like the Sailor Scouts on *Sailor Moon* whose bodies house weapons as well as sexy flesh. And thinking particularly of the "giant robot" and *kyōdai* (*gittai*) *robotto* (fused, multipiece robots) fads in boys' shows/toy merchandise starting from the late 1970s,²⁴ this newest fashion in "communication partner robots" represents a shift, as one observer puts it, from *mechatronics* to "soft-ronics" (*Toy Journal* 2000:51): from "hard" to "soft" electronic fantasies/goods.

If, in *mecha* superheroes, the fetishistic gaze (what I have called the "money shot") is on the display and detail of body assemblage—showing (off) the bodily "secrets" of the robot/warrior/cyborg/babe's powers—it is

the same in soft-robotics, but with a different logic: using *mecha* not to construct the superhuman but to reconstruct the humanlike in "pet robots." Performance is every bit as important here and is similarly mapped by intricate and intimate attention paid to circuitry. But the model of "life" it imagines is not a posthuman warrior (cybernetically endowed to supersede human limitations) but what, going in the other direction, is the mechanical imitation of a biological animal—one that, because it rolls over wags its tail, or takes a poop, invites humans to bond with it like a pet. As Sony describes one of its newest toy products (*ningenDOG* = human dog), it has a "human smell" (*Toy Journal* 2000:51), an odor less inscribed with the national identity of Japaneseness than other made-in-Japan cultural products, a factor that has hindered (until recently) their globalization, leading Fox Network, for example, to "Americanize" *Power Rangers* for U.S. broadcast (Iwabuchi 2002:28). Indeed, Japan is doing well on the global marketplace exporting robotic petdom, both as actual products and as a trendsetting new play fashion. The New York Toy Fair in 2001, for example, was filled with electronic toys, and sales in the category of virtual robo-pets rose exponentially from a mere \$5 million in 2000 to \$159 million the following year.

Techno-intimacy is a sign of the times. While *mecha*-tronics was the fantasy as well as national policy for rebuilding Japan after the war—remaking the country as a techno supernation—soft-robotics is the symptom and corrective to this industrial master plan in the new millennium—assuaging the atomism, alienation, and stress of corporatist capitalism with virtual companionship. What performativity exacts and extracts from citizens in the era of speeded-up, "just in time" delivery, soft robo-pals promise to make up for: a "humanness" that, once lost, is to be recouped by mechanical petdom. As Benjamin noted about an earlier stage of industrialization: "It is in this way that technological reproduction gives back to humanity that capacity for experience which technological production threatens to take away" (quoted in Buck-Morss 1997:268).

This would seem to be the answer, in part, to what kind of "sociality"—in Appadurai's sense—the *tamagotchi* serves to artificially "imagine" for its users; it operates as a fetish bearing both an absence (a loss) and a presence (that masks, stands in place for, and—in this case—also transforms what has been lost and is still desired). Intimate play goods are machines used for play and instruction and also for communication and companionship. Significantly, these devices are also said to be "healing" in rhetoric that assumes players are already wounded: psychically on edge, overworked, stressed out. Being touched by another, albeit a machine, is soothing: the simulation of social intercourse.

Not surprisingly, adults are increasingly becoming consumers as well as players of soft-robotics. Bandai, for example, has a service that thirty thousand *sarariman* subscribe to called "Love by Mail" that sends messages from make-believe girlfriends to the subscriber's Internet-enabled cellphone. And Takara's Aquaroid, released in 2001 at a price of \$750, is a solar-powered robot that—living in an aquarium of water and mimicking the movements of a jellyfish (by moving up and down and side to side)—is a big seller among *sarariman* for its hypnotic and soothing effects. In both these cases, a form of companionship comes from an other that has been artificially/virtually constructed, is a commodity sold in the marketplace, and has been designed to please and heal the individual (as player and consumer).

To see how such intimate play goods are a product of the very conditions of capitalism they are used to assuage, we must turn to the next, and biggest, Japanese contribution to global toydom, the phenomenon known as *Pokémon*. Continuing the trajectory in play goods away from the big mythic themes of good versus evil that devolve upon human (super)heroes, as in *Sailor Moon* and *Power Rangers*, *Pokémon* engenders a fantasy world that, like *tamagotchi*, centers upon nonhuman characters (and the relationships humans form with them). Here, however, these creatures are conceptualized as pocket monsters: a slew of "wild" beings (151 in the first Game Boy game edition) that players track down, battle in matches, and then catch (thereby "pocketing" them), versus the singular *tamagotchi* that players hatch from an egg, attend to like organic animals, and raise as virtual pets. While incorporating an element of the nurturance and companionship fostered in the *mecha* soft (play)ware of a *tamagotchi*, *Pokémon* also shifts and extends its logic of (transformational, animistic, polymorphously perverse) play in significant ways. The consequences of this direction both for the global marketing and marketability of *Pokémon* and for the construction of fantasy it breeds for children at this moment of millennial capitalism are the issues I take up in the next chapter.

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Millennial Monsters

Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination

ANNE ALLISON

Foreword by GARY CROSS



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