Caring-About Virtual Pets: An Ethical Interpretation of Tamagotchi
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"Tamagotchi is more than a toy, it is a learning device. It teaches people to be responsible - to care for something - like a pet."
Mary Woodward, spokesperson for Bandai Corp., U.S.Division

"The real referent of the gismo is nature in its entirety reinvented in accordance with the technological reality principle - a total simulacrum of an automated nature."
Jean Baudrillard

A prevailing sense of anxiety and ambiguity clouds my thinking when I think of the reality of virtual pets. What I feel towards them has been instrumental in the writing of this article, it has been a sticking point that has forced me to confront whether or not they really matter, and whether I care. Virtual pets are things I would rather did not enter my world, and yet they are here and have affected me and many others. This one small toy has opened up a space for a whole new generation of toys that are so called 'responsive' entertainment.

The launch of the virtual pet Tamagotchi was phenomenally successful, seemingly striking a combination of elements which sparked a feeling of its novelty. This novelty operated beyond the usual trajectory of wonder at the close proximity of its simulation of real life. Given that this toy (in its material manifestation) is relatively simple and seemingly benign, the key to interest in Tamagotchi resides elsewhere.

Tamagotchi is an electronic figure that represents a 'pet' on a small (1x1 inch) screen. The screen is housed in an egg sized plastic mould that has about four control buttons which the

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3 Tamagotchi has been an extremely popular, extremely 'faddish' game. The manufactures have sold 20 million worldwide. Added to this are the many 'clones' and other types of computer pets, a fast growing industry accelerated by the net.
player uses to interact with the ‘live’ pet on the screen. The pet (the Tamagotchi) will periodically call (by beeping) its owner to feed it, play with it, give it medicine and occasionally punish it. The game involved is one of keeping the pet alive for as long as possible by finding the right combinations of inputs that ensure its general well-being. If it all goes wrong (as it did in my case) the ‘pet’ will die, but you can get a new one by re-setting the program very easily. Although you have to be responsive to its needs, ultimately you have power over the life and death of this ‘virtual’ other, with no ‘real’ responsibility attached.

However, if we step back from the media and academic hyperbole surrounding ‘the virtual’ for a moment, we can start to see the various trajectories which make possible the arrival of such games as Tamagotchi. They have not arrived out of nowhere (or out of ‘Planet Tamagotchi- somewhere in cyberspace’ as Bandai Corp. have marketed). Computer games are rife, and ‘animals’ are more popular than ever.\(^4\) Put in the context of current lifestyles for the targeted group of consumers (of digitised, broken up time, high mobility, and a sense of individual ineffectiveness) Tamagotchi starts to make sense. Rather than just taking this sense as therefore being naturally meaningful, I seek to interrupt the trajectory and look more carefully at what and who is being affected by such inventions, and perhaps more interestingly, by their marketing. This article is thus an attempt to ‘respond’ to the phenomenon of virtual pets (especially the variety which launched the concept and the fad: Tamagotchi) beyond the confines of the game itself. Doing so is more than a one or two button push.

My approach has been hermeneutic,\(^5\) for the way in which virtual pets work (and are made meaningful) is through a complex process of interpretation, signification and imagination.

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\(^4\) It is not that we are increasingly in contact with animals, rather, it seems that the opposite is true - the further away we are from them in an everyday sense, the more they are represented and consumed.

Hermeneutics is involved in unpicking the processes of interpretation, it looks at the sites of mediation (for example, at texts) because the possibility of a pure experience of 'reality' is questioned. In order to uncover what is at stake with the 'virtual' mediated experience, we have to also look at what it is simulating more carefully, that is, at the concept of 'reality' that supports it.

The game Tamagotchi can be thought of as a 'text' which has a particular world that has been programmed into its computer. The world of Tamagotchi is encountered by the interpreter (the player) who brings an 'historically operative consciousness' (a world) which shapes her or his interpretation and experience. In the interpretative encounter, a 'fusion of horizons' between these two worlds occurs, and a meaningful relation arrives. This is the 'effect' of Tamagotchi, the moment when its world moves out in front of the text itself into the field of life and action. It is through interpretation and imagination that the Tamagotchi housed in the plastic egg becomes meaningful as 'pet'.

The trajectory of this article follows the idea of 'worlding' and encounters between subjects and objects quite closely. In the break up of this text, I am mimicking a heuristic devised by Sandra

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6 Paul Ricoeur in describing hermeneutics claims that it involves a 'general mistrust concerning the claim of any philosophy to reestablish the primacy of intuition, immediacy, as though we could have before us in our minds the pure presence of "what is"'. He then goes on to say that 'the word hermeneutics will be the task of the explication of all the symbolic systems which relate us indirectly to reality, whatever this reality may be. And this will be, I suppose, one of the stakes, that is, one of the ontological premises.' Charles E Reagan, 'Interviews, 1982' in Paul Ricoeur: His Life and Work, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996), p.1.

7 The notion of 'world' is central to a hermeneutic understanding of the process of reading and imagination. Richard Kearney describes hermeneutics as being 'not just confined to the objective structural analysis of the texts, nor to the subjective existential analysis of the authors of the texts. Its primary concern is with the worlds which these texts and authors open up.' Richard Kearney 'Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutic Imagination' in T. Peter Kemp & David Rasmussen, eds., The Narrative Path: the Later works of Paul Ricoeur, (MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991), p. 6.

8 'Historically Operative Consciousness' (or 'prejudice) is the Gadamerian way of expressing what Heidegger terms a subject's 'forestructure', that is, the culture, history and language through which a subject learns to make the 'world' meaningful. Because of this 'making' the world can never be thought of as entirely outside the subject. For Gadamer's description of prejudice see Truth and Method, p.237.

9 The 'fusion of horizons' is a meeting of the contextual understanding of the interpreter with that of the interpreted. Gadamer, Truth and Method, pp. 273-274.
Schneiders in her feminist hermeneutic reading of the Bible.\textsuperscript{10} Here the complex interpretive moment is broken up into three worlds: the world of the text, the world behind the text and the world before (or in front of) the text. Section One (the world of the text) reads Tamagotchi as a text that has a structure and narrative that mimics the temporality we usually associate with 'life'. Here my research was taken from my own experience of the game as well as interviews with other people who have come into contact with Tamagotchi, most of these were primary school aged children. Section two will look at the world behind the text: that is, asking what it was that gave rise to the text and the relationship of these factors to the text itself. In the case of Tamagotchi I will focus specifically on the 'caring' relation it commodifies and makes virtual by drawing on its relations to children, pets, and computer games. Section Three looks at the world before the text, that is, the world that has shifted and changed as a consequence of the encounter between the interpreter and the text. As the marketed image of Tamagotchi claims, it is in fact a 'learning device'. But what exactly is being taught and learnt needs to be examined more closely and radically questioned by someone who 'cares'.

Section 1. The World of the Text: The Consumption of Tamagotchi

"If you keep your Tamagotchi full and happy it will grow into a cute, happy, cyber creature. If you neglect it, it will grow into an unattractive alien." (Bandai Instruction Booklet)

"You don't just play with your Tamagotchi when you feel like it - it will let you know when it wants you. It will beep and cry for you, and its sounds will get louder and louder until you give it attention. If you ignore it, Tamagotchi will misbehave, or die."\textsuperscript{11}

In order to understand Tamagotchi the players have to enter into its world and be open to its meaning and structure. As readers of this text, we also have to be open to it so that we can ultimately uncover its ethical effects. Because I am interested in the ways in which Tamagotchi are interpreted and experienced, my research in this area has focused on my own experiences of the game.

\textsuperscript{11} Eisenberg, 'Bandai's Golden Egg'.
interviews with children who either use them or know of them, and web based research (chat rooms, personal and company websites).

Although this game is eminently repeatable (you can simply press reset if your current 'pet' dies) it is not an experience I would personally wish to repeat. My ability to respond to its beeps (in all manner of contexts) lasted only a short time. After a while, I basically programmed it to 'sleep' (to minimise its beeps), and it died soon after. I pressed 'reset' and got a brand new pet, the last one was soon forgotten. This pet lasted slightly longer (I had learnt a few tricks), but ultimately it suffered a similar fate to the first. Is this a reflection on my poor ability to mother and nurture? Should I be feeling guilty? The context of my use of the game had almost completely pre-figured my experience of it - I was researching an article, I was already cynical, I did not 'believe'. But more than this, my ontological experience of the object made it very easy for me not to care, it is small and plastic, it is very easy to make it 'go away'. Nevertheless, I still did not feel entirely comfortable in admitting that I had let it die so easily, and the children I spoke to were appalled at my lack of remorse.

To believe in this object's 'life', one necessarily has to construct a kind of narrative around its existence. This narrative involves not only the game itself, but also your role in relation to it (ie as a mother or carer). Adults whose children were not allowed to take them to school were made into 'babysitters', and people who deliberately killed theirs were named on a number of websites as 'abusers' and 'torturers'. Virtual Pets mean very little in themselves (as figures on a screen), it is their narrativisation (primarily in the head of the user) which makes them become a 'pet' and forces a particular kind of behaviour.

Paul Ricoeur describes narrative as a grasping together of events to make a temporal whole.12 This 'grasping together' is an active, interpretative function of the imagination, and thus has to do directly with the 'worlding' of the interpreter. However, a certain openness towards the 'story' of the text must be given by the interpreter, and this means a willingness to follow the temporal and spatial dimension given by the text. There are certain rules, structures, and usually a strong temporal dimension which are

designed by the maker of the text (in this case the designers of Tamagotchi) with the user's experience and ability to interpret the text in mind.

Tamagotchi simulates an organic being by presenting something which is seemingly operating under its own temporality (it beeps at you when it wants you). It mimics the narrative most often ascribed to organic beings in the West, that of an inexorable movement from birth through to death. This trajectory is the familiar narrative structure of 'beginning, middle and end' as explicated by Aristotle. The designers of virtual pets have imitated this structure and made it into the game itself.

In the case of Tamagotchi, the 'game' is to keep the pet alive as long as possible. The responses which you can give to the 'cries' of the Tamagotchi are limited by the computer's program and number of button options (there are usually four buttons with sub-programs, so there are approximately 16 things you can 'do' to your Tamagotchi). Figuring out the rules of the program and your particular role is the challenge of the game.

Tamagotchi was first discovered in Japan. Tamagotchi hatch from tiny eggs after travelling millions of lightyears through cyberspace. With proper care and feeding (accomplished by pushing buttons on the eggs) Tamagotchi quickly grow into adorable virtual reality pets in a wide variety of shapes and personalities.

Bandai have constructed the myth that Tamagotchi were created independently of their physical design and manufacture. The 'world' from which Tamagotchi come from is imagined as completely immaterial, just as the pets themselves are also immaterial. Because you can 'reset' Tamagotchi and get a new one, the egg shaped casing is like a cage or nest in which you temporarily nurture the alien pet-creature. The origins and ontological experience of the this egg (as plastic and silicon) are completely erased by the mythology created by its marketing and by their wide interpretation as being 'virtual'.

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14 Bandai, Tamagotchi Home Page 1997
15 Jean Baudrillard in The System of Objects writes 'in order to consume it, the object has to first become a sign'. As I outlined at the end of section one, the user is consuming the idea of the animal and computer as pet.
Once the egg has been hatched and the Tamagotchi is born onto the screen it is now up to the user to 'look after' it. One of the many websites offering helpful 'mothering' hints for Tamagotchi states:

Tamagotchi require lots of tender loving care, in the form of frequent feedings and attention. Hang on there, the baby stage doesn't last very long. They mature very quickly, one human day equals one Tamagotchi year.

The internal clock of the Tamagotchi mimics the different lifespans of 'real' pets as interpreted by humans. As a child, it was a source of continual delight to figure out the 'human age' of various pets in order to determine their relation to me (if they were older or younger, a child, teenager or old man).

Tamagotchi are programmed to change their weight, get older and eventually die. There is a 'handy' statistics measure (of happiness, hunger, health and weight levels) for the user to determine the relative doses of affection, punishment, food, play, sleep and medicine to give to the pet (through pushing various combinations of buttons). Can our relationships with pets be so easily characterised and simply programmed? Consider the following description of the human/pet relationship:

Like children, the animal must be cared for: fed and watered, kept from eating dangerous foods and objects, bathed, groomed, protected against the elements, clothed when necessary, brought to the doctors and spoken for at the doctors. Like children they are petted, stroked, and played with at the will of the owner, their range of motion being limited and sex life controlled.16

What this quote reveals is the connection between behaviour towards children (parenting and nurturing) and animals in the form of pets (which I will analyse in more detail in section two). If we use this same quote to think through the role that Tamagotchi has simulated we could just as easily substitute 'the animal' for 'the Tamagotchi', the clever marketing and design of the machine by the manufacturers have almost taken such a description of the role of pet keeping practices and mimicked it with an electronic lifeworld interface. Tamagotchi reveals that what it is simulating

is already somewhat programmed and constructed by our narratives. As will be further examined in section two, the relations of nurturance towards pets and children are naturalised by making them virtual, they are taken as the 'real' referent to which the virtual refers.

The creation of Tamagotchi does not just stop at the screen's image of the hatched egg, and the marketing of Tamagotchi does not stop at its point of purchase. The reasons for purchasing the Tamagotchi are often due to social pressure and a responsiveness to advertising. One eight year old girl told me that after she saw the ad on TV for Tamagotchi, she: 'had to have one because I love animals'. The connection between the sign of the animal and the game of the virtual pet had been successful and the purchase made. Another described the fad hitting their school with the following narrative 'It all started when Sophia's Dad went to Japan and brought her back a Tamagotchi. She took it to school, then everyone had to have one'. Those who I interviewed who did not personally own a Tamagotchi or virtual pet knew almost as much about them, they had entered the everyday folklore of the primary school.

Because it is small, it can be carried on the person everywhere. You are thus always responsible for it and have no real excuse for it becoming sick or dying. Addictive and obsessional behaviour towards Tamagotchi is encouraged by the very game itself which forces the user to re-enter its world intermittently throughout the day with its constant reminders for attention. A salesperson in a Sydney toy shop described them as 'initially quite addictive, but you eventually get sick of them and stop caring.' Many other interviewees and comments on web pages followed a similar path of desire, purchase, initial excitement, addiction and emotional attachment, then annoyance and finally detachment. Similarly, 'real' pets only stay cute and appealing to humans for a short period of time. Once the initial novelty of the 'other' as young and manipulable wears off (they grow up and are sometimes then abandoned), the everyday chore of 'looking after' ceases to be so romantic.

The illusion of an organic 'other' was uncovered by one user as being nothing other than a strenuous alarm clock. He complained that when two friends set them at the same time, they then beeped and demanded at the same time for the rest of their
'lives'. This, he deemed, was not responsive enough, the illusion or organicism was unmasked as a set program with minimal variables. One child at the primary school was excited by the promise that 'if you treat it well, it will live forever'. Unfortunately the confines of a two digit time system means that they have to in fact 'die' at 99 years (that is 99 days in human time), rather like the problem of the millennium bug. It is thought that most die within two weeks of their 'creation'.

You cannot simply turn it off. In order to end the game you have to 'kill' the Tamagotchi by neglect, or by bringing out of balance the various inputs at your disposal (feeding, punishing, medicine, bathing, pooh cleaning, making it sleep etc). The movement towards death that Tamagotchi imitate is a carefully constructed narrative both on and off the small screen. The image of death was changed by the manufacturer Bandai when it was released into the U.S. market. U.S. trial users were somewhat disturbed by the Japanese version of death which had an image of a cross and a gravestone. It was changed to an image of an angel, and the mythology of 'Tamagotchi land' and cyberheaven was elaborated upon in the booklet and websites. There is a 'Tamagotchi Graveyard' on the web where you can post your dead Tamagotchi's details (name, age, favourite habits) with a message to send to it in cyberheaven. The 'ritual exploration of life and death' (which according to Turkle is the function of playing with computer games as expressed through games such as Tamagotchi carries some fairly hefty emotional baggage. One user stated passionately: 'Those who say we feel no pain at resetting the game have obviously not raised a Tamagotchi on their own.' And yet when the user is finally bored of the game, its material 'death' is not even noticed. All the emotional energy and interest is in the imaginary pet as represented by the small figure on the screen.

17 Glen McCrae, Don't Bother Buying a tamagotchi, Website, August 1997.
18 Most entries were concerned with expressing their love for the pet 'God bless Linda, I bet she's having fun up on planet Tamagotchi.', another repeated 'I'm Sorry' two hundred times, and someone else said 'To Devon my worst Tamagotchi, you will never be missed cause I hated you because you always beeped in the night even when I was trying to sleep, hope you go to hell and rot you little disgusting Tamagotchi.'
19 Turkle’s thesis is that the use of computer games is to play with ownership and control over something which frightens us and is potentially beyond us (ie computers). She writes that ‘the children allow the toy its most autonomous behaviour, and then, when it is most like a living thing, they kill it.' Sherry Turkle, The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1984), pp. 34 -38.
One vehemently anti-Tamagotchi website (and there are a few) is called 'Smash Tamagotchi'. Its writers urged people to send their Tamagotchi to them with the promise that they will be smashed. Interestingly, the same writers later reflected that although they had had many 'hits' (visits to the web page) no one had actually sent them to be smashed. What this illustrates is that people do not actually think of Tamagotchi as material, the Tamagotchi creature is ephemeral and un-smashable. A neo-luddite response to Tamagotchi is clearly not an entirely appropriate reaction to the power of the virtual.

The narrative structure encountered in the world of the text is limited to the users immaterial experience of the Tamagotchi. The material life-span (or life cycle) of the object is concealed by this narrative. But this life-span, although concealed, is still present in an ontological sense. Although we may not be fully conscious of it, it designs our experiences, our ability to care and be responsive to the virtual creature.

None of the children I interviewed mentioned what had happened to the Tamagotchi object once they were sick of the game, it is almost as if it is not even 'seen'. Once the program had been figured out, the challenge of everyday care was eventually just too everyday. The initial shine of the virtual (in its proximity to the real) is dulled by its repetitious nature, much the same way as children (and adults) tire of pets once they are no longer young, cute and novel. Responses to the pet by the user (who after all exists in both the world of the text and outside of it) can be controlled, managed, and made to disappear. The imaginary which prompted the interest in the object has been consumed and the 'care' that Tamagotchi professes to teach is similarly abandoned.

There is a disjuncture between the world of the text in its imaginative realm and the world of the text in its ontological or material domain. The material waste produced by such fads is not

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20 The children I spoke to at a primary school were confused by my questioning of what they did with them after they got sick of them. Most admitted that their Tamagotchi's had joined the other 'junk' and discarded toys in a cupboard or under the bed. They were much more interested in describing how they had gotten rid of the immaterial Tamagotchi through various methods of starvation, burying under pillows and turning the sound down so that they would 'not have to hear them die'.
taken seriously; the waste of time (which also has material effects) can span anywhere from two days (in my case), to a couple of years. Although a Tamagotchi death is experienced as immaterial, its material reality (which has been concealed) forecloses our response to its worlding. It is the ontological/material experience of Tamagotchi which finally teaches us not to care about Tamagotchi’s well being.

Section Two: The World Behind the Text

"What is said stands against the background of the vast unsaid to which it is related."- Hans George Gadamer

In order to understand the phenomenon of Tamagotchi we need to re-contextualise it into the life-world from which it arrived. Rather than getting carried away with its novelty (an approach which itself has an ethical effect) I want to make apparent some of the different elements which make it meaningful. To do this in its entirety is an impossible task (for it will arrive to different people in a multitude of ways) but there are some dominant themes and discourses which can be deciphered as the nodal points from which Tamagotchi was configured. The elements I have identified are specifically related to the broader questions that I have brought to the text: that is care, ethics and a concern about virtual ‘otherness’.

In order to uncover the unsaid or background that makes Tamagotchi meaningful, we have to look at the ‘reality’ that Tamagotchi is making virtual. This dynamic itself is not innocent however, it effects the elements that are being represented. It is my proposal that by making a ‘virtual’ version of a ‘real’ image or object, the reality status of that object becomes naturalised and fixed. The virtual, (which is defined as the ‘almost’ rather than the artificial - which is the ‘fake’) as a technologised entity,


\[22\] Gadamer writes ‘What changes forces itself far more attention than what stays the same. That is the general law of our intellectual life. Hence the perspectives that come from the experience of historical change are always in danger of distortion because they forget the hidden constants.’ (my emphasis) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. xiii.

\[23\] Schirmarcher describes how the term ‘artificial’ (which implies the fake) has been replaced by the buzzword ‘virtual’ (which is the ‘almost’) in contemporary society. He writes ‘This would certainly meet the much lesser expectations we have in this field nowadays: “almost” life, “almost” reality, “almost” intelligence would leave our traditional world view intact, merely
makes possible a repeatable experience of the 'nature' it is replicating. To revisit the quote at the opening of this article by Baudrillard, the real referent outside of the virtual (ie nature) is actually re-invented as a simulacrum of an automated nature.

Tamagotchi contains a relatively simple computer program that is easily learnt. It arrives in a space whose occupiers are by and large computer literate, televisualised, urbanised and used to a certain quality of graphics and interactivity. The appeal of Tamagotchi cannot then be put down to a simple fascination with the highly technological. Its graphics and virtuality are similar to that found on a digital wrist watch or even on a calculator and come nowhere near being an 'almost' animal. The novelty and interest in Tamagotchi thus clearly resides elsewhere than the interface itself. In this section I will argue that it is the elements, discourses, boundaries and objects to which it refers which make it popular. These elements in themselves are not especially new or novel, indeed they are rather familiar, close and almost naive.

Heidegger argues that what is closest to us is precisely what is most hidden,²⁴ so in the case of Tamagotchi, what has been capitalised on by the manufacturers is the very proximity of caring-for relations which are deemed necessary in our current culture and which are not usually associated with a computer interface. So it is the bringing together of a number of different realms (the animal /machine/ human, care and nurturance) into the one symbolic object which makes it so new and exciting.

The configurations from which Tamagotchi takes its meaning can be generally located within the domestic sphere: children, play, toys, pets and nurturance or mothering. Tamagotchi were supposedly created by a Japanese mother whose child could not have a real pet,²⁵ and it was initially marketed to young Japanese girls. However, its popularity grew far beyond this group, transgressing the usual gender and age barriers for toys of its genre.


²⁴ Paul Ricoeur uses Heidegger's thesis to explain why the distinction between what appears and what is hidden is not too sharp (this is in the context of explaining his use of both phenomenology and hermeneutics). Charles E. Reagan, 'Interview with Paul Ricoeur June 19, 1982' in Paul Ricoeur: His Life and Work (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996), p. 4.

²⁵ Tamagotchi Website: Bandai Corp. 1997.
It is worth staying with the marketed image of Tamagotchi for a while, for it is here that the connections to the 'real' world are most explicitly being forged. We have to be careful however, for marketing itself works in a similar way to the virtual. It creates and fixes the very market it is seeking to sell its product to. Like the virtual, it does not simply represent (and then satisfy) a consumer's previously unfulfilled desires. These images actively shape and mediate how the object or text is received and experienced.26

The marketing discourses of Bandai (the manufacturers and distributors of Tamagotchi) specifically work to solidify the idea that children can learn to act responsibly through being in contact with pets. Revisiting the opening quote of this article by a Bandai representative ('It is more than a toy, it is a learning device...it teaches people to become responsible, to care for something, like a pet.') we can see how the phrase 'like a pet' grounds the claim that has just been made. It is assumed that by looking after an 'other' being, children learn an ethical and moral lesson of care. I do not doubt that a sense of morality or ethics is learnt from the contact between pet and child, but does it then follow that what is learnt is 'right' and 'natural'? What is being learnt is a culturally specific set of rules and moral codes of permissible behaviour.

Hegel situates the importance of the domestic setting as the site wherein ethics are formed in the subject.27 This realm has been overtly coded feminine and private and been demonstrated as such by feminist theory. In Western culture it has been somewhat locked out of the realm of public discourse and knowledge. Likewise reason has been privileged over passion and emotion.28

26 The media often later picks up on these marketed groups, using them to describe the current social milieu. For example Linda Lee writes of Western adolescents 'why not just call them the Tamagotchi Generation? They like things technological and cute (like the 1995 movie Babe), they are open to the global marketplace and they insist on their right to irony. And unlike the electronic pets called Tamagaotchis, the Tamagotcheratis will never die as long as marketing people are willing to push their buttons.' Linda Lee 'Grunge gets the boot in bright new world of idoldom', The New York Times, March 13, 1998, p.24.
28 Alison Jagger, 'Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology', Inquiry, 32, 1989, p.151. This realm, and the bodies that support it (the mothers' bodies) are described as natural: childbirth and childrearing is assumed to be one of the most 'natural' occurrences of the human condition. Many feminists have
and the relation has been 'naturalised'. So we can start to see why Tamagotchi were initially marketed to young girls, because girls traditionally learn mothering behaviour through playing with dolls and mimicking their own mothers' nurturance and responsiveness to others. The fact that Tamagotchi have become popular beyond this limited category is perhaps testimony to the actual fluidity of these roles, that they are not grounded in a feminine bodily 'reality' of the capacity for childbirth, but are rather taught and learned behaviours.

Tamagotchi explicitly plays on and constructs its close proximity to the domestic. By making virtual a relation of nurturance and imitation (ie children pretending to be adults, especially mothers) what is simulating gets broken down into a manageable program of feeding, affection, health and punishment. The fact that it can be virtualised so easily is shocking partly because it is too close to what already occurs. As well as this the nostalgic idealisation of the domestic and nurturance is revealed to involve practices usually found in the public domain: that is time management and programming. The romanticised 'natural' realm of the private and domestic is shown to be easily replicated and made into a computer program.

Tronto describes the 'nurturance' most often acted by mothers as an ethical system based on the relation of 'caring-for' another (which is in contrast to a masculinist public 'caring-about' relation).29 In section three I will take up this idea of the 'caring-

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29 Joan Tronto, 'Women and Caring: what can feminists learn about morality from caring' in A.M. Jagger & S.R. Bordo, eds., Gender, Body, Knowledge: Feminist Constructions of Being and Knowing, (Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1989), p.173. The strand of moral theory known as the 'feminist ethic of care' stresses the exclusion of women from traditional Western moral theory as well as women's sense of morality as being less about abstract situations than caring for others around them. It hints towards an inter-subjectivity that displaces the traditional Western patriarchal ethical systems which emphasise the individual moral subject capable of making objective decisions from universal principles. See for example Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1982).
for/about' in Tamagotchi to show that it teaches a 'caring-about' while simulating a 'caring-for' model of ethics.

The recognition of an 'other' as being outside of oneself reiterates an ethical model that is provided by Levinas, that of the recognition of finitude through the face of the other.\textsuperscript{30} It is particularly interesting to think through this notion of ethics in terms of the animal as 'other'. Recognition that the animal's world is outside of our complete comprehension and understanding does force the human subject to acknowledge their own finitude to some degree. What is questionable is whether this can occur in either the pet or virtual pet relation. Here the interpretations and encounters with the 'other' are already so prescribed and pre-figured that any 'otherness' is easily concealed; By responding to an 'other' that has been programmed by another human to call for you (ie the Tamagotchi), are we thus able to recognise our finitude and thus ethical situatedness? I would like to leave this larger question open.

The other-ness of the pet is often concealed by the common human treatment of the pet as a child. For example language that is spoken to both infants and pets has been referred to as 'motherese'\textsuperscript{31). Thus the interpretation of the animal is not one that is totally open to the world of the other, rather it is a form of anthropomorphism that projects the subjects' identity onto the object. It has been argued that the 'cute response' to many animals and pets is a kind of misplaced response to our own babies that illicit an innate desire to nurture and protect.\textsuperscript{32} This 'innate' desire is naturalised and made a necessary part of the grand narrative of human evolution. What is at stake in this discourse is the ultimate meaning and future of the 'human', any feelings

\textsuperscript{30} Levinas writes 'We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other, ethics.' Immanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity (Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1969), p. 43.
\textsuperscript{31} James Serpell writes 'People even talk to pets and children in similar ways. Psychologists have found that, in terms of structure, the manner in which people talk to their dogs strikingly resembles the specific kind of language, known as "motherese", which is adopted by mothers when talking to their infants.' James Serpel, In the Company of Animals: A Study of Human Animal Relationships, (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1996), page 78.
\textsuperscript{32} Serpell attributes this idea to ethnologist Konrad Lorenz who compared the many different animals that elicit a cute response and showed their similarities to human infants. Similarly, Stephen Gould is quoted by Serpell as writing 'we are fooled by an evolved response to our own babies, and transfer our reactions to the same set of features in other animals', Ibid., p. 76.
towards others outside of this boundary are denigrated as misplaced and sentimental.

As children, we play with toys and dolls by making them 'alive'. Similarly we construct a world of human reference for animals (a form of anthropomorphism) in order to interpret their behaviour. The boundaries implied by the term 'anthropomorphism' (between human and the animal) are not necessarily realisable to the child, rather these boundaries are learned later. Midgely writes that children slip more easily between the world of humans and animals, the boundaries between them having not yet been fully learned.33 I would extend this observation to the division between the real and the artificial and virtual. As adults, we may 'know' the rules in a formal sense, but our everyday relation to things suggests that the childhood animism I have identified may never be fully grown out of. Such animism could even be called a form of virtualisation or narrativisation, a world is constructed that is related to (but not quite) the one that is partly concealed. Our worlding and techniques of interpretation precede our very experiences of the object so that our encounter with it is meaningful.

If we add to this picture the boundary between the human and machine we can witness the high degree of anthropomorphism (behaviours such as talking to one's computer, responding to the television etc) that circulate beyond the domain of games. The toys that adults play with (cars, boats, computers, mobile phones) are just more complicated and expensive. Tamagotchi as 'virtual pets' reveal that the boundary between the animal and machine is only meaningful to the human. They play on these dynamics and uncertainties over boundaries, turning the 'animal' into the 'machine', an image already prefigured by Descartes' influential image of the automaton. What Tamagotchi reveal to us is the way in which we already virtualise most of our relations with 'others'. By virtualising an already unsure distinction, Tamagotchi confuse our ability to make a clear moral judgement; the grounds on which such judgements are usually made have been shifted.

Section 3: The World Before the Text: 
What can we learn from Tamagotchi?

As is suggested by the phrase 'the fusion of horizons', the complex processes of encountering and interpreting a text involves an activity of transformation. Something occurs in this encounter between the text and the reader (or the game and the player as in the case of Tamagotchi) which changes both of them. Ricoeur describes this as the world or story encountered in the text being appropriated, becoming part of the subject's own story or world. Because any encounter is situated within a complex field of relations, objects, meanings and their interconnections, it will have a number of different consequences perhaps not even immediately apparent. Ricoeur stated in an interview:

Interpretation is not limited to the boundary of the text. As soon as we raise the problem of appropriation or application, then we go out of the world of the texts and to the field of life and action. And then we are confronted by ethical questions and political questions.3 4

There has been much concern over the possible effects the 'virtual' may have on the 'real'. Such concern expresses an anxiety over the possible replacement of the real by the virtual. For instance, Kruger asks: 'will real action lose its immediacy when it is but a replication of a simulated activity?'3 5 Though I too share in some anxiety over virtuality, what I have attempted to show is that the 'real' or 'immediate' is not only effected by the virtual, but is actually constructed by it. It is difficult to identify which one comes first for the virtual is anticipated in advance of our contact with it, then it actively constructs the world from which we supposedly come. This movement can be recognised as what is known as the hermeneutic circle.

Tamagotchi complicates the picture, because it is directly working on and fictionalising the world of praxis (ie by making a 'pet' that we have to respond to). However, we have to look beyond the confines of the game itself into the fields of its many consequences in order to see what political and ethical changes it is effecting. The term 'consequence' suggests a linearity (a cause and effect model) which conceals the more complex movements.

34 Paul Ricoeur quoted in Reagan 'Interview 1982', p.10.
of 'worlding' that I have laboured to articulate in my analysis of Tamagotchi. Once we put Tamagotchi back into the everyday contexts of its use (ie in the overtly saturated universe of media, the virtual, images, objects, toys and the plethora of useless gadgets) we can start to see how the linearity suggested by 'consequence' starts to become confused. Baudrillard writes: 'the anticipation of reality by images, the precession of images and media in relation to events, such that the connection between cause and effect becomes scrambled and it becomes impossible to tell which is the effect of the other.'36 Tamagotchi, as virtual pets, reveal to us the scrambling and complexity of the relation between reality and the virtual, turning nurture into a naturalised virtuality.

Following on from the contexts described above, perhaps one of the reasons Tamagotchi has become so popular is that it feeds directly on our sense of increasing inability to be able to determine and fully comprehend our effects. As subjects (who gain our very 'subjectivity' through the reflection of ourselves in others and through the interpretation of texts37), we seem to have developed the desire to make something respond to us and to which we have immediate and eventually dire effects.

By broadening the ethical model of consequence out from its close proximity to subjectivity to a more complex system of relationality, we are able to start to make connections outside of our immediate anthropocentric worlds. Revealing the material life-cycle of the Tamagotchi (as was demonstrated in Section Two) is one way of working against the complete hegemony of the narratives of 'life' as constructed in the image of 'virtual life'. No matter how immaterial, imaginative and ethereal virtual worlds such as Tamagotchi appear to be, they are still contained within the finitudinal boundary of human interpretative ability. A 'real' dog would not immediately interpret a Tamagotchi 'egg' as a rival. However, the dog may notice that this object is taking up human attention and changing behaviour. By using this example I am forced into an anthropomorphism which projects a certain

37 Paul Ricoeur writes: 'what is interpreted in a text is the proposing of a world that I might inhabit and into which I might project my ownmost powers' and later: 'The shortest route from the self to itself is through the images of others.' Paul Ricoeur quoted in Kearney, 'Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutic Imagination', p.17.
image of the ‘other’ in order to illustrate yet another human-meaning.

By making pets ‘virtual’, is it possible that ‘real’ animals may be relieved from the burdens of human subjectivism? The abuse animals are subjected to through our attention (or lack of it) could be a way of lessening negative human impacts on the animal domain. But this consideration opens up a larger, more problematic question. If animals are no longer to serve as our pets, where will they go and how will they survive? Is there room in our vision of the future (a world projected which effects our current world) for animals beyond our use of them as ‘standing reserve’? The increasingly enframed and designed worlds in which we live have less and less time and space for others to exist in their own autonomy. The enframing of our modern technologised lives Heidegger argues is capable only of revealing to us our own image.

Although animals are made to be our foils (especially pets), encountering them at least forces humans to recognise our own finitude and capacity to be open to the world of genuinely alterior ‘other’. To paraphrase Gadamer, in any genuine questioning (which this article has sought to be) there is a wall of negativity which is faced, and this is the knowledge of ‘not knowing’. I would argue that Tamagotchi’s ‘otherness’ gets concealed by their momentum and interpretation as sign. The caring-for relation which they seemingly encourage is actually packaged into a more generalised caring-about that does not have to confront the knowledge of ‘not knowing’.

Because in an ecological/relational framework everything has effect, it is a moot point that something is indeed being effected by Tamagotchi’s presence and use. Thus my concern over the ethical models being taught and learnt by an encounter with Tamagotchi is one of caring-for what is being effected by their use. What is taught is a generalised type of care that pays little heed to the complexity of responses needed for changing situations. What Tamagotchi (as consumer item) does is market and package ‘ethics’. I have argued that such a form of ‘ethics’ is actually

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38 Martin Heidegger, ‘A Question Concerning Technology’ in The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays (Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1977) pp. 26-27. This modern technological enframing (or Gestell) is only capable of revealing the world as ‘standing reserve’ to the human.

unethical because the consequence is that ethics can then be disposed of once the fad is over. In the mean-time our idea of what 'care', 'response' and ultimately 'ethics' are have been transformed, and it is a world which we all now inherit.

Biography

Annie O’Rourke graduated from Sydney University with Honours from the Women’s Studies Department in 1997 for which she was awarded the University Medal. Her honours thesis (entitled ‘What does Cloning create?’) was a hermeneutic and ethical interpretetaion of cloning in both its animal and (potential) human manifestations. She has a long standing interest in issues about animals, anthropocentrism, technology and sustainability, and intends to pursue these and related topics in future studies and writing. She is presently working for the EcoDesign Foundation (a Sydney based research, education and consultancy organisation) as a desk top publisher, researcher and contributer to the monthly Journal ‘Information Ecology’.