Just Playing: Nurturing No Body

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Résumé : Dans cet article, l'auteure se livre à une critique des codes culturels que nous imposent les fabricants de jouets. Les animaux de compagnie en peluche seraient plutôt destinés aux fillettes et les guerriers aux garçons. Ces objets sont conçus, manufacturés et mis en marché de manière à suggérer que les différences entre filles et garçons se développeront en distinctions entre femmes et hommes. Les petites filles seront jugées «bonnes» ou «mauvaises» mères selon la façon dont elles manipulent leurs toutous et leurs poupées. Aux garçons, cependant, on offrira des jouets stimulant leurs aptitudes et leur faculté de prendre des décisions. Ces différences dans le conditionnement des rôles des enfants sont d'autant plus inquiétantes que l'apparence physique des animaux, des poupées et des soldats les font percevoir comme bien réels et imposent a priori un sens aux jeux auxquels vont se livrer les enfants.

Summary: *In this article, I critique the ways that virtual pet and baby key-chain games have been coded as girls' toys and fighters as boys' toys. They have been manufactured, designed, and marketed to suggest that there are differences be-tween girls and boys that will develop into distinctions between women and men. Girls are judged to be "good" or "bad" mothers by the way virtual dependents develop. Boys are offered game skills and decision making. These differences in envisioned and modeled children's roles are particularly disturbing because the simulated corporeality of pets, babies, and fighters makes them seem real and the game significant.*

Introduction

*I*n this article, I consider the intended market and messages constructed by virtual pet, baby, and fighter key-chain games. I argue that vir-tual pet and baby versions of these games encourage girls to accept tradi-tional ideas about the body and about gender even when engaged with virtual settings rather than material spaces. Even while acknowledging, as

does Ellen Seiter, that children may "make meanings out of toys that are unanticipated" ("Children's Desires" 299), the troubling messages of toy manufacturers, designers, and marketers still need to be addressed.[1] Virtual pets and babies are marketed to girls and fighters are marketed to boys because members of the industry believe that girls and boys want different toys. Boys may very well play with virtual pets and babies, but a close reading of the games, toy boxes, websites, and advertising materials show that the industry does not acknowledge this, and that these toys are conceived of and marketed as the appropriate way for girls to play. The scripted narratives of virtual pets and babies make girls over into caretakers and mothers. These toys indicate that nurturing is a feminine behaviour instead of persuading both girls and boys that caring for children is an important role.

The requirements of these games enforce a high level of engagement with the virtual representations. For instance, girls have to do a kind of feeding, playing with, and cleaning up after their dependent on demand. This scenario of appropriate care is striking because there is no body to clean. The girl's engagement with the game and the game's requirements for care produce an animated body or at least a moving series of elements on the liquid crystal display (LCD) screen. This makes the virtual setting of the game into a kind of physical space and the represented bodies seem to be real and physical. The girl performs a version of womanhood by naming and nurturing her virtual ward. The emphasis in the game on keeping the virtual pet or baby healthy and preventing it from dying of neglect teaches girls about "good" and "bad" mothers. However, the girl can never fully succeed because the pet's and baby's lifecycle is always brief. Through such design strategies, the game underlines a girl's failures as a mother rather than her successes. The game's narratives about care are related to the recent media fascination and even production of working and "lower-class" women as "bad mothers."

This article begins by describing the precursors to the virtual pet and the ways that the toy was developed. The general tendency of manufacturers, designers, and marketers to distinguish between "girls' toys" and "boys' toys" clearly influences the gender-specific devices of virtual pets, babies, and fighters. Thus, I examine the games' websites, design, digital representations, box and insert texts, and press releases. These elements make the toys seem alive and real so that the child will invest in them. I also examine the narratives about good and bad mothers that result from this simulation. Close visual and textual analysis are used as a form of proof to demonstrate the ways that these games are gendered. This analysis acknowledges the work of feminists who have resisted gender stereotypes (Chodorow and Contratto; Cowan; de Lauretis; Doane; Ehrenreich and English; Mulvey) as well as more recent scholarship about girls and toys (Cassell and Jenkins; Formanek-Brunell; Hendershot; Klugman; Kuznets;

Rand; Seiter, *Sold Separately*). However, I note that the recent cultural histories of girls' experiences with dolls, which have indicated that girls sometimes resist traditional narratives through the ways that they engage with toys, cannot be fully applied to virtual pets and babies. Dolls and other toys offer a body that can be manipulated and subverted by children. The narratives and representations that virtual pet and baby key-chain games offer are largely contained "behind" the screen and are thus out of girls' reach.

The toy industry promotes the idea that there is a clear set of differences between girls and boys that will develop into distinctive differences in women and men. Teresa de Lauretis suggests that choosing gender, through such means as deciding to mark the "M" or "F" on a form or picking the girls' or boys' toy, results in the "M" and "F" marking the individual. For example, most individuals do not think about which bathroom to enter because they have been trained to understand their body and identity as well as those of other people within a system of binary categories. People are taught to perform as "M" or "F," with behaviours "appropriate" for their gender (women are encouraged to be soft and domestic while men are instructed to be rugged and business-focused) and are warned that there are punishments for not participating (these can range from comments, to being beaten in the school yard, to the horror of Brandon Teena being raped and murdered for passing as a man). Teresa de Lauretis's theory suggests that girls and boys are *produced* through their experiences with toys rather than through being naturally different. The significant ways that toys produce artificial gender categories make research in this area important and should encourage individuals to address how manufactured products shape societal conceptions. Such inquiries are particularly important to feminists and to those who resist the production of binary gender.

Precursors and Developments in Virtual Pet, Baby, and Fighter Key-Chain Games

The current variety of virtual pet, baby, and fighter key-chain games are derived from Bandai's Tamagotchi, which was first marketed to Japanese girls in 1996. Bandai describes its organization as "the third largest toy company in the world, comprising 53 subsidiaries in 18 countries" (Bandai). The Tamagotchi is often characterized as the "first" virtual pet LCD key-chain game (Worne); however, it is related to earlier fads like *Winky-Dink and You* (1953-1957), which encouraged children to help by drawing objects that the main character needed on the screen; Gary Dahl's pet rock (1975); and hand-held electronic organizers with dogs and cats, which were popular among Japanese girls in the early 1990s (Pollack). Joe Hutsko makes a clear connection between pet rocks and virtual pets in his "Tamagotchi

Diary" when he describes himself as "a former Pet Rock parent" (Hutsko). These inanimate objects, which people engage with as if they were some kind of corporeal entity, may seem to provide ironic commentaries about postmodern society and people's inability to care or their lack of interest in caring for living things. However, this is misleading because virtual pets require a great deal of maintenance and engagement.

The market for these games was much larger than Bandai originally expected: the games attracted a diverse group of purchasers and collectors, and "over 40 million units sold worldwide in 1997" (Bandai America, "Press Room"). The phenomenal demand encouraged competitors to introduce similar versions of this product, including Tiger's Giga Pets, Playmates' Nano Pets, Trendmaster's Baby and Animal Bytes, and Octogotchi. PF Magic, Mindscapes, and Aquazone offered virtual pets for the home computer. Other types of key-chain games included "arcade adaptations like Space Invaders, Bomberman, Galaxians, Crazy Climber, and Pac-Man" and "brick games like Tetris and Breakout" (Worne). The production of different key-chain games increased so rapidly that one fan website had "well over 150 different models illustrated" by September 1997 (Polson, "Recent Developments"). Some virtual pet websites were directed at children, but others focused on the rise of a collector culture.

Most virtual pet, baby, and fighter games are composed of a small, egg-shaped plastic unit designed to fit in the palm of the player's hand and a metal key-chain, suggesting that the child should always be tied to the game. An LCD renders various views, offers a series of icons that the player employs, and presents the time of day. The player engages with the game by manipulating a series of buttons. New "generations," or more complex versions, offer increasingly detailed representations, extra programming features, and tie-ins to films, television shows, and other popular representations.[2] The developments in the virtual pet market have also included an increase in attempts by manufactures, designers, and marketers to distinguish between girls' and boys' key-chain games.

Cultural Distinctions between Girls' Toys and Boys' Toys

The Tamagotchi could have been kept from the pervasive segregation of girls' and boys' toys. It is rendered with an amorphous body and with no clear gender attributes. However, the development of new "generations" in the virtual pet market has included the growing differentiation of appropriate girls' and boys' interests and game environments. The continued attempts to gender code these popular items may not be surprising. Toy manufacturers, designers, and marketers seem to believe that there is an essential set of masculine and feminine desires. They claim in published statements, press releases, and interviews that producing gender-coded toys is a response to market demands (Schneider). For instance, Blue Bridge

Enterprises, which sells a variety of toys on the web, advises prospective buyers that, "instead of just the Tamagotchi chicken, we now have cat, dog, frog, fish, penguin, and yes, BABY (watch out for this version, American little girls love to act as mommies)."

Toy marketer Cy Schneider advises toy advertisers and designers that "children like products that make them feel superior or more grown-up" (95). According to him, boys identify with the masculine role of their father: "Boys are concerned about power and strength. Hot Wheels are popular because they embody the wish to drive Dad's car . . . at speeds which only the most courageous driver would dare risk on a track" (95). This suggests that play enables boys to move out of the home and into a world of risks and new skills. Schneider's descriptions of girls suggests that he thinks they should have a more limited relationship to the social environment. He envisions girls staying at home, identifying with their mother, and performing the role of caretaker:

> Girls are concerned with looks and cuteness. . . . Girls can also identify with Mom's role. Witness the recent success of the Cabbage Patch dolls, which appealed to every little girl's protective sense in wanting to adopt a poor little orphan. (95)

Of course, the Cabbage patch doll also had a great appeal for young boys. Despite such possibilities, Schneider's narratives and the comments from virtual pet manufacturers, designers, and marketers suggest that toys are always only appropriate for girls or boys and never for both. These ideas are perpetuated even though girls could, of course, enjoy the wild risks of Hot Wheels races and boys could enjoy caring for an abandoned toy child. It is also likely that children play with some toys in drastically different ways than those described or imagined.

There is a great deal of support for the continued production of different girls' and boys' toys even though a segment of society has been demanding gender-neutral and violence-free toys for some time. As Karen Klugman notes,

> For all that some members of society advance notions of empowering women and making responsible caregivers of men, girls' collections of dolls reinforce the traditional female preoccupation with physical appearance and homemaking, while the boys' collections embody conflict and superhuman power. (175)

Manufacturers, designers, and marketers have devised a clear set of attributes that girls' toys and boys' toys should have and they insistently fashion products for this market:

> Once the market is defined, even if a product itself could be enjoyed by

children of both sexes (and it is difficult to imagine one that could not be) the manufacturers tend to design the specific product to be as appealing as possible to the target. Girls get pink, purple, lavender, blue, ruffles, frills, horses, flowers, hearts. . . . Boys get their toys silver, fast, scary, gross, violent (Stern and Schoenhaus 201; qtd. in Hendershot 94).

A demand for gendered toys is instituted through advertising, display and toy designs, and carton representations. Stereotyped conceptions of girls and boys are also produced through such devices.

Making a Difference in the Virtual Pet Market

The belief that women and men have different roles and behaviours is also perpetuated by the descriptions of the Tamagotchi toy designers. Akihiro Yokoi, who designs toys for other companies to produce, and Aki Maita, who was on the Bandai marketing team, are credited with the "invention" of the Tamagotchi (Wudunn). A great deal of the literature about Maita correlates her research to gender. She is described as the "mother" of the Tamagotchi (Mystic Fortress). Newspaper accounts and popular web literature have deprecated her market research by linking it to frivolous and girlish behaviours. For instance, Maita is written about as if she were one of the girls that she uses as a test market: according to numerous accounts, she "read all the high school girl magazines trying to learn what the young girls are thinking" (Golden Autumn). The fascination with Maita's marketing is worth noting because her test market and strategies are fairly conventional. As was widely reported, "Maita took Tamagotchi prototypes to the streets of Tokyo's Shibuya district for a consumer test. She handed them out to about 200 high-school girls" (Mutsuko).

Maita's research and development are directed at a youth market that was targeted, or even produced, by manufacturers, film, and television producers after World War II. Marketers target young consumers because they have an ability to recognize trends and a willingness to support fads with their largely disposable income. However, in much of the recent popular literature, these young and often female consumers are denigrated for their lack of intellect:

> Before the likes of the Tamagotchi (an electronic "pet") and sophisticated gadgets like the new mini diskmans get the green light, the marketing men consult their schoolgirl gurus. Given that the twin gods of the Japanese teenage girl are cuteness and fun, this has led to an array of faddish electronics — eye-catching, bizarre, but ultimately vacant. ("Japanese Schoolgirls")

These market accounts suggest that Maita and the young women who buy her products lack sense and control in their "insatiable appetite for the

new" ("Japanese Schoolgirls"). Such accounts depict the woman consumer as frivolous and empty-headed — conceptions that certainly have a long history in the media — rather than acknowledging that women are responsible for serious economic decisions in the home.

In the literature about virtual pets, women's bodies, demeanors, and judgments are rendered in very different terms than those of their male peers. For instance, Akihiro Yokoi remains largely undiscussed in the literature. Maita is depicted as timid, smaller, and less intelligent than her male colleagues despite playing a significant part in Bandai's virtual pet market. *Time Asia* states that "From the look of her, you'd expect Aki to be the one at the office serving tea to all the male Bandai executives. . . . The Tamagotchi digital pet this petite, soft-spoken woman invented two years ago has spawned an almost cultlike following" ("The Cyber Elite"). *Time Asia* distinguishes between the "diminutive" female Maita and her male colleagues and suggests that readers should be surprised at her accomplishments. This is similar to the toy industry's articulation of a clear set of differences between girls and boys that they suggest will develop into distinguishing differences in women and men.

Bandai and other manufacturers have continually redesigned many of the virtual pets in order to fit these toys more neatly into binary categories, despite their early popularity with a variety of consumers. This development is illustrated by the move from the amorphous "body" of the Tamagotchi to the virtually made-up female faces and compact-shaped case of the Nano Salon, which focuses on a girl's appearance. The unidentifiable form of the Tamagotchi suggests that there may be ways to resist the binary division of the virtual pet market. The Tamagotchi is not supposed to resemble the body of the game player; rather, it first appears on the screen as an animated amorphous blob. Its facial features — three dashes that connote eyes and a mouth — and the emotional expressions that these features convey are extremely limited. A "growth chart," which appears on the instruction sheet, illustrates the Tamagotchi's different stages and indicates that it can develop into different forms.

The Tamagotchi suggests proliferation and difference rather than a clearly developmental cycle. The node or nipple that protrudes from the top of the Tamagotchi's "body" during one "stage of development" evokes the kind of multiplying madness of limbs and parts that has been associated with technologically-produced bodies. The Tamagotchi's swelled and grotesque growths, which seem more like excess flesh than recognizable features, evoke the genetically proliferating amorphous body in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* and the *Alien* film series. At the same time, the Tamagotchi's technologically facilitated embodiment is also related to such abject representations as Frankenstein's monster, which has notably resurfaced as a kind of pleasurable postmodern fairy tale in Shelley Jackson's hypertext novel *Patchwork Girl* (1995).

Toys such as the Tamagotchi — but not the box texts and accompanying press materials — challenge the idea of a unified corporeal body because of their abject representations. Dolls and other figures also ooze viscous and largely unidentified fluids, leak simulated urine and milk, and even soil their diapers. Children can also perform their own versions of grotesque consumption by taking "filth" into their bodies in the form of candy skeletons that come in plastic coffins and candy insects that can be baked at home (James). Attempts to produce a more ordered system of bodies and gender-specific behaviours may be a reaction to the strange play that children have devised for their toys. Of course, this strange play has also been reproduced and marketed to children. It seems that the continued establishment of binary gender divisions in the toy market may be a limiting agent for the kinds of destabilization that are produced through play.

This production of the body from a series of unrelated parts has been connected to the liberating possibilities of surgical sex reassignment and the recognition that gender is literally pieced together (Stryker; Stone). The strangely sexual protruberant parts of the Tamagotchi suggest the intergender body of the hermaphrodite or the transsexual who refuses to pass as "M" or "F" rather than representing binary sexed genitals. A "glimpse of the arbitrariness of gender and other roles is one liminal element that toy narratives could offer," but studies indicate that this rarely happens (Kuznets 152).

The Tamagotchi may offer a brief glimpse of different bodies, but the Nano Salon provides only the most limiting representations. The graphic pink bow that jauntily perches above the Nano logo on the packaging, the fuchsia colour of the case, and the navigational buttons that are designed to look like cosmetics mark this as a girls' toy and connect it to feminine spaces and experiences. The Salon screen renders a series of hyper-feminine faces that have long eyelashes, button noses, and darkly-painted lips. The Salon encourages the girl to compare her face in the game's mirror to the virtually made-over female faces on the screen. The two views are collapsed by the Nano Salon texts, which suggest that the game representations are part of the girl's body:

> You can even customize your hairdos with your own virtual comb, mirror, curling-iron and make-up to create a coif that's beyond cute. . . . [T]he fashion foiling elements of sleep, rain, and wind conspire to wreak havoc on your hair. Beauty does have its price! (Nano Salon)

The Nano Salon texts and representations inextricably link girls to one-dimensional images. They belong to a long visual tradition in which women have also been more closely tied to their images than men. For instance, classic narrative cinema produces an intimate and claustrophobic relation-

ship between women and representations: "For the female spectator there is a certain overpresence of the image — she *is* the image. Given the closeness of this relationship, the female spectator's desire can be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism" (Doane 22). The design and game play of the Nano Salon encourage a similar narcissistic relationship. The girl has to hold the compact-shaped game in her hand and look at herself as an object within the mirror and the screen in order to engage with the game. She connotes to "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey) — that which exists in order to be gazed at — because there is no way to resist seeing herself as a reflection in the glass.

The texts and images make the game into a version of the girl and instruct her to improve upon this likeness. As seen in the material quoted earlier, the Nano Salon insists that constantly reworking her image is the "price" of being a woman. Her mirror image and the ideal feminine representations of the LCD are set up to invite comparison. Her physical body and the LCD screen representations, which Nano claims can allow her to "create her own dream" ideals, are all mixed up and reflected in the mirror's surface. This closeness between self and image encourages girls to internalize the Nano Salon's representations. While engaged with this game, there is no way for the girl to develop a more ideal and distant view of the world since she is always in conversation with an image of herself.

Making Girls and Boys on the Web

Websites, press releases, and packaging designs also insistently produce feminine and masculine contexts for the virtual pet market. The websites of Playmates, Trendmasters, and other manufacturers, which were available with the release of the toys, used gender-coded colour schemes and toy links as a way of directing customers. This use of colour to differentiate between girls' and boys' products echoes the traditional use of colour in children's clothing, which informs people how to gender bodies, as well as the colour schemes in toy stores, which direct purchasers to gendered sections.[3] The Trendmaster's website had links to "girls' toys" and "boys' toys" as well as some other toy links such as "games." Individuals who followed the links for boys or for games would never encounter the virtual pets because they were only available from the girls' toys link. Trendmaster's internal navigation "buttons" turned pink when the girls' toys page was accessed. Such colour-coded "maps" direct users into gender-segregated settings. These demarcations encourage girls to occupy a different subject position than boys.

Though most toy websites have become increasingly complex, offering multimedia formats and varied kinds of linking structures to the user, the Toys "R" Us site still offers "Gifts for Boys" and "Gifts for Girls" under its list of categories. One may navigate by age category, but the conception of

gender-specific toys has already been established. Recent versions of the Playmates site may also seem to have gender-neutral links to products. However, clicking on the "Dolls" link still provides the user with a submenu of "Girls' Toys" that is gender-coded by its bubblegum-pink colour. The "Action Figures/Vehicles" link and the submenu do not mention boys, but the target audience is probably identified by the blue denim colour and the rendered bullet holes that decorate the image.

As I have already suggested, gender-coded websites and toy-store spaces are part of a larger cultural tendency to separate girls and boys. The dynamics in such non-commercial spaces as homes and schools encourage children as well as adults to identify with varied gender maps. For instance, as Barrie Thorne reports in "Boys and Girls Together . . . But Mostly Apart," a group of U.S. school aides "openly regarded the space close to the building as girls' territory and the playing fields 'out there' as boys' territory. They sometimes shooed away children of the other gender from what they saw as inappropriate turf" (330-31). In toy stores, "boys' toys are encountered before girls' toys — so that girls must pass the boys' toys and may even buy some of them but boys can completely avoid the girls' aisles" (Seiter, *Sold Separately* 208). The colour-coding of products, the narrow casting of children's programs, and the targeting of advertisements to specific genders also result in a culture that gives children very clear signals about gender-appropriate fantasies and desires (Cassell and Jenkins). In a similar way, the websites where virtual key-chain games are marketed define these products as either appropriate or inappropriate for a particular gender. Children are thus encouraged to engage with this rigid binary and are notified that this is not their setting through a series of visual and textual effects. The work of de Lauretis suggests that engaging with and being bracketed by such sites produces an understanding of binary gender as well as a gendered self.

The gender coding of technology-oriented toys is particularly disturbing. At the time these toys were released, the Internet was still being described as an "environment" that was largely "populated" by young white male programmers. Computers "in general are used more by boys than by girls, and perceived to belong more to boys than girls. Even kindergarten children assign a gender to video games, viewing them as more appropriate toys for boys" (Cassell and Jenkins 12). There is even some evidence to suggest that users of chat settings and other Internet sites may believe that the average user of the Internet "is a fat middle aged man" (hhsb). The use of colour-coding and other devices to gender toy sites suggests some of the ways that the Internet will continue to be divided. For instance, the user of the Playmates site is told, "OK, girls, here's your section!" when accessing the "Girls' Toys" link (Playmates, "Girls' Toys"). Such comments indicate how girls may be kept out of Internet settings and the ways that technologies produce even more rigidly-bound gender positions.

"Girls' Toys" and "Boys' Toys" in the Virtual Pet Market

The websites of toy manufacturers produce a divided market setting in which girls and boys can be directed toward "suitable" toys. Cuddly pets and needy babies are offered to girls, while fighter games and gruesome alien monsters, which produce a different imaginative terrain, are marketed to boys. The girls' webpage on the Playmates site features dolls that are described as "delicate," "secret," and "precious." Even the names of such "girls' toys" as "Fairies of Cottingley Glen" and "Water Babies" render soft, romantic, and delicate fantasy worlds. The "boys' toys" offer narratives of discovery and exploration through the *Star Trek* series and combat, with such products as WWF, *Ninja Turtles: The Next Mutation*, and Zorro.

The web-based press releases, which are available on most manufacturers' sites, continue the practice of suggesting that there is an appropriate gender consumer for different toys. For instance, all of Bandai's virtual pet and fighter press releases emphasize the gender of the targeted consumer. Bandai's Tamagotchi Angel, which could conceptually be related to fairies and water babies, is "Targeted to females 8-years old [sic] and up" (Bandai America, "Press Room"). Bandai's belief that the "four pastel pearlized colours of Tamagotchi Angel are sure to appeal to females of all ages" suggests that girls and boys innately find different colours attractive ("Press Room"). It also suggests that females are attracted to certain colours and kinds of play throughout life. However, girls' and boys' desires for particular colours, shapes, and kinds of play are almost always presented as different.

The key-chain games that are designed for boys don't have the "pretty" colours or rounded egg-shaped case of the "original" Tamagotchi pets. For instance, Bandai's DigiMon fighter is supposed to be more attractive to boys because it evolves into "gross monster characters" and is available in "brown, gray, blue, and neon-green" (Bandai America, "Press Room: DigiMon"). Bandai's press releases and terminology echo the conceptions about how to design toys that Schneider espouses. Bandai has even redesigned the case so that is seems more rugged. DigiMon is "housed in a rectangular-shaped 'cage'" rather than the "feminine" egg ("Press Room: DigiMon"). Clearly, such a change downplays the reproductive implications of the design. Bandai's "digital fighter," which is "Targeted primarily to boys 8-years old [sic] and up," includes some of the same nurturing features as the Tamagotchi, but the rhetoric is different.

Playmates Toys also uses web-based press releases to explicitly gender code virtual games. The Nano Fighter, which is also directed at the boy's market, is written about in an active tone and employs a boxing metaphor:

> Playmates toys deals knockout blow to virtual pet competitors with introduction of Nano Fighter for boys. . . . This virtual pet takes the nurturing

play pattern targeted to girls that has made Nano the leading virtual pet brand among retailers and replaces it with the competitive play boys crave. (Playmates, "Nano" [a])

The Playmates press release suggests that nurturing play must be changed into competition in order to please boys. Like Bandai's redesign of their Tamgotchi "egg" into the DigiMon fighters "cage," Playmates' rounded egg-shaped virtual pet case is transformed into a boxy case for the Nano Fighters. These representations and narratives implicitly argue that nurturing is an inappropriate domain for boys, an idea that Karen Klugman notes is inconsistently applied in advertising:

> In fashion advertising, men carry toddlers on their shoulders and hold naked babies against their chests. Yet in spite of this new dad fad, dolls that require care and teaching are not marketed to boys: the insidious message to children and adults alike remains that nurturing is something that boys do not do. (171)

Toy manufacturers, designers, and marketers believe that nurturing is something that boys do not do, or at least will not buy, so they clearly construct a different environment for each gender. The boys' games construct a shared competitive play environment while the girls' games encourage a solitary experience.[4] Children who engage with the single play games could also share a common space when they are playing or compare the "health" of their virtual wards, but the game requirements do not encourage this.

The stated object of the Nano Fighter, DigiMon, and other digital fighters is to win. Game players can link virtual fighters together, interact with each other and with the technology, and compete. Through these games, boys are invited to engage in more active settings, to strive for successes, and, at least symbolically, to participate in physical forms of play. The fighter games relate success to strength because "the victorious DigiMon gets stronger, while the defeated DigiMon gets weaker" (Bandai America, "Press Room: DigiMon"). Engaging with the DigiMon allows the fighter and presumably the boy to gain a set of skills: "With enough training, he can start battling and will change into one of the 7 Champion DigiMon. He may even turn into one of the Ultimate DigiMon" ("Press Room: DigiMon"). These texts emphasize that competition, personal successes, and being the "champ" are for boys.

The language employed in various key-chain games also proposes that girls and boys are different. It renders contrary temperaments, energy levels, and spaces for girls and boys. For instance, the Nano Fighter is described in a staccato, action-oriented language that evokes such public spaces as boxing arenas and training gyms:

> You Train 'em. . . . You Fight 'em . . . with Plug 'n Slug Action! You must

train your Nano Fighter and coach him to victory. You decide the exercise routine. You plan the training. Are you a good coach — is your buddy better? Are you good enough to train a champ? There's only one way to find out — Plug 'n Slug! Beat the rest and be the best! Will your Nano Fighter be the champ or the chump? It's all up to you! (Playmates, "Nano Fighter")

The text suggests that Nano Fighter players have the agency to make a set of decisions and to discover and learn from mistakes. However, the Nano Baby, which is "the perfect accessory for 8-13 year old girls" (Playmates, "Nano" [b]), indicates that caregivers do not have viable options in the way that they engage with their wards:

> The object of the game is to take care of your Nano Baby just like you would a real baby. If you take good care of your Nano Baby, it will grow up into a happy family. If you neglect your Nano Baby, the game will end prematurely with an unhappy family. (Playmates, "Nano Baby")

Nano Baby players are not encouraged to make decisions but DigiMon fighter players are influenced by such phrases as "You decide." Instead, they may be discouraged from experimentation because improper care results in dire consequences. Even the tone of the description is less action-oriented. The text shifts the attention away from the girl and her self-interest and toward her responsibilities to care for the "baby."

Through such tactics, the girls' games model a different kind of play as well as future roles and behaviours. Owners of virtual babies are supposed to make a connection between their present life and their expected future role because playing the game properly means "caring" for the Nano Baby "just like you would a real baby." The text that accompanies the Nano Baby implies that girls want to and innately understand how to care for real babies. This discourse is part of a set of general cultural assumptions about childcare, including one that Jane Swigart notes in *The Myth of the Bad Mother* (1991): that is, the assumption "that nurturing the young is an easy task that comes naturally to women but not to men" (10). Virtual pet games inform girls of these expectations and that having a happy family rather than being the "best" individual is the girl's reward.

Play in the girls' versions is not about producing imaginative fantasies, strange monster bodies, mighty powers, and foreign worlds that can be explored and conquered. In fact, the development in the single play virtual pet merchandise, which has been marketed to girls, has been from the more interesting ungainly alien bodies of the Tamagotchi toward more familiar types of animal and baby bodies. Graphic depictions of bows and other feminine accessories on the packaging and game cases institute stereotyped conceptions of girls. These ideas about femininity are elaborately produced in Trendmaster's website marketing of Kimiko Baby Byte. The game is

depicted in the girls' section of their website as a rounded doll-like body. The representation has blonde beribboned hair, big eyes, long lashes, and a puffy blouse. Baby Byte's hyper-feminine attributes are dimensionally rendered and seem to bulge out at the viewer in order to suggest that she can slip out of the game and be real and alive.

Trendmaster informs the potential buyer that "Baby Byte's virtually adorable! She winks, frowns, laughs, cries" and "needs your TLC to grow up the way a cyber tot should!" (Trendmaster, "Girls Toys Home"). Virtual pets and babies are part of a larger series of girls' toys that allow children to play grown-up. Virtual babies, like such earlier girls' playthings as the easy-bake oven and china tea set, replicate miniaturized versions of conventional objects that girls are traditionally expected to encounter when they grow up. This miniaturization allows for the home to be scaled to the child's body or even changes domesticity into a tiny fantasy world so that the rote chores of housework and appliances seem to become cute and fun (Stewart). To a certain extent, virtual pets and babies train girls to become homemakers and caretakers rather than providing play and exploration.

Simulating Liveness

The instruction booklets and other materials make it seem that games perform physical actions, have material needs, and exhibit palpable emotions. Narratives about the mechanical qualities of the game are elided or at least mixed up with descriptions of the virtual pet's physical and emotional needs. For instance, the description for Futuretech's hen incorporates button pushing into the pet's corporeal qualities:

> Just like the real pets, Tamagotchi goes to the bathroom. If droppings appear on the screen, it must be cleaned up right away or Tamagotchi will get sick. Press the A button until the broom icon is highlighted, then press the B button to flush the screen. (Futuretech)

Despite these evocations of the game's mechanisms, the screen is ignored and differences between representation and child are collapsed by asking players to perform physical actions. For instance, the child who engages with Futuretech's Puppy is told that it needs you to "bring your puppy to the toilet" (Futuretech).

The demands of the game require a high level of commitment to perpetual "care." Owners have to "feed," "play," "care for," and "discipline" their pet, and they must "flush" the toilet or "sweep up" after their virtual pet evacuates. Such statements as "Feed Me," which are written on many of the toy boxes, link virtual pets to the digestively and intestinely lacking and yet still virtually needy and hungry "feed-me" dolls. However, the virtual pet does not actually have a body or even a pink plastic cavity. The

lack of materiality of these games has not prevented the production of bodies through a number of means. Pets and babies are provided with corporeal qualities, and children are encouraged to emotionally engage with their wards. For instance, the Panda Byte toy box suggests that the commitment to care and nurturing should be constant and eternal even though the game may end. The child is instructed to "Love me all the time! Care for me always!" (Trendmaster, "Bobo Panda Byte"). Some of these texts make it seem that there is no end or reprieve from such defining roles. This is particularly disturbing since the child is taught to have empathy for a representation that has no body because it is nobody; in other words, the child is not actually engaging with anyone.

The virtual pet is designed to die or to recreate a death-like disappearance. Japan's Tamagotchi ended its life by "dying," but the version marketed in the United States "returns to its home planet" (Tamagotchi). The Giga Pet kitten and dog were among the first virtual pets to "die" in the United States. As Susan Berfield reports, the confusion of game and reality was evident wherever the games had flourished: "Singapore's daily tabloid, The New Paper, offered space for 'farewell' ads to departed Tamagotchi" (Berfield). An account from the *New York Times* described one fan mourning the loss of her virtual pet: the "35-year-old shopkeeper held a funeral, putting its body on a pedestal, praying over it and lighting a cigarette in lieu of Japan's traditional incense-burning" (Pollack). This conception of the virtual pet's materiality is supported by web-based "graveyards." These graveyards include the Cyber Pet Cemetery, Nix's Virtual Graveyard, A Proper Sendoff, Pullus' Tamagotchi Cemetery, Tamagotchi Grave Page, and The Virtual Pet Resting Place. Some of these sites are "full" because of the astronomical demand for "services."

The many expressions of mourning on virtual pet pages suggest that caretakers provide the love that the game demands. Danielle Paxton tried to send her Tamagotchi a message: "i would like to tell him that i really miss him and that i love him with all my heart . . . always and forever." CoUrTnEy promises that "i will always love you!" (Nix). The loss of a particular virtual pet, baby, or fighter may be one reason that children have been so engaged with these toys. The toys render a fragile corporeal body because "special care" is required to prevent "sickness" (Trendmaster, "Bobo Panda Byte"). The toys are more viscerally present because of their impending absence. They seem to be mobile and physical — rather than a representation that is formed from a series of marks on the LCD screen — because they will depart or die. Of course, the game can always be restarted.

The virtual pet's processes of eating and evacuating imply that materials are moved in and out of the game; some pets must also have a bath or a shower. The required procedures of "flushing" and "feeding," which most of the games employ, engage owners in a discourse about their ward's "needs." A black triangular form, composed of a series of black bits with

additional radiating lines that are presumably designed to denote a heated reek, appears on the screen when the pet evacuates. The descriptions of this evacuation suggest a twinned fascination with the dirty and the clean. The *Octogotchi* instruction insert, with an image of a broom, encourages the child to "sweep your pets [sic] poo-poo to make it clean." My Little Puppy's instructions advise the owner that, when a "dump is generated," the pet needs to be cleaned so it will not get sick. The instructions on the Nano Baby inform the child that "When your Nano Baby makes a mess, you have to clean it up — yuka-puk! If you see some stinky digital droppings on your screen or tiny little foot prints, then it's time to clean your Nano Baby."[5] These pets combine physically unpleasant work with a kind of abject fascination in order to make the repetitive tasks of family care into simple fun. The 1970s feminist critique of new cleaning technologies (Cowan; Ehrenreich and English), technologies which only resulted in increased work for women, may be related to the instructions about cleaning up the Nano Baby: the caretaker is instructed to "Repeat as necessary." Through such texts, the games model incessant cleaning rather than providing information about when cleaning is necessary for health reasons.

Though the games allow the child to engage with a representation of the dirty, the end effect is that of cleanliness and order. Evacuation always "occurs" safely within the LCD screen; the games encourage a fascination with evacuation but they do not produce any material discharge. There is still an interior with some of the most popular clear plastic games because they facilitate a view inside the game. Clear plastic allows the viewer to look into the game while also being safely distanced from any kind of grotesque production. Bubble packaging and plastic inserts make the game visible to the eye while keeping it clean for the eventual purchaser. Plastic is employed in order to deliver the abject aspects of the game through a seemingly hygienic interface.

These games produce complex narratives about purity and cleanliness through these representational devices. Virtual pets, babies, and fighters must share the screen with one or more "dumps" or piles of "droppings" until the child "cleans" up their "environment." The appearance of virtual droppings may be initially entertaining but children quickly learn that this evacuation is a potential problem and must be managed quickly. The Tamagotchi and other virtual figures "sicken" if they are left in this state. Kute Pet's Baby Dino page issues a direct warning: "Of course, don't forget to take him to the bathroom. He will grow each day if he is well cared for or will die if he is neglected" ("My Baby Dinosaur"). A number of the games use a skull icon in order to indicate that the pet is sick. The virtual cries for care or increasingly lethargic state all happen under the ominous sign of the skull. These markers connect evacuation with death.

The game presents a twinned fascination with filth and cleanliness that is realized through anal matter, but the anus and process of expelling are

not represented. The "dumps" just appear on the screen. The game teaches that evacuation can kill. Anal processes, not only evacuating but also possibly anal sex, become disturbingly conflated with death through these virtual figures. The virtual figure's rectum, at least when not societally sanitized and controlled, is constructed as a grave (Bersani). The relationship between uncleanliness and illness also reinforces concerns about a rare strain of E. coli bacteria and other viral contaminants. The inattentive child is implicated in this contamination. The instructions have already made it clear to girls that they are to blame for inadequate hygiene habits and poor training.

Good Mothers and Bad Mothers

Virtual pets, like Giga's Compu Kitty, consistently demand attention that is indicated by flashing icons and "crying." Virtual pets, as William Gibson suggests, are "pointless in a peculiarly needful way." Their repetitive demands for care force the girl, who has been scripted as the appropriate gender consumer for this game through the pink game packaging and other devices, to demonstrate a high level of engagement with the pet or to face the consequences. The instructional warnings about pets and babies that are not properly cared for evoke the recent cultural fixation on the "bad mother," a figure that Swigart describes as a "woman easily bored by her children, indifferent to their well-being; a mother who is so narcissistic and self-absorbed, she cannot discern what is in the best interests of her children" (6). Playing with the virtual pet or baby engages girls — whom manufacturers, marketers, and designers have coded as the main consumers for these toys — in a struggle to be a good mother. The results of neglect and the connected "selfishness" and "moral disorder" of contemporary mothers are learned through "play." For instance, Giga Pets cry out more regularly when they are ignored but even turning off the sound does not prevent the bad mother from being confronted. The Kitty bleats out cries that are represented as sharp lines that emanate from its mouth. In this setting, inattention leads to the quick death of the virtual dependent.

Virtual pet games suggest to girl caretakers that they are solely responsible for the pet's positive or negative development:

> Tamagatchi is a tiny pet from cyberspace who needs your love to survive and grow. If you take good care of your Tamagatchi pet, it will slowly grow bigger, healthier, and more beautiful every day. But if you neglect your little cyber creature, your Tamagatchi may grow up to be mean and ugly. (Tamagotchi)

Bandai thus encourages girls to have guilty feelings about their mothering skills and to question their ability to mother even before they actually have

children. Their description of the bad child, a monster who is created through inferior care, is part of societal assumptions that mothers are utterly responsible for how their children turn out. This rendering of the caretaker is related to Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contratto's observation that there has been a tendency to believe that "mothers are totally responsible for the outcomes of their mothering, even if their behaviour is in turn shaped by male-dominant society. Belief in the all-powerful mother spawns a recurrent tendency to blame the mother on the one hand, and a fantasy of maternal perfectibility on the other" (55). As Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky note, the popular press has perpetuated these assumptions: "'Bad' mothers have long been a mainstay of the American media" (265), to the point that they have more recently become a part of political platforms:

> As political mother-blaming intensified in the 1990s, single mothers and welfare mothers took center stage. Just as Mom was blamed for American weakness during the Cold War, conservatives now blame single mothers for crime and the growing divisions in American society. (17)

Bad mothering and accusations of neglect affect the lives of adults and children. However, in virtual pet and baby games, girls are blamed for neglecting a representation. Girls are contradictorily informed that they are imperfectly nurturing and that care is an innate female skill and child's play. The weighty implications of these narratives make it even more disheartening to note that accusations of blame and narratives about bad mothering are not presented to boys in virtual fighter games. In fact, boys are sometimes encouraged to develop monstrous digital fighter personalities because it makes for better fighters. Through such differences, these games provide girls and boys with very different messages about their respective responsibilities.

Engaging with virtual pet and baby games requires a great deal of time and repetitive play, but the texts suggest that mothering can be as simple as pushing a button. This replicates discourses about housekeeping and childcare that were used to inculcate women into new kinds of domestic work. The advertising and cultural perceptions that accompanied technologically-advanced cleaning products and devices suggested that women's work was simplified or even resolved. However, as Ehrenreich and English argue, women actually had to meet even higher standards of cleanliness since the 1920s because of the marketing of a variety of cleaning materials and methods:

> Washing machines permit you to do daily, instead of weekly, laundries. Vacuum cleaners and rug shampooers remind you that you do not have to live with dust or countenance a stain on the carpet. Each of them — the dishwasher, the roll warmer, the freezer, the blender — is the material embodiment of a task, a silent imperative to *work*. (179)

Despite their marketing as "cleaning aids," the increasing use of gadgets and other cleaning products has often extended the time that women spend cleaning (Cowan). If changes in household technology have actually made women perform more labour, then the virtual pet may render higher standards in the technology of care. Virtual pet and baby games imply that successful mothering can be determined by growth charts and happiness meters. As in a number of recent political and media campaigns about motherhood, individual virtual pet and baby "mothers" have little control over the criteria by which they are judged.

Conclusion: Playing with Bodies

It is tempting to theorize children's resistance to the more normalizing aspects of these games by playing differently. It is also the case that boys have played with virtual pets and babies. Recent academic literature on toy culture has argued that the limiting scripts of dolls have been counteracted by the way that some children play. Dolls have some of the same attributes as virtual pets and babies; they are produced to teach girls how to nurture, clean, and care through play, and they have also been used to train girls in social behaviours and future roles. In the nineteenth century, girls' play with dolls became part of the "natural training in the republican values they would need as future wives and mothers" (Formanek-Brunell 9). Some of these dolls came with pamphlets that provided "'scientific' advice" on how to "wash her face, put her to sleep, make her hats and dresses and give her parties" (Formanek-Brunell 180). Twentieth-century doll manufacturers, designers, and marketers promoted a domestic and feminine culture in which dolls played an important role when they encountered a decrease in their sales because other toys were replacing girls' interest in dolls.

Dolls may have been designed and purchased to teach girls a particular set of scripts about their future roles. However, research has shown that individual children have sometimes subverted the proscriptions of these toys by the way in which they played with them. Girls have maltreated dolls, reconfigured doll bodies, and held doll funerals in order to resist the socialization and models that accompany typical doll play. Different types of bodies and desire have also been expressed with dolls. Shelley Jackson intricately details the "head-swapping and sex changes" that accompanied the Jackson sisters' doll games. It is also worth noting that the love girls are encouraged to feel for their feminine doll friends and the fascinated manipulation of doll bodies suggest lesbian and queer rather than heterosexual bonds. Erica Rand indicates that the normative scripts of manufacturers may be partially subverted through queer play with Mattel's Barbie and other dolls.

These conceptions of doll play suggest that children could also resist

the normalizing narratives of virtual pet, baby, and fighter key-chain games. However, it is difficult to fully theorize such queer or transgressive play because there is no toy body to manipulate. The Tamagotchi's monstrous developments and the alternate positions represented on some web sites are worth noting, even though they cannot fully erase the games' scripts. They suggest points of weakness in the larger cultural representations that these games embody. After all, there are many ways to "kill" virtual pets, babies, and fighters:

> To make a 0 year old dead baby: Restart your Tamagotchi. As soon as it hatches, keep feeding it snacks over and over again. Soon, a skull will appear, meaning that the Tamagotchi is sick. Give it medicine until it is well. Repeat this process over two more times. Your Tamagotchi will start beeping. If you have a Tam1, a flashing skull will appear at the bottom of the screen. You have just killed your Tamagotchi. (Tamagotchi Nursery)

Some children enjoy this killing despite (or perhaps because of) the ways that this makes them bad caretakers of screen-based representations. Ironically, killing may be the best way to resist claims that these representations are alive. After all, there is no negative outcome that results from extinguishing the LCD representation, since games can be reactivated. By highlighting such conflicts, the insistent relationship between gender and care may also be undone.

It is important to address and correct the kinds of conceptions that these games promote because children are not only taught how to perform their own gender but they are also instructed that these gender differences persist throughout life. These objects become significant and material to the child through a variety of manufacturing, designing, and marketing strategies. The child is taught to nurture a representation that has no body; the child is not engaging with anyone. Without mechanical and critical points of resistance, such representations will be taken to be alive, real, and true. The narratives about liveness and the child's investment in particular games and identities threaten to make gendered stereotypes seem real. Represented bodies are "fleshed out" and made corporeal because there appears to be a whole set of interactions and an environment.

Studying how virtual pets, babies, and fighters become real can also encourage interventions into the ways that computer material is animated. Steve Jones argues that "it takes little effort to be of the belief that Internet materials represent . . . well, *something*, some semblance of reality, perhaps, or some 'slice of life'" (12). Critical engagements with these simulating technologies, including key-chain games and the Internet, are imperative if we want to keep representations visible and available to critical purview. To allow such materials to become a "slice of life" is to accept children's roles and adult lives that are based on the most limited conceptions of binary gender.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   I am using the term "toy manufacturers, designers, and marketers" to describe the complex array of participants in the toy business.
2   This approach has been particularly pronounced in Tiger's key-chain games. Their Giga Pets line now has games featuring Yoda and R2-D2 from *Star Wars* as well as the characters from *Looney Tunes*, *Rug Rats*, *101 Dalmatians*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. Current and future Giga Fighters include *Batman and Robin*, *Hercules*, *Xena Warrior Princess*, *Men in Black*, *Alien Predator*, *World Championship Wrestling*, *Mortal Kombat Trilogy*, *Tech Warriors*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Jurassic Park: The Lost World*, and Marvel Comics.
3   According to Kirkham and Attfield, the gendered use of pink and blue for these purposes was only established in the 1930s (5).
4   There have been some exceptions to this. Most of the linkable pets are intended for the boys' market and feature multi-play fighting, but there are also some multi-play key-chain games that feature developing friendships, mating, and reproduction. These other versions include Love-Chu, Mulder and Scully, Bandai's Osu-chi and Mesu-chi, and the Wedding Pet. Gary Polson includes a very brief section on these pets in his Virtual Pet Homepage.
5   The Kitty and Puppy also use the bathtub icon and have a similar description of this cleaning process.

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