

TAMAGOTCHI IN THE KINDERGARTEN FROM JAPANESE TOY MARKETS TO CHILDREN'S DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

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The study of processes of consumption, of engagements with toys, media and technology, is an emerging research agenda for the anthropology of children and childhood (Schwartzman 2001: 10). The interest in the topic reflects the growing economical potential of the so-called 'kids market' (McNeal 1997); it seems that in the wealthier parts of the world "[t]o be a child is to be a consumer within a very specific market" (Langer 2004: 255). Consumption appears to have become a necessary and indispensable context in which children develop, but it is not sufficient in itself. From the perspective of anthropology, it is thus important to study how exactly children construct their social belongings and understandings when much of their material world is commercially branded. Detailed ethnographic analysis can demonstrate how commercially imposed meaning blends with children's everyday talk and practice, possibly supporting current forms of consumer capitalism and its globalizing hegemony (Cook 2004: 151).

In a fascinating, recently published book titled *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (2006), Anne Allison explores toy consumption and globalization through the Japanese culture industry. Other scholars have also noted the role of Japan as the leading producer of 'fun' in the global marketplace; exports in fantasy and entertainment, goods and trademarks, such as manga, anime, Pokémon, Power Rangers, Tamagotchi and Hello Kitty are now recognized all over the world and successes in transactions of imaginary characters and digital play technology have marked Japan's new status in the global commodity market. The entertainment industry, long dominated by the United States, is being reshaped through Japanese commodification of play and entertainment (Allison 2006: 4–5).

Allison explains the success of Japanese playthings by noting their fit with notions prominent in the global economy. The current culture of capitalism has been repeatedly described as mutable, transformable, competitive and feverish (e.g. Sennet 2006). Emily Martin argues in *Flexible Bodies* (1994) that the human ideal promoted by today's corporate culture is flexible, ahistorical and ever-changing. Allison adds to this picture the 'flexibility' and 'portability' of Japanese playthings and argues that their appeal is intimately linked to the fact that their "techno-spun fantasies of mutable identities and disjunctive imaginaries are in sync with lived experiences of fragmentation, mobility and flux" (Allison 2006: 10).

Allison's research is deeply influenced by Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* (1996); following Appadurai she describes a world of rapid change, speeded-up economy and flows of people, goods, ideas and capital across geographic borders. Allison focuses on what she calls 'the global imagination' and relies on Appadurai's understanding of the new role of imagination in social life; a newness that partly derives from digital technologies that represent and reproduce the world through stories and images (Allison 2006: 177). Japanese toys are travelling around the world and insinuating themselves into the everyday lives and fantasy desires of children from Taiwan to Hong Kong, from France to Finland. Toys appear to "feed

and construct the imagination in particular ways that are shaped by the global, millennial, and capitalistic nature of their current traffic” (Allison 2006: 32). She asks (2006: 32): “why and how these goods work so powerfully on kids’ minds and in the global marketplace today.”

While Allison builds a theory of ‘the global imagination’, she in fact concentrates only on two specific sites: Japan as the generator of consumer products and the United States as the consumer marketplace for these goods. Consequently, the book tells more about the historical, cultural, political and economic engagement between Japan and the United States than about a globally shared imagination. Allison’s work can thus be critiqued with similar arguments as that of Appadurai. While Appadurai’s work has been influential, scholars have not been convinced by his urge to collapse the world into all-encompassing global flows. In the case of toys, the question of why and how playthings work so powerfully on children’s minds is more fruitfully articulated with an exploration of the appropriation of particular toys by particular children. Elisabeth Chin (2001a), for instance, shows how Afro-American girls in New Jersey “racialized” their white Barbie dolls by braiding their blond hair. By doing so, she pays attention to how the perspective of children can challenge existing ideas about engagements with toys and material culture in general. In their appropriation of toys, children are critical, active and strategic agents involved in the construction and interpretation of their own worlds (Chin 2001a, 2001b).

The purpose of this paper is to go beyond the general argument made by Allison and show that her detailed descriptions of the production, design, marketing and appropriation of Japanese-made playthings can be used for alternative theoretical and empirical aims. Allison offers rich material for thinking about relations between the toy market, children and playthings; her interviews with corporate producers, toy designers, public relations firms and fans of Japanese toys both in Japan and the United States demonstrate that toys offer a dynamic context for children’s growth. In the wealthier parts of the world mass-produced toys are an unavoidable and indispensable part of the material world with which children come into contact and childhood has become unthinkable without commercially produced toys; children are intricately bound to their toys (e.g. Sutton-Smith 1986).

Despite intimate connections between children and mass-produced toys, surprisingly few studies have explored the consumption of toys from the perspective of children. Most toy research is adult-centred and toys are studied either through textual and pictorial evidence or directly read (Martens et al. 2004: 158–159). Few researchers explore the ways in which toys are used as “cultural sites where consuming selves arise, transform, and grow to the point of co-creating other consuming selves” (Cook 2004: 144). Thus if we want to go beyond the neoclassical economic notion of an individual (child), who comes into contact with an equally bounded market (toy market), we need to explore the intertwining of childhood and commercial culture (Cook 2004: 145). According to Webb Kean (2005: 194) objects instigate and invite people to certain actions; the design and marketing of mass-produced toys entices children to particular forms of play and social interaction. Yet this does not mean that playthings determine the actions of children or the meanings they give to their toys, as some toy researchers have assumed.¹ The interplay between children and toys remains complex, hard to follow and predict. As Elisabeth Chin (2001b: 138) puts it: “Given that the industry professionals—those guys who make toys their life—often haven’t got a clue as to what will or won’t work with kids, it seems silly to insist that one can read the meaning of a toy simply by examining the toy itself.”

The following discussion uses Allison's study of the virtual pet, the tamagotchi (2006: 163–191), as a point of departure for exploring the meanings given to the virtual pet by adults and children and the actions that it invites children to. Following Appadurai, Allison links the global success of the tamagotchi to the shared experiences of fragmentation and mobility in the contemporary era and defines the tamagotchi as “a new kind of place that produces new kinds of relationships—global commodity flows, postindustrial kids' trends, mobile and imaginary attachments” (Allison 2006: 170). Yet instead of thinking about the tamagotchi as an object which is inscribed with meaning that can be decoded from the world around it, perhaps it would be more fruitful to think of it in terms of its potentiality. What if virtual pets do not represent experiences of fragmentation and mobility, but prepare, invite and make children ready for them? The data offered by Allison is complemented with ethnographic material collected from a kindergarten in Helsinki. Together these materials suggest that toys can be fruitfully thought of as platforms which are used for rehearsing certain kinds of orientations to the world.

Note about the ethnographic data

The data for this paper was gathered in a kindergarten in Helsinki over a period of five months (January–May 2008); the fieldwork focused on kindergarten teachers and children's interactions with and around toys. Particular attention was paid to five to seven-year-olds' discussions of toys and their uses of them. The kindergarten was selected as a setting of the study because it is a public place, where interactions between children can be easily observed and where children are used to having adults around so they are not bothered by outsiders. For the children the institutional setting is, however, also a place of intense sociality, personal relations and intimate friendships (Gulløv 2003: 31; Strandell 1995).

The interactions between children and their toys were observed on weekly 'toy days'. Observations focused on the social interaction and play that toys appeared to instigate and invite children to participate in. The idea of the 'toy day' is that children bring their own toys to the kindergarten, present them to the teacher and other children and then play 'freely' with them. As a practice, the 'toy day' fuses together the educational context and the commercial culture of children. The toys children bring to the kindergarten tell of the toy fashion cycles initiated by the media. In addition, children have their own fashion cycles; they bring to the kindergarten toys that they assume others want to see and play with. Sometimes children also negotiate beforehand which toys they will bring along.

The toys that children brought to the kindergarten replicated the gender structure that characterizes the toy market. Popular girls' toys included fashion dolls, particularly Barbie and Bratz, baby dolls, animal toys (horses and ponies in particular), virtual pets and Littlest Pet Shop magnets. Boys' toys included Pokémon figures, cars and trucks. The only category of toys that appeared as gender-neutral consisted of soft toys, which were brought to the kindergarten by boys and girls alike. The observations in the kindergarten confirmed that toys invite children to play in a gender-segregated manner; girls typically showed little interest in boys' toys and vice versa. The tamagotchi was the only girls' toy that boys were clearly drawn to. The virtual pet resembles handheld digital game devices, which boys were familiar with; the fact that tamagotchi can be used to play games was greatly appreciated.

Domesticating digital technology

The tamagotchi, the new virtual pet, was launched in Japan in December 1996 and it transcended national boundaries with remarkable ease. The handheld, egg-shaped digital pet was distributed to Finnish toy markets the following year and it was quickly sold out with virtually no marketing (Helsingin Sanomat 30.7.1997). The tamagotchi is a simple computer with three buttons that allow the user to attend to the needs of the virtual pet, including sleep, play, food and discipline. The ‘craze’ lasted for some time, then the tamagotchi disappeared from the toy market; it then reappeared with new features. Now virtual pets are manufactured in various forms, spinoffs and versions and they are a recognizable category of children’s commercial culture. The children in the kindergarten in Helsinki mostly played with tamagotchi versions 4.5 and 5, but they also had Littlest Pet Shop digital pets.

Allison describes the tamagotchi as a “cyborgian fantasy”; a machine that provides personal access to a living organism; it was designed as a portable machine, which responded like an organic flesh-and-blood pet (Allison 2006: 164). Allison notes that one of the most important features contributing to the appeal of the tamagotchi is its sense of presence; it feels authentic. Girls in the kindergarten referred to this authenticity by talking about how they take care of their virtual pets by feeding them and ‘clearing their poop’. The bond between the child and the virtual pet is formed by repeating chores and duties that mimic those involved in the raising of a real pet. By manipulating the three buttons on the toy, the owner attends to her tamagotchi. Depending on how attentively the owner follows the pet’s needs and desires, the tamagotchi grows and develops. (Allison 2006: 166–167.)

According to Allison the interactive work of care is a key to the success of tamagotchi in the global markets. Yet, the tamagotchi also invites children to play games. The games that the pre-schoolers preferred most were simple ones that aimed at earning points (children usually talked about Euros or money/moneys) with which they could buy gifts or snacks for the pet.

We are sitting on the floor and watching Eva², who is playing with her virtual pet. Eva tells Bea that she already has forty points. I ask Bea if she has a tamagotchi.

Bea: “The batteries have ended and I do not remember how to take care of it.”

Mia and Lisa are listening to the conversation and continue the discussion.

Mia: “I play with it, earn points and then go shopping.”

Lisa: “I do not play with it, I take care of it.”

Mia: “Well I do that too, only sometimes I press the buttons as if it were a computer.” (Fieldwork notes 28.3.2008)

To an outside observer the game-playing of girls did not differ much from that of the boys; girls were handling digital devices, enthusiastically pressing buttons and aiming for higher scores. It was obvious that it was the game playing that excited them rather than the taking care of the virtual pet. Yet in conversations with adults the game playing aspect of tamagotchi seemed to be constantly downplayed. The emphasis on caretaking is an important discursive strategy for girls; it separates girls from boys, whose playing with their handheld electronic games is repeatedly represented as problematic. Girls were thus familiar with the widely-shared adult discourse that focuses on the harmful effects of computer and video games,

particularly on boys (e.g. Walkerdine 1998); they had learned that adults value more highly the taking care of the pet than playing games with it.

Allison emphasizes the bonds that are formed through the care giving and suggests that it is the work of care that matters most for the Japanese. She ties the intimacy and closeness that Japanese feel with their playthings to publicly shared concerns: the trend of having fewer or no children, the pressures of the education system, the loneliness of Japanese children and their withdrawal from society. The phenomenon of social shut-outs, the *hikimokori*, who refuse to participate in the world, has been widely documented as one of the malaises of contemporary Japanese society. According to Allison the tropes of 'healing' and 'soothing' (*iyasy, iyashikei*) are common in the marketplace of toys and both children and adults are offered relief from the stresses caused by consumer capitalism in the form of playthings. Toys encode and produce intimacy and belonging, which is otherwise missing from everyday lives; intimate relations with digital pets, *techno-intimacy*, are said to provide children and adults with fun and release from the everyday stresses of market society. (Allison 2006.)

Allison treats techno-intimacy as crucial for the success of Japanese toys also elsewhere in the world, but from the Finnish perspective the marketing slogans focusing on the 'healing' and 'soothing' effects of digital machines do sound strikingly Japanese; it is hard to imagine that they would mobilize consumers in Finland. The rhetoric of 'healing' that assumes that children are already wounded, overworked and in need of 'soothing' social interaction with digital devices (Allison 2006: 190) sounds almost offensive from the Finnish perspective. If Finnish children do need 'healing' and 'soothing', more typical advice would be to take them out to the woods: nature is supposed to be a soothing experience for children rather than commercially produced digital machines. This idea of the nature being 'the best possible place' for the child has great cultural resonance in all Nordic countries; it is built on the notion of children prospering in nature, not in urban environments surrounded by commercially produced toys and digital devices (Gulløv 2003: 28–29). Consequently, digital toys represent an intrusion into the lives of Finnish children; they introduce elements which are seen as 'unnatural' in the lives of pre-schoolers. The taking care of the virtual pet domesticates the effects of the digital technology, however, and girls learn to emphasize it. Without the care-taking aspect, virtual playmates would be much more controversial in a world of adults where little children's interactions with digital technologies continue to raise concerns.

Between the organic and the digital

The virtual pet invites children into an ongoing movement; they learn to operate in two different spaces which could be termed the 'organic' and the 'digital'. The virtual friend enlarges the actual living space of the children; the tamagotchi invites the owner to fulfil the pet's needs and desires for food, play, discipline, medicine, attention, and waste cleanup. The tamagotchi mimics the hierarchical relationship between caregiver and dependent and turns it around: the child, who is usually the one taken care of, becomes the caregiver, whose everyday routines ensure the pet's life (Allison 2006: 183–184). The 'digital space' of the tamagotchi orientates the owner of the pet towards the world of digital games. Significantly, however, the two spaces are never separate; the pet's needs also have to be taken care of during the game-playing.

Eva is walking around and playing with her tamagotchi; Maria is following her closely and watching carefully what she is doing. One of the boys, Tom, walks by and tells the girls that they are doing absolutely great: "Oh yeah." Then all three sit down on the sofa. Eva continues to play, Maria and Tom are trying to see what is happening on the small screen.

Eva announces: "Hundred, soon we have enough money and we can buy something."

Katja, a six-year-old, walks by and informs the players that there are tamagotchi web pages on the internet.

The players pay no attention to her.

Eva (to Maria and Tom): "Hold your noses, this pooped."

Maria and Tom hold their noses; Maria makes faces.

Eva: "What are we going to do? This has pooped."

She is anxiously pressing the buttons. "Now the poop has been cleaned. We have a hundred points. Let's go there", she concludes.

She shows the way to the others, Maria addresses me: "Now you do not follow us." They walk to the door; then suddenly return to the sofa.

Maria: "Now we can buy something, let's buy something, let's go and look for food."

Eva presses the button too quickly and is forced to select the first choice of food.

Eva: "This ate it."

Maria: "Now we have to continue playing, because we have no money."

(Fieldwork notes 28.3.2008)

The virtual pet fuses together elements that belong to the 'organic space' and the 'digital space'. According to Allison (2006: 185) the tamagotchi holds together "incompatible elements, real and imaginary, that kids become fluent in today through the cybermedia that structure so much of their study and play." For children these elements are not incompatible at all; they are just elements that the virtual pet orientates them towards. Toys, such as the virtual pet, familiarize children with everyday routines, such as feeding and shopping, that take place in the 'digital space'. The tamagotchi is not providing an access to an imaginary world, but it invites children to a world where the movement between the organic and the digital is "part and parcel of the ordinary itself" (Allison 2006: 186). As I already pointed out, in the Nordic countries children are understood to prosper in the world of nature. Deep nostalgia is attached to children's engagements with nature and with products of nature (see Karimäki 2004: 118); sticks and stones are treated as more suitable tools for little children than plastic toys and digital games. Prominent understandings of childhood emphasize the importance of 'organic space' over 'digital space' for the well-being of children. Yet, children do spend a considerable amount of time with digital technologies and this is also seen as important for developing skills for future citizenship; after all Finland is discursively defined as a knowledge society, where the mastering of technologies is a key to civic engagement (e.g. Berglund 2007).

Finnish educators emphasize the importance of regulated game-playing; if possible, the 'digital space' should be engaged with in a controlled and instrumental manner. Children are encouraged to become rational explorers and users of technologies. Children's actual engagements with technologies are, however, typically not that goal-oriented; virtual pets are used as instruments of play and experimentation, not as task-specific tools. Overall, children's understandings of engagements with and within the digital space can differ remarkably from those of adults. As Valerie Walkerdine (1998: 244) argues, the anxieties around new technologies seem to be an adult affair. Yet, this does not mean that children

could not have concerns of their own in relation to digital technologies; virtual pets invite children to a world that requires of them knowledge and skills that they might not yet have.

The art of mastering the pet

In Allison's book the children included in the discussions of playthings are deeply involved in the interactive toy worlds; they are fans of superheroes and masters of digital technologies. Studies that concentrate only on children who have the knowledge and skills that the interactive toy worlds require, however, fail to capture the processes that precede intense involvements with such playthings. Not all girls in the kindergarten knew how to use virtual pets; some preferred other activities or were happy just to observe what others were doing with their pets. These girls did not want to try to play the game, even if offered; they did not want to take the risk that they might not master the game quickly enough. A couple of girls were openly frustrated; they complained that the tamagotchi games were too complicated for them and required skills that they did not have; the images on the screen went by too fast and gave them too little time to react.

In order to understand better what the tamagotchi requires of the owner, I bought the tamagotchi version 5. I thought I would learn to operate the pet by reading through the instructions: remarkably, however, the package included none. The following day I sent my five-year-old son to the kindergarten with the new device; in the afternoon he enthusiastically explained me how to feed the pet, clean up the waste after it and keep the pet's 'hearths full'. Two of the five-year-old girls in the kindergarten had carefully showed him how to operate the pet by pressing the three buttons. After days of interactions with the pet, we still did not know how to play all the games. We had also not registered the pet online, which was essential for further involvements in the interactive tamagotchi-world. It seemed that the virtual pet opened a whole range of possibilities, which could have been used much more efficiently.

The lack of instructions on the package of the virtual pet was probably no coincidence. One of the aims of Japanese playthings has been to strengthen communication and exchange between children; the Pokémon, for instance, was particularly designed for collecting and trading that would bring socially isolated Japanese children together (Allison 2006: 199). The interactive tamagotchi-world has been built in a way that encourages and relies on the sharing of knowledge among children. Knowledge of Japanese playthings is available on the internet, but illiterate children are unable to retrieve this information by themselves. Consequently, the exchange of knowledge about toys, games and their websites already shapes children's interactions in the kindergarten. In some groups of friends the distribution and sharing of this kind of knowledge is highly valued. As soon as they learn how to read and write, children start to collect and share this information over the internet; the tamagotchi-website, for instance, is used as a platform of communication among children.

Toys and digital games construct 'discourse communities' (see Urban 1996), which create a social space for collective sharing; this community is produced by talking about playthings and by the actual playing of children. In the kindergarten, playing with a virtual pet was never a lone endeavour: one or more children were always following the player carefully and commenting on how he or she was doing. In fact, if there was no one to share the experience with, the pet quickly lost its appeal. The players are central figures in children's

discourse communities; they are respected because they have been persistent enough to learn the rules of the game. The mastery of games requires patience and remarkable emotional control on the part of pre-school children; they need to learn how to manage their frustration, anxiety, even panic, in front of other children (Walkerdine 1998: 244). From this perspective, the playing of games transforms the virtual pet into a platform for rehearsing interactions with digital technologies; it orientates children towards a world where digital games are mastered and enjoyed by becoming a part of a discourse community. Needless to say, this is a lesson that extends well beyond the virtual pet.

Toys in cultural transmission

According to Allison, the tamagotchi is a new kind of place that produces relationships and attachments that support children in a world of mobility and flux. Based on the ethnographic material collected in the kindergarten in Helsinki, the techno-intimacies with the virtual pet might be emphasized in talk, but not necessarily in practice. The playing of games on the virtual pet worked much more powerfully on these girls' minds than taking care of the pet. Digital technologies are a taken-for-granted aspect of their daily environments and they are familiar with digital technologies and computer games. The girls visit each other regularly and many of them had older sisters, brothers, and fathers who play games.³ From this perspective, these girls use the tamagotchi for orientating themselves in this environment; the knowledge and the technical mastering of the virtual pet opens possibilities for future engagements with digital technologies and electronic media. By doing so, it also introduces children to the globally cherished and hegemonic idea that the consumer economy requires continuous movement between the organic and the digital. Orientations to the world are created through playing digital games; subjectivities emerge through the ever faster pressing of the buttons of the virtual pet.

The tamagotchi is appropriated and understood in various ways and used for different discursive purposes. Yet it seems that both in Japan and in Finland discourse communities of children use branded toy worlds as platforms of communication; these platforms are the means by which children continually re-construe their worlds in the ongoing process of cultural transmission (see Sherzer 1987). Consequently, the processes of cultural transmission among children cannot be fully examined if playthings are approached as vessels of meaning that can be decoded from the world around them. Instead, toys should be approached as facilitators of communication and action that offer powerful ideological content by urging children to familiarize themselves with the principles of consumer capitalism. The materials discussed in this paper demonstrate that instead of adding to the already well-established discourse on adult anxieties over children's engagements with technology and media, a more fruitful research agenda examines in a detailed, critical and open-minded manner the ways in which children use commercially branded toys and game worlds in their processes of cultural transmission.

NOTES

¹ Bob Dixon, for instance, argues that Barbie dolls seriously reduce the complexity of children's play. He claims that: "The Barbie products set the agenda for a ceaseless round of triviality and self-indulgence. There is no room for anything else" (Dixon 1990: 72).

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² All names of children are pseudonyms.

³ Mothers were usually mentioned as the regulators of game playing.

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