

'Bereavement' counselling is now available to help children come to terms with the death of their Tamagotchi.

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Mark Griffiths

Are virtual pets more demanding than the real thing?

Over the past few months I have been receiving more and more calls from various parts of the media asking me for my thoughts on Tamagotchis — or cyberpets, as the press have dubbed them — particularly about whether they are a threat to either educational or social development. At the moment it is far too early to give definitive answers to such questions, but these press enquiries have certainly stimulated my thoughts on the subject.

A threat to mental health?

Tamagotchis are currently the country's best-selling toy, and appear to be a craze sweeping the UK child population. In Japan (where they originated), Tamagotchis have been selling a million a month since their launch in November 1996. Since their launch in this country on 8 May 1997, Tamagotchis have been discussed on *Esther* and *The Late Show*, have made an appearance in *The Archers*, and have been written about in newspaper stories up and down the country. For instance *Gotchi! Is this toy a threat to our mental health?* which appeared in the Independent on Sunday (13 July 1997), was one such story.

Although the toys are probably a fad, they do seem to be a new breed of toy that is more interesting psychologically than many of its predecessors like Space Hoppers, Deely-Boppers, and the Rubik's Cube. Many may argue that we have always been fascinated by portable

games and toys. However, unlike most toys, which people eventually get bored with, it is alleged that Tamagotchis require their owners to be the slave rather than the master. This Christmas there is likely to be a Tamagotchi bonanza, which will be fuelled by more sophisticated versions and six more colours. Many schools, both here and in South East Asia, have already banned them in an attempt to stop them interfering with children's educational development.

For those reading this who still have no idea what a Tamagotchi is or does, then let me explain. Tamagotchi means 'egg watch' or 'lovable egg', and the device looks like an egg-shaped key ring. It is about 60mm in diameter and has a small liquid crystal display screen. By pulling a small tag on the side, an 'egg' hatches to reveal a small chick, and the owner has to attend to its every need by pressing the appropriate buttons.

Constant attention

These virtual pets demand all the things you would expect of a real pet (being fed, going to the toilet, going for walks, being disciplined when it is naughty, being given injections if it is sick, etc.). They require constant attention to survive. Unhappy animals that are not fed or nurtured make noises (squeals, snarls) at their owners and will die if they are ignored. The aim of the game — if indeed it is a game — is to keep the Tamagotchi alive for as long as possible. The

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current record life-span for the toy is about 30 days. It is designed for children that are not allowed to keep real pets at home, and the aim is to 'nurture' the Tamagotchi through its life by responding to its virtual needs. Each Tamagotchi develops differently (in terms of both shape and characteristics) depending on how its owner has brought it up.

If the increasing number of press stories are to be believed, 'bereavement' counselling is now available to help children come to terms with the death of their virtual pet. Tamagotchis play on the psychology of attachment, and therefore it is perhaps not surprising that emotions unleashed by separation may be severe. There are already anecdotal reports of parents with inconsolable children that cannot cope with the death of their favourite Tamagotchi. One parent even wrote to The Times to complain that her role of parent had been stretched to the limit when her 11-year-old daughter rang (reverse charge) from school to request that she feed her Tamagotchi!

'Electronic friendships'

To many people, cases such as this may seem irrational and over the top. However, there is no reason why a child should not be able to learn from such a toy. The whole point of computer simulation is that you learn about things before you do them in real life. There is at least the potential for a positive learning experience in this case. But there are also possibly negative aspects. Besides the issue of educational disruption, Tamagotchis have been alleged to be socially isolating, preventing children from developing social skills. However, just because children may use them as 'electronic friends' does not necessarily mean that their owners fail to form human friendships and to interact with their peer groups. This does raise interesting questions about friendship.

Over the last twenty years there has been a large upsurge of research into children's peer friendships and social skills. This research has demonstrated that interaction with peers plays an important role in fostering interpersonal skills, poise, and social competence in children. It has also been noted that friendships are more than just friendly interaction. It would appear that 'friendship', like most psychological concepts, has many different definitions. For instance, definitions often describe friendship as a mutual preference for interaction, skill at complemen-

tary and reciprocal peer play, and shared positive affect. However, such definitions are never really sufficient to describe all cases. What is more, such definitions implicitly assume that such relationships are always between people. It could well be the case that some people (particularly children and adolescents) can form 'electronic friendships', as they appear to do with Tamagotchis.

More time with technology than with people?

Anecdotal evidence suggests that for the typical Tamagotchi owner there is little cause for concern. However, it may be that for a minority of children and adolescents they can take up considerable time, and that to all intents and purposes their owners are 'addicted' to them. Whether the games are inherently good or bad is not the most pertinent question here. The question to ask is what the longitudinal effect of any activity that takes up an excessive amount of time (in this case playing with or looking after a Tamagotchi) has on the educational and social development of children and adolescents. At present we do not know the answer to such a question, but it doesn't need a psychologist to say that any child engaging in any activity (whether 'good' or 'bad') over a long period of time from a young age would have its social and educational development negatively affected in some way.

Finally, it may be worth noting that what we are witnessing could be a quite 'natural' state of affairs. Are we merely seeing a decades-long trend for people to spend an increasing amount of time with technology instead of other people? A number of sociologists have made the point that the shift away from family and peers to mass-media technology as the primary agent of socialisation can be traced to the advent of radio in the 1930s, followed by television in the 1950s and by computer networks today. Maybe Tamagotchis are just a contemporary way of dealing with a society where people are becoming increasingly isolated from each other. Whatever the reason, they are certainly worthy of continued psychological study.

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