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### Cuteness & Capitalism: the Tamagotchi's Role in "Cool Japan's" Reinvention

In the time of the Walkmans, digital video discs (DVDs), and Nintendo video games, American '90s pop culture flourished with technological goods from Japan, converting the once antagonized state from that of prejudice and pain to whimsy and mystification. The establishment of Japan as a "cute and cool" country has already been established through anime, Hello Kitty, video games, and other representative items and figures, as claimed in cultural anthropologist Professor Anne Allison's book, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*, and among other scholars' works. However, the Tamagotchi, one of the world's most popular virtual pets produced in the 1990s in which the player hatches and raises a "cyber creature" sent from outer space to "learn what it's like on Earth" ("The Original Tamagotchi Gen 2 Instructions") further contributes to these images through its rapid adoption into domestic and overseas households. The Tamagotchi adapts the essence of its gameplay in its physical and virtual design features, like the egg-shaped plastic casing and reactive creature designs, in turn also acknowledging the Tamagotchi's mortality and contributing to its universal appeal. Using visual, cultural, and social analysis, I believe that capitalizing on cuteness and wholesome interspecies relationships via pop culture objects like the 1996-1997 Original Tamagotchi line to appeal to children (and young adults) is an underestimated force of power in recreating Japan's idealized cultural representation of "Cool Japan" as seen through the

Tamagotchi's physical form, digital character design, and simple yet appealing nurture-based gameplay. These marketing appeals, therefore, contribute to the development of loving yet concerning Tamagotchi-human relationships that are strong enough to survive the test of time in contemporary American culture due to the toy's widespread appeal among its intended audiences.

However, prior to the Tamagotchi's invention and Japan's growing soft power, the United States shared a turbulent history with the Japanese due to Japan's military actions during World War II (WWII). Tension was already high at the start of WWII as is the nature of war and hysteria driven by mass media; however, in the aftermath of the infamous Pearl Harbor bombing in 1942, fear and racial hostility rose in the United States. All Japanese Americans, more than 110,000 people, living in the Pacific Coast region were forcibly removed from their homes and displaced in internment camps alongside true enemy combatants two months after the bombing as "Americans and the Holocaust," a website run by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, explains. Pulling from the American Institute of Public Opinion, 93% of American citizens believed that Japanese people without American citizenship should be interned in internment camps, while 59% also believed that Japanese Americans should be interned ("Americans and the Holocaust"). Incarcerating people of Japanese ancestry illustrates American animosity toward the Japanese: not only were the Japanese punished, but also innocent Japanese-Americans who had nothing to do with the war. The idea that the majority of American citizens disregarded Japanese Americans' citizenship and the inhumane lack of freedom that follows reflects the blind rage and fear at the time of WWII and this disdain is on the basis of ethnic identity. With such long-standing animosity towards the Japanese people, the United

States people and government must have shared a strained relationship for years; however, that changed over time due to new commodities including the Tamagotchi.

With the help of precise marketing targeting new-to-technology children, the Tamagotchi achieved major success both within Japan and overseas, including the United States. Professor Anne Allison affirms this sensation in her chapter on Tamagotchis in which she describes how the “toy that is simultaneously pet, gadget, game, fashion accessory, and virtual reality” was first aimed at eight-year-olds but “took off with teenage girls and adults” (163). Furthermore, Allison reports that millions of Tamagotchis were sold “in more than eighty countries and had produced revenues of more than \$160 million” (164) by May 1998, less than two years since its initial release. She also draws attention to Walkmans and karaoke, noting that a key component of Tamagotchi's appeal may be the change in body and spatial experiences, creating a new and entertaining way to experience everyday things like singing along to instrumentals or listening to music while walking. Since the digital pet is easily attachable as an accessory and does not require difficult mechanisms or great amounts of attention to play, the Tamagotchi allows new a new element of entertainment to the monotony of everyday life. This creates a hybrid experience: the natural world of animals and nurture combine with the digital age to create a chic mix between Hello Kitty and the Walkman that users can conveniently carry around and play with at any time. With players openly playing and walking around with these uniquely represented toys around their book bags, it was only a matter of time before the trend spread in Japan and later abroad, reaching international levels of popularity. These claims from Allison's work prove the prevalence of Tamagotchis and how they capture both cool and cute images

while introducing a new form of entertainment technology, engaging a variety of audiences, and propelling Japan to its current cool reputation.

From a nationalist standpoint, the Japanese embraced these forms of “soft power” and began the “Cool Japan” campaign. The “Cool Japan” campaign is a Japanese federal project established around 2005 dedicated to reshaping Japan’s national brand into a favorable and attractive light, or as simply put by its coined name, “cool”, among foreign youths, as described by Associate Professor Katja Valaskivi in her paper “A Brand New Future? Cool Japan and the Social Imaginary of the Branded Nation” (485). This reformation of Japan’s image is based on their “gross national cool”, a term dubbed by American journalist Douglas McGray and explained by Valaskivi, referring to successful Japanese culture exports that “created a new image for Japan, an image that does, in fact, have a positive impact on the nation’s GDP and may potentially increase its global attractiveness, including on the political stage” (488). Although Japan has not formally explained what inspired this focus, Valaskivi suspects that it derived from its accidental international popularity during Japan’s “lost decade” (the 1990s) in which they paid attention to internal problems while interest in cultural commodities like entertainment goods and sushi took flight abroad (488-489). The Cool Japan Fund and its gross nation cool is envisioned to help Japan in its pursuit of greater soft power, generally defined by anthropologist Christine Yano as “the ability to indirectly influence behavior or interests through cultural or ideological means”. With other countries’ citizens and subcultures growing on Japanese products, Japan itself gains this soft form of influence over the aforementioned countries. Hence, with the Tamaogotchi’s creation in 1996 and worldwide release in 1997, the Tamagotchi

becomes a figure in the inspiration and motivation for the founding of Cool Japan and its focus on soft power.

By simply viewing the physical appearance of the Tamagotchi's design, there are plenty of visual appeals to users. For instance, the plastic outside containing the Tamagotchi imitates that of a real-life bird or reptilian eggshell—a play-on of the “*tamago*” (translating to “egg” in Japanese) part of the toy's name—that emphasizes the nurturing and life cycle mechanics in the game. The toy is in the shape of an egg and has a jagged edge surrounding the digital display, mimicking an animal hatching from its shell. Since many animals must hatch from eggs before stepping foot into the world, these choices indicate that the player's new friend will be some form of new life, just as the egg is often associated with fresh beginnings and new life. Furthermore, the plastic's decor is bright and colorful, sometimes adorned with shapes, numbers, or cartoons, clearly made to cater to children. Moreover, alluding to the watch or “-gotchi” part of its name, the keychain portion of the Tamagotchi gives players the opportunity to display their Tamagotchis. As described by “The Gotchi Boy”, an adult Tamagotchi collector and child during the 1990s, “on their bookbag, on their belt loops, wherever a keyring be available to attach to, [...] *chains* of these hanging from themselves and latched onto themselves and their belt loops and everything” (“The DEFINITIVE Original Tamagotchi” 00:02:22-00:02:38). The Gotchi Boy continues to explain how his first meeting and interest in a Tamagotchi sparked when a Tamagotchi's beeping cry sounded during class and the owner showed him what caused it, thus beginning a trend on the playground. While the gameplay and digital designs of the characters have their own contributions to the amassed popularity of the Tamaogtchi, the toy's representative outward design made waves in establishing a unique figure for itself.

Since the Tamagotchi would constantly be put on display on the playground and around the town, the toy's novelty gained massive traction as the iconic, small egg shape stimulated the interest and familiarity with the toy and aided in generating outsiders' perceptions of it. This idea of the trend spreading is further supported by communication professors Linda-Renée Bloch and Dafna Lemish, for whom the easy display of the Tamagotchi enables owners "to boast of their acquisition, thereby becoming members of an 'in-group' of those children socially attuned to and with access to current trends" (290), implying that the Tamagotchi is shown around as if a badge of honor. Children, in their impressionable views, may associate cool materialistic items like the Tamagotchi with the owner themselves, finding those who follow or start trends to be popular on the playground and desiring to copy the same attribute making them cool. In the same vein, Bloch and Lemish highlight the contrast of the single-player design to Tamagotchis frequently "elicit[ing] much discussion" among users when comparing their Tamagotchi's growth (297). Due to the iconic physical shape, easy attachment features, and popularity in putting these toys on display, detecting the Tamagotchi and sparking discussion on it comes naturally. Thus, many children who wish to join in a group's camaraderie may be encouraged to buy one, emphasizing the vitality of the toy's attachment facet in its perceived coolness and widespreadness of it. With these easily detectable attributes on the toy's surface, the Tamagotchi became an icon for fun and digital petness.

In spite of Tamagotchi's mystified character designs, the creatures' body parts resemble real animals, which plays an important role in the toy's appeal. None of the characters look fully human, however, all the characters have some combination of lips, arms, legs, eyes, and bodies that are even decipherable through their limited 8-bit screens. Although the 8-bit design of the

gameplay may seem like a hindrance to the characters' appearance as cute or cool creatures, the simplicity in design may suggest otherwise. As claimed by psychoanalyst and media critic Eyal Amiran in his lecture on animals as significant figures in culture and childhood, the animal figure subconsciously helps bridge the gap between a child's fantasy realm and the real, adult world. This implies that the modest 8-bit designs of the original Tamagotchis keep users engaged, as players can use their real-life observations to interpret the body parts of the characters they see on screen and process them as animals due to these minuscule anthropomorphic/animalistic details. In turn, this brings out an additional element of gameplay beyond the coded design itself: what each individual can associate their Tamagotchi with from the real world. Furthermore, the Tamagotchis's animations aid in making children perceive their characters as pets because of the movement itself and the different expressions and demands the creature makes. This incorporation of movement and reactions presents the Tamagotchis as living creatures themselves, having some form of emotional self-agency and personality. Thus, with the variety of the Original Tamagotchi designs, it is easy to understand why children and even young adults became enthralled with the Tamagotchi's childlike glamour and lifelike behavior.

No game or toy would be very popular without charming gameplay to keep its audiences entertained; and for the Tamagotchi, that implies the simple nurturing basis of gameplay. Researchers and millennial players concur that these tasks are more effortless than doing the same thing in real life, yet still reaching the same beneficial results. For example, between bathing a Tamagotchi with a few clicks of a button versus bathing a golden retriever, both will still be clean, which is vital for a healthy living, but the Tamagotchi will be much easier to take handle. Some of the actions that the player can choose to adhere to their Tamagotchi's needs

include playing, feeding, turning off the “lights” for sleeping, giving shots for illnesses, cleaning up, and disciplining. In short, the attentiveness that the player completes to keep their Tamagotchi happy, healthy, and well-disciplined contributes to the evolution, growth, and emotional response of the Tamagotchi (“The DEFINITIVE Original Tamagotchi” 00:07:30-00:12:33) which brings satisfaction in seeing the cyber pet thrive. Although the mini-games contributing to the Tamagotchi’s happiness meter are amusing and engaging in and of themselves, the combination of all these actions to respond to a Tamagotchi creates more than entertainment: it leads to responsibility. According to Gatcha Boy, “Kids would be upset [about Tamagotchis being taken away from them] because they would take care of them for so long and there’s a potential for them to pass away in the time that they were waiting to get it back” (00:03:23-00:03:33). Furthermore, as recalled by another millennial adult in an interview on Tamagotchis, parents would also recognize the responsibility that was necessary to keep the Tamagotchi alive, as their mother challenged the interviewee to keep a Tamagotchi alive to get a dog in return (“90s Kids Play” 00:00:33-00:00:44), most likely using the virtual pet to somewhat prove they could handle the responsibility of raising a dog as well. With the essential gameplay and goal of getting the Tamagotchi to grow up to the best of the player’s ability, the player and toy becomes more than a simple relationship and instead creates a more intimate, social bondage between nurturer and Tamagotchi, human and digital creature.

Although the Tamagotchi is well-revered as a digital pet toy, the human-computer relationship in Tamagotchis is limiting. Professors Thomas Chesney and Shaun Lawson, writers of a paper that studied the social fulfillment of dog and cat owners versus *Nintendogs* owners (a Nintendo game in which the player cares for a virtual dog on a mobile multi-screen device),



revealed that “the companionship afforded by a Nintendog is significantly less” than their real-life cat and dog counterparts (Chesney & Lawson 340). Although the paper’s focus mainly surrounded *Nintendogs*, the researchers extended the results to *all* screen-based virtual pets as they also used some responses from Tamagotchi owners to conclude, thus implying that the Tamagotchi does *not* form nearly as strong emotional bonds as with true pets. “If the toy interferes with other commitments or desires it can be disposed of”, support Bloch and Lemish in their paper, “If one is tired, bored, or simply negligent, there is always another chance” (290). The pair express the disposibility of the toy: at the end of the day, the Tamagotchi is a battery-powered toy meant to be played with and enjoyed, not necessarily built to be a friend. Their highlighting of disposibility culture (the ease and acceptability of throwing, changing, or remaking items in everyday culture) within their paper underscores the Tamagotchi’s temporariness in the long run, meaning that purchasers and users must be aware of the fact when adopting their alien friend. The Tamagotchi, as a toy, is then limited in its existence as a true social companion due to its nature as a digital toy first and foremost.

Although the Tamagotchi had piqued people's interest in its novelty as an accessory, game, and friend, its formation of pseudo-social relationships had taken a toll on its consumers. Despite this, Tamagotchis still held some emotional significance as mentioned in many papers and references from millennials; Tamagotchis were once so popular that they were banned from classrooms due to disruption and distraction and taken away from their owners. The idea that Tamagotchi players would go as far as to get into trouble with their parents, teachers, and other adults over taking care of their Tamagotchis emphasizes the emotional importance and attachments they had concerning their characters. These attachments eventually also became a

concern to some psychologists in the late 1990s. Dr. Andrew Cohen, an American psychologist at Dalton School, describes the Tamagotchi death as a “real sense of loss and a mourning process” (qtd. by Lawson) in an article produced by *The New York Times*. While Tamagotchi toys can be reset to begin the game over again and are not living, breathing animals, the fact that professionals were concerned and went out of their way to criticize these toys indicates Tamagotchi's significant role in the social relationships formed with users, especially children. Cohen's claim is further verified when considering the cemetery in England dedicated to Tamagotchis, along with online cemeteries for the rest of the world (Baranowski). He expands on his concern by explaining how "Kids want to nurture and take care of pets -- it gives them a feeling of empowerment and self-importance -- but here the consequences are too high" (Lawson). This suggests how Bandai capitalizes on children's want to be mature and in control of something to successfully carry out the Tamagotchi's marketing. It may also capitalize on its older audience's desire to play and indulge in childlike pleasure as the gameplay is reminiscent of childhood, its nurturing mechanics and animal-like designs perhaps imitating a doll once cared for. In a sense, then, the Tamagotchi finds itself stuck in a gray area as both an easy source of entertainment and one-half of a true, animal-human relationship.

Since the years of the Tamagotchi, the American opinion on Japan has improved. According to RJ Reinhart, an analyst and writer for Gallup (which founded the American Institute of Public Opinion), most Americans have consistently viewed Japan favorably since 1996, with 65 to 84 percent of respondents reporting that they view Japan “very/most favorable” rather than “very/mostly unfavorable” (Reinhart). Furthermore, Reinhart also notes that most Americans viewed Japan favorably in 1989 to 1991 (Reinhart), which may be due to the height

of other exported goods or technologies, such as the Sanrio franchise (Allison). This report does not seem to be a coincidence; with the Tamagotchi's overseas release in 1997 in addition to prior Japanese exported advancements (anime, Hello Kitty, et cetera [Allison]), Reinhart implies that Japan's vision of soft power influence and Cool Japan's youthful appeal is working. However, although the timing may seem concurrent, correlation does not equal causation as there is not a clearly defined reason for these changes; for instance, other influences could be political relations, advertising on non-pop culture related goods, or simply time to mend the American view. Nonetheless, with the statistics of the polls and age change in interviewees, the plausibility of the Tamagotchi's undeniable economic and cultural affluence in international exports must have contributed to the Japanese government's idea of Cool Japan and the course it is taking.

Today, Americans can still see the digital pet's cultural impact as both a topic of study as well as its various appearances in contemporary American media. For instance, the Tamagotchi can be seen in works like *Turning Red* (2022), a skit on late night talk show host Jimmy Fallon's Twitter, and even in various rap and R&B songs. These references to the Tamagotchi—nearly 25 years after its release abroad—demonstrates another life-imitating aspect of the digital pet despite their limited lifespans and solitude in the shell: generational legacy. The Tamagotchi, the alien species sent down to learn about life on Earth, lives on in these various forms and references of the toy that have evolved since their creation in the 1990s. Discussion surrounding the Tamagotchi may go beyond the scope of the 1996-1997 classic given its withstanding influence on American and international pop culture, posing itself as a friend, an animal, and an iconic, digitized toy.

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