

Make it Cuddle, Make it Fight, Market it Pink: Virtual Pets and Affective Economies of Gendered Play

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Virtual pets were among the most culturally influential digital artefacts of the 1990s, capturing user's daily attention and reshaping expectations around emotional engagement with technology. Yet beyond their nostalgic appeal, these devices reveal how games and software toys (Rollings & Adams, 2003) participated in gendered affective economies; systems in which emotional labour, care, attachment, competitiveness, and aspiration were assigned different cultural values depending on who was imagined to perform and play them. This paper examines how virtual pets (particularly in the 1990s), through both design and marketing, encoded assumptions about gendered labour, reinforcing broader cultural hierarchies about which forms of emotional engagement "counted" as legitimate play.

This paper also presents a typology of virtual pets that aims to help clarify these dynamics. Distinct virtual pets -- such as *Tamagotchi* (Bandai, 1996), *Gigapets* (Tiger Electronics, 1997), *Neopets* (1999), and Disney's *Little Mermaid Virtual Friend* (1997), operated as standalone caregiving systems. Players tended a small digital creature through repetitive loops of feeding, cleaning, healing, disciplining, and teaching, often at regular intervals that mirrored the rhythms of domestic or childcare labour. These games offered affective pleasures through witnessing the creature's happiness and growth into new life stages. Progress was tied to emotional fulfilment rather than strategic achievement; a pet was "doing well" not because it leveled up, but because it was happy, healthy, full, or soothed. This deeply repetitive, relational style of engagement closely resembles what Bloch and Lemish describe as a "meta-narrative of nurturing" (1996), inviting players to inhabit forms of labour historically associated with femininity, domestic responsibility, and care work.

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Embedded virtual pets, conversely, operated within broader game ecosystems. The Chao in *Sonic Adventure* (1998), Pokémon in the long-running *Pokémon* (1996 - present) franchise, Digimon's evolving monsters (Bandai, 1997 - present), and Chocobos in the *Final Fantasy* (1987 - present) series all functioned as a kind of digital companion, but they additionally have varying degrees of value in their contribution to progress-oriented systems such as levelling, combat, exploration, and collection. These games framed such virtual creatures as allies in goal-driven play, allowing for training and optimisation. In such embedded virtual pet examples, care can be provided for the creature, but it was instrumental: nurturing a creature enabled it to evolve, gain stats, or perform better in battle. The underlying emotional economy emphasised mastery, measurable progress, and competitive success. Many fans within the emerging "hardcore" player culture, for example, celebrated grinding, levelling, and optimisation while dismissing caretaking mechanics as trivial or unserious, revealing clear hierarchies between what kinds of emotional labour were valued (Salter, Stanfill, and Sullivan, 2019).

These differences were reinforced through the visual and rhetorical language of marketing. Distinct pets were more often associated with pastel palettes, soft rounded shapes, and domestic metaphors drawn from girlhood aesthetics of the period. Advertisements foregrounded gentleness, responsibility, and companionship, positioning these devices as feminine-coded spaces of emotional expressiveness. This aligned them with a broader 1990s trend in "games for girls," where play was frequently distilled into single-focus activities, such as caring for virtual pets, dressing up characters, shopping, gossip, or performing makeovers. These activities were often presented as self-contained, holistic play experiences but were structurally narrow, offering limited systems and tightly constrained forms of interaction. By contrast, virtual pets embedded in expansive adventure or RPG systems were wrapped in bold colours and action-oriented slogans. Pokémon commercials emphasised adventure, conflict, and competition; Digimon was explicitly conceived as a "boy-oriented version of Tamagotchi" (Makoto Kitagawara, 2018), foregrounding combat and toughness.

The contrast between care-as-play and combat-as-play shaped not only the mechanics but also the affective temporalities of these systems. Distinct pets required frequent, steady attention throughout the day, creating an ongoing sense of low-level responsibility. Embedded pets, meanwhile, invited bursts of intense effort in the form of training sessions, battles, evolutions, followed by intervals of exploration or progression. The former modelled continuity and emotional maintenance; the latter modelled achievement. These rhythms were not politically neutral: they mirrored broader social narratives about whose time is structured around continuous, often invisible labour, and whose experiences of work and play are framed around visible accomplishment.

Nevertheless, players often moved between or across these modes in ways that disrupted simple gender binaries. Some children found deep emotional satisfaction in training their Pokémon or caring for their Digimon despite the competitive framing. Others, boys included, developed strong attachments to their Tamagotchi or GigaPets. These user practices reflect a spectrum of affective motivations. Some players sought emotional closeness and continuity; others valued partnership in goal-oriented play; still others delighted primarily in acquiring, collecting, and cataloguing creatures. However, despite this diversity of player engagement, the design and marketing structures of the era consistently framed certain forms of emotional expression as natural or expected for specific audiences and less appropriate or less valuable for others.

Understanding these dynamics requires attention to the wider affective economies in which virtual pets circulated. These devices accumulated emotional value beyond their basic function: they became tokens of friendship, sources of comfort, and markers of belonging within early fan cultures, drawing on cultural discourses of cuteness, responsibility, and identity. Yet they also operated within gendered political economies of representation, where notions of girlhood and boyhood were constructed through advertising, toy design, and the narratives attached to play. Care-based play, despite its prominence in distinct virtual pets, was routinely siloed and undervalued, while combat-driven forms of engagement expanded into major multimedia franchises. The contrast is especially clear in the first Tamagotchi console title—a narrow breeding simulator released in 1997—set against the sprawling RPG ecosystems that sustained embedded virtual pets and continue to anchor large-scale game franchises today.

This paper argues that virtual pets were not trivial digital novelties, but cultural texts that encoded, reinforced, and commercialised gendered forms of affective labour. The virtual creatures of the 1990s modelled differing emotional expectations for different players, embedding care, control, mastery, and attachment within gendered frameworks of value. Their design and marketing reveal a divided emotional economy in which nurturing was rendered narrow and feminised, while ambition and competition were framed as neutral, or implicitly masculine. These dynamics have had lasting ripple effects; the affective hierarchies first exhibited through virtual pets remain visible in contemporary creature-collecting genres, mobile care games, and the enduring split between “cozy” and “hardcore” gaming cultures.

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