EMOTIONAL AMBIVALENCES. LOVING AND HATING A *TAMAGOTCHI*

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In her book "Alone Together", Sherry Turkle tells a story about actors and robots that she experienced when she was in Japan for the first time in the early 1990s. She reported:

> *The problems of elderly loomed large. Unlike in previous generations, children were mobile, and women were in the workforce. Aging and infirm parents were unlikely to live at home. Visiting them was harder; they were often in different cities from their children. In response, some Japanese children were hiring actors to substitute for them and visiting aging parents. The actors would visit and play their parts. Some of the elderly parents had dementia and might not have known the difference. Most fascinating were reports about parents who knew that they were being visited by actors. They took the actors' visit as a sign of respect, enjoyed the company, and played the game.* (Turkle 2011: 74)

The Japanese, as Turkle was told, valued the "predictable visits and the well-trained and courteous actors." So, she thought "If you are willing to send in an actor, why not send in a robot?" (Ibid.) She does not answer the question directly but makes her skeptical position very clear. Whatever one thinks about actors visiting lonely parents on behalf of their children, who do not want to or are unable to do so themselves, it hints at crucial aspects that are also significant in the context of human relationships to emotional machines:

First, both actors and robots, replace someone, in this case a specific person in a social relationship; but often social robots replace *humans as humans,* not as a specific person.

Second, the feelings of actors and robots are *simulated*.

Third, neither the actor nor a robot has a long and close intimate relationship with the person they visit. Therefore, they do not have a long history together. Disputes, contradictions, frictions, and family conflicts will not arise. The visits are friendly and pleasant. Everything stays under control, nothing gets out of hand.

Fourth, these actors bring joy to the elderly. The elderly are willing to accept the actors and do not view or bring up the substitution In a negative way.

From a historical perspective, the fourth point is of particular interest. Robots or avatars bring joy to people and people are willing to accept them. This has held true for robots for more than a century. Robots were shown at industrial fairs. They were presented as spectacles that astonished the audience. These early, very clumsy robots, like e.g. Eric, were able to bow and say a few sentences. Even though the range of sentences was very small and the audience knew that the robots had been outfitted with a record or a loudspeaker, they were enchanted and delighted by them (Bülow, 2007: 57–65).

Today, in the context of artificial intelligence, we are faced with a different category of robots. Nowadays, robots seem to be able to individually respond and react to their counterparts, which is quite different from their electronic-mechanical ancestors which endlessly repeated the same phrase to everyone, no matter whom they addressed. Thus, human-machine relationships have fundamentally changed.

To describe this change in human-machine relationships, Sherry Turkle spoke of a "robotic moment":

> ***This does not mean that companionate robots are common among us; it refers to our state of emotional—and I would say—philosophical—readiness. I find people willing to seriously consider robots not only as pets but as potential friends, confidants, and even romantic partners. (…) We are poised to attach to the inanimate without prejudice.*** *(Turkle 2011: 9f.)*

Turkle observed a clear difference to the 1980s. In the 1980s, she argues, "computational objects — robots included — should not be allowed into the realm of human relationships". However, "over the next decade, opinions shifted." (Turkle 2010: 4)

She calls this a change from a romantic moment to a robotic moment. While humans had — in a romantic attitude — previously defended the distinction between man and machine and emphasized certain peculiarities of humans, such as emotions, they were now ready to accept machines as friends. Mark Coeckelbergh (2017: 154) suggested that Turkle's definition of romance is too narrow: "There is no good reason to limit 'romanticism' to a defense of the human/nonhuman border or the alive/dead boundary." Others criticized Turkle for a conservative attitude and for sticking to dichotomous thought patterns since she considers friendships with machines problematic. She was blamed for not tackling the topic of social robots as "philosophical opportunities and challenges." (Gunkel, 2016: 198)

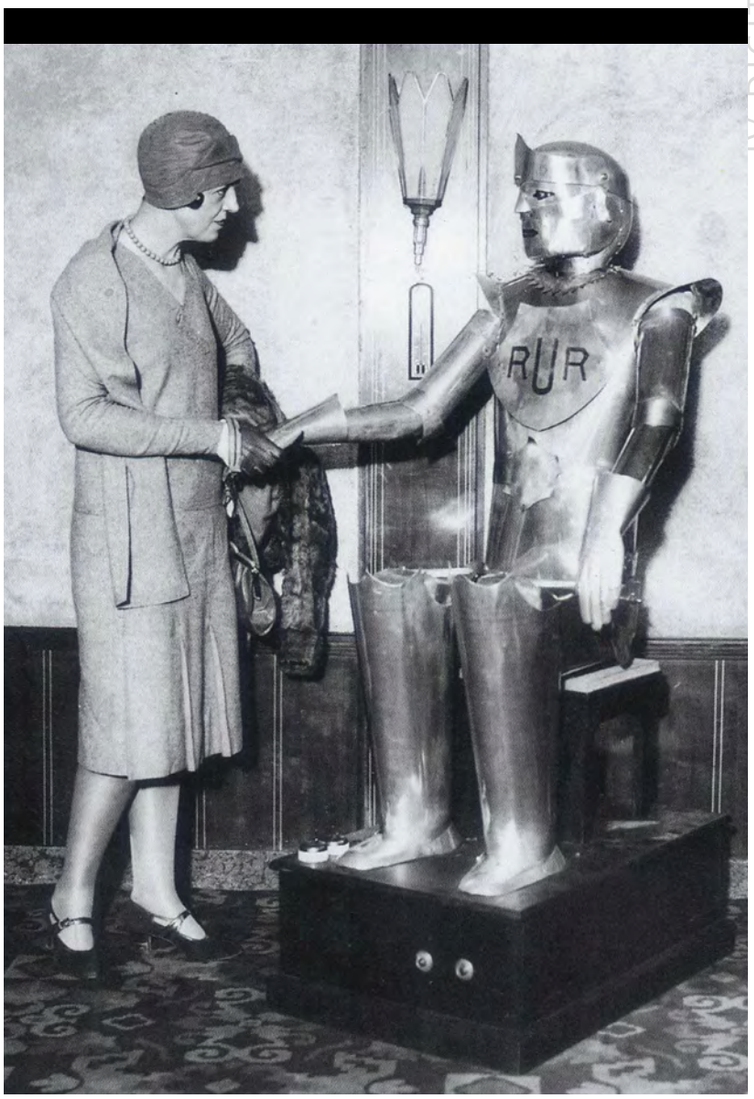

FIG. 1
ERIC, THE FIRST ROBOT (1929)

However, the concept of the robotic moment deserves further discussion, particularly from a historical perspective. Without doubt, humans' emotional relationship towards machines has changed during the last decades. The Tamagotchi will serve as a historical example. And while important research on social robots has reflected on the "other," (e.g. Gunkel/Marcondes/Mersch, 2016) this article will look at the transformation of objects

(from passively being handled to actively responding) and ask for the emergence of a new category of objects, namely that of responding objects. The decisive question here is what it is that makes these objects, such as Tamagotchi, so special, so appealing to humans.

EMOTIONS TOWARDS OBJECTS

Emotions towards objects are historically anything but new. For several decades, emotions towards objects have been the subject of *material culture research.* Authors such as Tilmann Habermas or Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, to name only two scholars, wrote groundbreaking books about the attachment of humans to objects (Habermas 1996, Csikszentmihalyi 1998, also Downes/Halloway/Randles 2018). Csikszentmihalyi showed, e.g., how emotions are ascribed to things through memories of social situations or persons, beyond their possibly low material value and their perhaps questionable aesthetics.

Tilmann Habermas titled his book *Geliebte Objekte* (Beloved Objects). As a psychologist he underlined the central importance of objects for personality development and examined their symbolic value and psychological significance. He analyses their functions, and identifies self-portrayal, memory, empowerment or influencing of moods, e.g.

Objects are also fetishes (Böhme 2006), they are sacral objects (Kohl 2003), favorite objects, gifts. Often, objects are anthropomorphized. Cars or bicycles get names, they are seen as a family member. Car mechanics treat automobiles as organisms that need healing, as a recent study made clear (Geuenich 2020, Gericke 2020).

Piaget has already shown that children of a certain age interpret the properties of objects as the will of the objects. He investigated a childlike animism, which serves as an explanatory scheme for child development (Piaget 1978: 223). Early childhood animism does not distinguish between the living and the non-living. Children ascribe a will, wishes, conscious activity or even pain to things or to nature. Piaget cites the example of a little girl whose doll has indented eyes one morning, which causes the child great desperation. The little girl again and again asks if the doll is hurting (ibid.: 245).

Piaget also distinguishes between four stages of childhood animism (ibid. 207–240), without interpreting these stages as a strict sequence of stages clearly corresponding to an age. However, animism starts disappearing at around the age of eleven or twelve. Thus, Piaget describes the capability to differentiate between alive and non-alive, between things and persons, as the result of a process of childhood development that starts with the child's inability to differentiate and explain animism: "The youngest children are animists without being able to consciously explain their attitudes." (Ibid.: 226)

Nevertheless, this attribution of a will or an intention as inherent in objects is also found in adults. Piaget quotes Théodile Ribot, who observed in 1897: "By virtue of an instinctive tendency it is well known, though not yet explained, that man assumes that which acts or reacts to him has an intention, a will, a causality analogous to his own; his fellow men, animals, and such bodies as imitate life through their movements (clouds, rivers, etc.)." (Ribot 1897, cited after Piaget 1978: 270) Especially when things do not work as intended, adults also tend to attribute a will to them (Cf. Geuenich 2020). Piaget and Ribot's descriptions are of particular interest when the relationship between humans and emotional machines is looked at. Adults as well as teenagers, *know,* unlike children, that the interactive devices or social robots are not alive. But they treat them as if they had a will or were alive, as will be shown in the example of the Tamagotchi.

What we see here is the conscious ascription of a will to an object. Of course, emotional machines do not have a will of their own in the sense of a human will. However, these objects behave fundamentally differently towards humans than non-interactive objects do,

and in doing so emotional machines give the impression of having a will of their own. They "respond", they "answer," they interact. They develop in dependence on the other, they learn, they recognize the other, they seek eye contact. The objects are often designed in such a way that they appear lifelike. The toy seal "Paro", e.g., has wide eyes, a weight that corresponds approximately to that of a seal's, it can make beeping sounds. RealDolls or sex robots have a lifelike skin and weigh about as much as a slightly built woman, around 100 pounds.

Therefore, emotional machines constitute a different category of objects. In his study on the robo dog "Aibo", Christoph Scholz suggested to speak of "subject-simulating objects" (Scholtz 2015). Here he speaks of objects that are designed in such a way that they are to be perceived by humans as subjects, so that a subject-to-subject relationship is experienced. No matter if one agrees to speak of subject-simulation machines or not, emotions are *experienced* by interacting with emotional machines, since they *behave* subject-like. As David Gunkel (2016: 213) put it by using the example of the social robot "Jibo", this "is not just another instrument, like our automobile or toothbrush. But he/she/it is also not quite another member of the family (…). Jibo inhabits a place in between these two options." Although a car is by no means a simple instrument but quite often also its owner's pride and joy, it is surely necessary to reflect on this new category of objects, as will be argued in the following using the example of the Tamagotchi: Objects that simulate subjectivity. Objects that can be groomed by their users. Objects that change and evolve depending on how their users treat them.

ARTIFICIAL COMPANIONS OF THE 1990S: TAMAGOTCHI

In the mid-1990s, the Tamagotchi became extremely popular toys, and not only for teenagers. Launched in Japan at the end of 1996 by the Bandai company, 30,000 Tamagotchi were sold in the USA within three days in May 1997, and within three months over three million had been sold (Allison 2006: 163f.). One year later, the Tamagotchi were available in over 80 countries. The small, round plastic egg was brought to life by its users and then had to be cared for, looked after and maintained in order to "survive". It is considered one of the first interactive gadgets. Anne Allison called it the "ur-form." (Ibid.: 164) It was introduced as an artificial pet. However, as Anne Allison also emphasized, it was an object between all categories. A plastic egg that did not look like a pet, an object that simulated life but was artificial, a novel toy but also a "companion" (ibid.: 181). A Tamagotchi required feeding, entertainment, cleaning, rest periods with the lights turned off, and so on.

At the end of the 1990s, children enthusiastically nursed Tamagotchi but adults did so, too. Children took it to school, which in turn banned it from their premises. And swiftly, "tamagotchi-sitting" services taking care of the device during school hours were established. Children emphasized that they loved their Tamagotchi because they had to take care of it. Another decisive factor for children establishing the feeling of having an individual counterpart was that the Tamagotchi developed different characters depending on the individual treatment it received. The plastic egg could become a well-behaved, pleasant companion but also an uncouth, spitting something. This depended on the personal relationship to its individual user. (Ibid.: 172)

FIG. 2
TAMAGOTCHI FRIENDS-42805 ORIGINAL UNICORN.

Hate and violence occurred in the users' treatment of the Tamagotchi, as it is with many emotional machines. Of course, violence against things is not a new historical phenomenon either. People have pounded on their cars or kicked copiers for a long time. Teddy bears have also been maltreated. However, when emotional machines are involved, we see further disinhibition and intensification of violence. The robot "Hitchbot", e.g., was subjected to this. Hitchbot was

a hitchhiking robot that communicated with humans and was dependent on the help of humans. Many treated him like a friend. Others, however, destroyed him in the most brutal way, resulting in talk of vandalism. Reports from "Sexdoll" brothels show that customers expressed their worst violent fantasies: dead-looking women were to dangle from the ceiling, among others. And recently a robot has been developed to facilitate its user's expression of physically aggressive behaviors—it serves the same purpose as the punching bag in the past (Moorstedt 2019).

FIG. 3
HITCHBOT BY MICHAEL BARKER – HITCHBOT GOES TO THE FAIR, CC BY 2.0
HTTPS://COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG/W/INDEX.PHP?CURID=46300428

These examples serve to illustrate the continuity with regard to violence against things, which is, however, apparently lived out in an even more uninhibited manner. Simultaneously, and this is very important to note, it seems that violence against emotional machines is more difficult to be physically expressed. In the context of Tamagotchi, there was a talk of "tamagotchi abuse". It was debated whether and when to add a moral component and speak of abuse. Some suggested the following behavior was abuse: "Leaving your Tam's light on all night. Discipline it for the Wrong Reasons. Not Cleaning them up, etc."[1]

This need for rule-setting in the Tamagotchi user community shows that Tamagotchi were abused and tortured. Simultaneously, it shows that Tamagotchi were treated like living beings, or at least there were community attempts to establish moral standards, which followed the moral standards for treating humans. Furthermore, the topic "How to kill your Tamagotchi" was fiercely debated during the late 1990s. What is interesting here is that people reported that it was emotionally difficult for them not to take care of their Tamagotchi and even to "kill" it. Having a Tamagotchi as a friend meant caring for something that seemed to be alive but wasn't alive in a traditional sense. Users fluctuated between treating it as a living being or a lifeless thing. They had inhibitions about killing it and treating it badly. They discussed the category of "abuse". This all points to a hitherto unknown category of objects: A category of objects for which we have not yet found an adequate form of living with.

1 http://www.virtualpet.com/vp/future/abuse.htm (01.09.2020).

MACHINES THAT RESPOND AND HUMAN MOMENTS AGAIN?

Machines that seem to respond to their users' feelings, and which develop individually but also differently — depending on their interactions with their human counterparts — represent a novel category of objects that have begun to change the human-machine relationship. Emotional machines are adaptive, thus appearing more human or human-like. The 1990s therefore marked the beginning of a new human-machine relationship, which has become much more obvious today: Siri, Alexa, Paro, Pepper, sexdolls or the hitchhiking robot Hitchbot have begun to come every day objects that people interact with as a matter of course. As Turkle observed in the 1990s, humans seem to be willing to accept machines as their counterparts. However, it is not clear yet what exactly that means. Is a social robot a viable option as a companion? As an additional friend? Just an amusing toy which humans start to treat as if it was alive? Or do these machines become substitutes for humans, as Sherry Turkle claims? We seem to live in a period of transition during which novel objects emerge in the world, and during which humans' attitudes and emotions toward machines are undergoing changes. At the same time, we do not know yet how our lives alongside emotional machines will look like in the near future.

However, the current Corona crisis may have made clear how indispensable human relationships still are. During the pandemic, a bot was released that was intended to mitigate humans' loneliness. Robots were put in soccer stadiums in order to replace cheering fans. Sex robots seemed to be an alternative in times of closed brothels. But none of these robots were widely embraced. Therefore, one thing has become most obvious in this ongoing crisis: Machines are not welcomed to substitute for human social contact. The longing for visiting with friends and family, for creating community with peers as partners let the robotic moment fade away and made the current time a *human moment*. This also holds true for the elderly whose family members were not allowed to visit with them in their retirement homes. These seniors did not ask for robots, actors or avatars. They were waiting for visits by their relatives of flesh and blood. They longed for human emotions and human bodies, hugging them.

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