

SaveLite

BY SARA THOMAS



At 6 a.m., Jane's alarm rang. She groggily reached over, shut it off, and turned on her TV. The announcer said, "It's December 16, 2067, and our top story this morning is about Tamagotchi pets. Seventy years after their heyday in the 90s, Tamagotchi pets have resurged as the ultimate status symbol. These 'pets' are digitized animals that strap to one's wrist and require feeding, affection, and exercise."

Jane watched from her bed, captivated. *This is why no one is adopting shelter pets lately. They're all busy with these Tamagotchi gizmos, she thought.*

"These companions aren't just for kids; adults from all walks of life are now raising squirrels, hamsters, elephants, zebras, and more digitally."

The newscaster continued, "If the owner neglects to care for the animal, it dies off, but a simple reset of the device brings back a new pet

with which to play. These companions aren't just for kids; adults from all walks of life are now raising squirrels, hamsters, elephants, zebras, and more digitally. The popularity of these devices has grown so much that 'real' pet shops are no longer relevant."

And neither are pounds, thought Jane as she pulled up her hair up in a bun and slid on her glasses.

Before Jane clicked off the TV, the announcer went on to say that Tamagotchi pets were at the top of everyone's Christmas list this year and were only growing in popularity in her area.



After Jane walked her dog Mia, she rode her bicycle to work, noticing people's heads buried in their devices. More than even with cell phones, everyone's attention was distracted by "walking" and "feeding" their digital pets. She grew frustrated as she almost ran into one guy as he veered off the sidewalk and into the bike lane.

"Out of the way!" Jane called.

He was muttering about not having enough time to give his pet all the "play" attention it needed and barely looked up as Jane's wheels brushed against his leg.

At SaveLite Corporation, Jane asked her assistant what was on the agenda for the morning.

"Just one case this morning: Mr. Gee, a wealthy, retired businessman from Tokyo is here in town to have his consciousness uploaded."

"Thanks, Steve. Shave the usual sections in the back of his head and make him comfortable in Exam Room C."

"Will do, ma'am. Are you OK? You look flustered."

"I almost hit somebody who was playing with one of those Tamagotchi digital pets this morning. Can you believe how obsessed everyone's become?"

"They are so addicting, Mrs. B. You should give one a try."

"Never," she seethed.

Jane spent a few minutes gathering her thoughts while organizing her office. As she filed papers, she thought about the overwhelming growth of technology in America. From the rise in digital pets replacing real ones to the international consciousness-uploading business, it was hard to tell where reality ended and where technology began. More and more people were requesting her services when their bodies could no longer sustain their minds, whether because of cancer, deadly diseases, or old age. It was an expensive process, but people were finding ways to pay for it, and Jane's company was on the forefront of the movement.

I've come a long way from being a humble bio major at CalTech, she mused.



Entering Exam Room C, she greeted Mr. Gee with all the warmth she could muster.

"What brings you in today, sir?"

"Well, I love my life, and the older I get, the more I can feel it slipping away from me. My joints are always aching. My back throbs when I wake up in the morning. I'm ready to leave this earthly body and take up my true home in a computer. I want the chance to live forever."

“You’ve come to the right place. Now, if you’ll place your hands on these sensors and move your forehead to the front of this machine, we can begin.”

He adjusted himself into position on the uploading machine. Jane fired up the probes designed to take patients through every major moment of their lives from birth to present. When each memory replayed in their minds, it would be erased from their brains and replicated digitally. The process could take hours because some of these memories were so deeply repressed.

Before she set the probes on Mr. Gee’s head, she asked him, “Do you have any final wishes for your body?”

“Yes, I’ve already arranged with your assistant, Steve, to have myself sent back to Japan for a proper funeral ceremony and burial.”

“Very good, sir,” Jane replied, thinking all that fanfare over a body was unnecessary. It’s what’s in the mind that matters, she reflected.

The rest of the day went as usual, with periodic checks on Mr. Gee. As more of his memories were digitized, his body became limp, yet he was able to talk with the energy of a teenager through the computer speakers.

“I feel great!” He declared. “I’m reliving all the best moments of my life, and better memories are yet to come. I just know it!”



Jane still had Mr. Gee on her mind when she arrived to volunteer at the pound that night. He had been so exuberant throughout the process, expressing a childlike joy at taking up residence in a computer.

As she walked among the cages, she felt a tugging at her heart. The dogs looked at her with big puppy eyes, yelping for her attention. The cats meowed pitifully. *If only there was something I could do to help them, Jane reflected, I would stop their suffering.*

Marie, Jane’s best friend at the shelter, was putting the dogs on their leashes for their evening walk. Her long, hippy-style skirt twisted around as she bent and chased animals.

“Come help me get Spot’s collar back on.”

Jane went to assist, grabbing a few leashes from Marie’s overworked hands.

With snow beginning to fall outside, the animals could not even enjoy their time in the yard. Sure, they liked playing in the snow for a few minutes, but soon they began to shake and whine for the relative warmth of the shelter.

The animals in the pound were on the fast track to cremation. With new abandoned pets arriving every day, routine depopulation was happening every week instead of every few months. *I wish I could give them some of Mr. Gee’s happiness,* Jane pondered. Then an idea struck her.

She walked up to her boss and said, “Ron, I’d like to volunteer for the next depopulation session. When is that, Friday night?”



“Yes, Jane, but I thought you hated to see the animals go to the incinerator.”

“I realized I’d like to be there for them, to comfort them in their last moments.”

“How sweet of you,” Ron stated with just a hint of suspicion in this voice.

Those moments will not really be their last, Jane thought. She could upload an animal’s consciousness into a Tamagotchi pet. Just like humans could live indefinitely as computer programs, these animals could have another chance at companionship digitally. Instead of having their final moments on earth, they would relive their pasts with probes hooked up to their brains, becoming lines of code, able to be downloaded by humans interested in the latest craze.

“It was hard to tell where reality ended and where technology began.”



On Friday at SaveLite, Jane stayed late until everyone left. Then she unplugged the uploader and wheeled it to her roomy sport utility vehicle.

Speeding down the highway, she felt a sense of self-satisfaction. She would be prolonging the lives of the animals, not to mention making a little extra spending

money. She had done some research and realized that she could sell the cat programs for upwards of fifty dollars and the dogs for at least eighty. She had set up an online store on eBay, ready to start selling the pets for online download.

The pound was thankfully deserted of humans. Jane got out the logbook and noted that Biff, Spot, Nightingale, Tanner, Max, and Scooby were set to be put down tonight.

"I'll start with you, Tanner," Jane looked to the beige French poodle in the far left crate. She cradled the little curly-haired dog in her arms, starting up the electric razor to shave the skin behind her ears.

After Jane attached the probes, Tanner began yelping and kicking her feet as though she was running in a dream.

She must be imagining being a puppy again, Jane mused. Then Tanner growled for a time, no doubt replaying the day she was brought to the pound. Her body started to move more slowly as the memories ran out. Soon her large, brown eyes closed for the last time.

"I'm ready to leave this earthly body and take up my true home in a computer. I want the chance to live forever."

Jane ran over to her computer, and there on the screen was a cartoon version of a French poodle panting and running back and forth. She gave Tanner

a digital bowl of food before uploading her program to the eBay seller's site.

One by one she shaved the cats and dogs, attached the probes to their scalps, and let the memories play. She moved the six bodies into the incinerator, feeling as though she had done the best thing possible for these abandoned pets.



A few weeks later, while sitting at her desk at the pound, Jane opened her email. She had several emails regarding her recent online purchases. A message appeared from one of the customers who had purchased the consciousness of Nightingale. The email read:

Dear SaveLiter799,

The cat I purchased "died" in the game because I forgot to feed her. When I hit the regenerator button on my Tamagotchi, a message came on the screen. It said "Error: No Data for Additional Lives." I paid top dollar for the Nightingale program, and I'm disappointed and confused as to why my pet won't come back to life. Please send a refund or a replacement.

Thank you,
DigiKat13

Jane gasped. Of course, the pets can't regenerate, she realized. *They only have one chance at life. When humans get uploaded, they are self-sufficient, just like in real life, but these pets are reliant on human care. And humans don't care enough.* Concerned for the other pets she had uploaded, Jane composed a lengthy newsletter regarding how frequently to bathe, feed, and play with the animals. She titled it "The Care and Keeping of Your Digital Cat or Dog" and sent it to the customers of the first three batches of pets that she had sold.

Just then, Marie walked into Jane's cubicle.

"What's going on, dearie? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Something like that!" Jane replied, grabbing her handbag and heading for the doorway.

"Is that a new bag?"

"Yeah," Jane replied, distracted.

"Looks expensive! Is it one of your knockoffs from the city?"

"Uh, yes." Jane lied.



Jane picked over a Caesar salad at her favorite restaurant, pondering how to respond to her customer's email. She wanted to keep selling pets and keep up her new lifestyle. *Plus they would be living at least a little longer, right?* She rationalized while jotting a reply:

Dear DigiKat13,

Thanks for your purchase. The inability to regenerate is a bug in the software that we're trying to work out. As soon as we do, you'll be the first to receive the new and improved version. We would be happy to refund your money. Please understand that we are a new company and can use only positive social media feedback at this time. We would appreciate if you would keep your experience to yourself.

Best wishes,
SaveLiter799

Now would not be the time for Jane's new business to fizzle out because she was planning a vacation to Fiji with the money she earned by selling digital pets. For a hobby that she despised, it sure was lucrative. She became so caught up in her scheme that she was even borrowing SaveLite's equipment between routine depopulations because she figured the animals were going to be put down eventually. *Why not help them along,* she thought.



One night Jane had a rabbit hooked up to the probes. As Sunny hopped back and forth, remembering his past playtime, Jane heard a door slam and voices echoing down the hall. She panicked and disconnected Sunny from the machine, putting him back in his cage and ducking behind a desk.

In walked Marie and Ron. Ron had been curious about Jane's late night volunteer sessions, so he'd brought Marie with him under the guise of doing some extra cleaning.

"What's this bizarre piece of equipment?" Marie inquired, looking at the robotic tower with coils of cords dangling from it.

Just then, they all heard a gurgling noise coming from the cages. Marie walked over to find Sunny lying on his side, drool dripping from his snout. She opened the cage door and tried to get him standing on his paws, but he simply flopped back down with weak muscles.

"He's half paralyzed!" She called to Ron.

"Look at those shaved patches behind his ears," he noticed aloud.

"It must have something to do with this weird machine," said Marie. She walked closer and caught a glimpse of Jane's red coat sticking out from behind the desk. She cleared her throat to get Ron's attention and pointed to Jane.

"Oh, no," Jane groaned. "I've been caught."

"I knew it!" Ron proclaimed.

"What does all this mean?" Marie asked, still confused.

"It looks like Jane's been trying to upload the pet's consciousness into the machine. Isn't that right?" Ron speculated. He recognized the technology from an article in a science magazine he had read.

"Trying?" Jane scoffed with pride. "It's working. I've been doing it for months now."

"Why would you do such a thing?" Marie asked, lost.

"At first I wanted to extend these pets' lives. I felt bad that so many of them were being killed here at the shelter, while out there everyone and their uncle has a Tamagotchi pet, but then I found it was a quick and easy way to earn a buck."

"So tonight you were taking their lives into your own hands," Ron interjected.

"Look what you've done to Sunny!" Marie cried, picking him up and cradling him in her arms.

"I'll just start the process back up," Jane took him from Marie.

As she reset the probes, Sunny swayed listlessly on his feet. The machine whirred, but his brain was too hazy to recall any memories. He fell with a thud onto the metal exam table and his eyes stared unblinkingly. No image of him showed on the computer screen.

"You killed him!" Ron and Marie shouted together.

Jane retorted, "It was an accident. If you two hadn't showed up, Sunny would be a viable digital pet right now."

"That's no fate for a living, breathing animal," Marie said. "They deserve to play outside, taste their food, and feel the pats of their owners; and when the time comes, they deserve to die with dignity and peace."

"I think Jane had a point in trying to extend their time on earth," Ron spoke up. "We don't know that they aren't happy as digital pets. However, you never should have turned it into a profitable enterprise for yourself." He looked at Jane. "This was an act of nothing but greed and selfishness. It goes without saying that your volunteer services are no longer wanted at this shelter."

Jane lowered her head in resignation. She knew there was no arguing with Ron and that she had not done the right thing with her technological abilities. She moved toward the SaveLite machine, getting ready to wheel it back out to her car, but Ron stopped her.

"Leave the equipment," he demanded.

"Why?" Jane asked.

"Surely you're not going to digitize more animals," Marie spoke up in dismay.

Ron replied, "Just one more."

"I think Jane had a point in trying to extend their time on earth," Ron spoke up. "We don't know that they aren't happy as digital pets."





The next day, while Jane was at work, Ron drove over to her house. Sure enough, he found her dog Mia tied in the backyard. He lured her into his pickup truck with a MilkBone and drove her to the shelter. There, he shaved the back of her head and attached the probes. Mia began to yelp at her early memories of being a puppy. She panted and pawed at the air, imagining the events of her life. Eventually, her body gave out and the image of a golden doodle danced across the computer screen.

Ron downloaded Mia's program into a Tamagotchi watch. Then, he got back in his pickup truck and delivered the watch into Jane's mailbox with a note.

Jane,

So you can know how it feels. This is the future you wanted.

-Ron

"The world isn't ready for this kind of technology. No one should be able to live forever."

Arriving home from work, Jane checked her mail and found the watch. When she read the note, her breath caught in her

throat. She ran to the backyard and did not find Mia there, so she powered on the device. Sure enough, there was her golden doodle wagging its tail.

Well, Mia looks happy at least, Jane thought, remembering how she swore she would never get a Tamagotchi device. *I guess I'm stuck wearing this watch for as long as I can keep her alive.* Jane strapped on the watch and hit the "feed" button, followed by the "play" button. She knew all the tips she had written about in her newsletter, yet she was still anxious about being a good digital pet owner. Jane checked Mia's vital signs, as she would every few hours for the foreseeable future.



Back at the shelter, Ron was about to dismantle the SaveLite machine and throw the pieces in the incinerator.

Never again will someone turn a pet into a Tamagotchi program, he mused.

Before he could take the machine apart, the door opened and a young man entered.

"Who are you?" Ron demanded.

"Someone who's here to take back what's rightfully mine. I worked hard for years to develop this technology, always under Jane's shadow. I helped her as we uploaded

person after person into computer programs, prolonging their mundane existences. I waited patiently for my turn in the spotlight, working as Jane's assistant at SaveLite," Steve rambled on, becoming carried away.

Ron interrupted him, saying, "The world isn't ready for this kind of technology. No one should be able to live forever, and certainly no one should have turned the fleeting consciousness of pets into a business. I'm getting rid of this machine before you nutcases take this enterprise any further."

"I don't think so," Steve pushed Ron towards the incinerator.

"You'll never get away with this," Ron said, sounding braver than he was feeling.

"Yes, I will," said Steve. "As soon as I upload myself into the robot I've been developing, I'll be able to take the business to new heights. My first task will be to lower the price of uploading so nearly everyone can do it. Soon, we'll all be living in a virtual reality."

Ron tried to back away from the incinerator, but Steve pulled out a pistol. He held Ron at gunpoint, tying his hands to a chair.

Steve shouted, "See ya on the other side, sucker!" He wheeled the SaveLite machine out of the pound.

Ron's chest heaved. *I'm not sure I want to live in a world where everyone's uploaded and a man like that is in charge. I've got to come up with a way to stop him.*

"Help! Someone untie me!" Ron yelled, while the animals in their cages looked over at him, helpless.

"Help me!" Ron called again, more defeated this time. He would have to wait until the pound opened the next day and the volunteers arrived. *Who knows how far Steve's plan will get by morning,* Ron worried, plotting his first move once he was untied.

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