Chapter 1
The Impact of Technology on Early Childhood Education:
Where the Child Things Are? Adults, Children, Digital Monsters and the Spaces in Between

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the bridging of the communication-generation gap through an analysis of the child's play with hi-tech toys. The analysis of the young child's play with these toys employs narrative from the show Digimon in order to critique predominant themes in relation to learning and development. These themes highlight challenges to binary oppositions of adult-child, self-other, and artificial-real. In troubling these oppositions, the very idea of the gap becomes of interest in that in the gap are potential alternatives for adults who seek a critical understanding of the complex terrains in which they engage the young child.

INTRODUCTION

Takuya is sprinting down the road, his cellular phone beeps, he looks at it...

Takuya: 5.40!?

He continues his dash down the middle of the street, past a small child kicking a football to his Dad. The Dad's phone makes a strange noise as he runs by, and he looks at it...

Dad: Huh?

Small child: Dad the ball!

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Takuya: Sorry.

Dad: The phone? That noise?

Takuya: I'll get it.

Dad: Kids these days

Takuya runs into a T junction after the ball, puts his foot on the ball, and stops. He kicks the ball back up the street. A truck approaches; the driver is staring at his cellular phone, which is making the same strange noise. The driver looks back to the road to see Takuya. He slams the brakes on, the truck skids sideways towards Takuya....

Takuya: Oh perfect... aaarrrrggg... this... is my destiny?

The scene above opens season four of *Digimon* – a Toei Animation animated television and movie series. Digimon, short for "Digital Monsters" is a media franchise encompassing anime, manga, toys, video games, trading card games and other media. The franchise's eponymous creatures are monsters of various forms living in a "Digital World", a parallel universe that originated from Earth's various communication networks. Takuya is about to embark on a fantastic adventure in which he, a digitally destined child, will discover certain, familiar, life boundaries are no longer intact. He is rushing headlong into a new technological future.

Throughout this chapter similar excerpts from *Digimon* provide themes for an exploration of gaps that appear between technological generations. Technological generations can be thought of as a more or less loosely defined classification of people, often chronologically constructed. Takuya, the character in the above excerpt, is a boy of about 12 years old, is a considered a member of a particular generation as a result of his age. Alternatively technological generations can be understood as the outcomes, or products, of technologies. Takuya is an active user of certain technologies and is hence a member of the *Digimon* generation; a child able to communicate with the digital world.

Any gaps between generations might also be understood as constructed. Exploring toys in this chapter provides a context for exploring gaps not to suggest that such gaps are not real, but to examine the ways in which 'we' construct and respond to them. This chapter explores the terrain of the communication-generation gap from the context of the toy. Toys are considered one instance of technology generating human generations. The concepts of 'adulthood' and 'childhood' can be thought of as intimately connected to toys. However technological gaps are generated around more than the dichotomy of the adult-child. Notably, the gap between real and artificial is a technologically determined gap, as are gaps between rich and poor.

From the seemingly most simple and natural stick, to the most complex multimedia pocket monster, toys reveal thoughts about the nature of child and adult, and of the gaps between them. This chapter begins with a brief family history of the toy, providing context for an analysis of the current 'generation' of toys, and in particular of the ways in which these toys are celebrated as powerful and educational or feared as unnatural and corrupting.

This kind of analysis of technology has its perils. If a writer is seen to be promoting the use of new technologies for young children, he or she may attract criticism from advocates for a less cluttered and electronic child. Similarly, if he or she is problematising the child's play with new media he or she is likely to attract the interests of advocates for hi-tech learning. From either position the research will be pulled apart for its scientific weaknesses and the values will be hauled across someone else's normative coals.

While this chapter cannot avoid these perils, it does attempt to look at the ways in which we respond to the phenomena as much as the phe-

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