

Plushies, My Little Cthulhu and Chibithulhu: The Transformation of Cthulhu from Horrific Body to Cute Body

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Introduction

This article will examine the depiction of Cthulhu in merchandising as a cute monster and how this affects our relationship to the character. The idea of a cute Cthulhu has gained the status of a meme, and this image has become commonplace in merchandising and comics, as well as fan-produced art. A meme is defined as a unit of culture that is passed on by imitation.¹ The cute Cthulhu meme has developed over the last decade and has become widespread, particularly as the internet has supported the development and communication of ideas, including cute culture. Most of the theoretical work on cute derives from scholars working on manifestations of cute in Japanese culture. In Japanese cute objects are described as *kawaii* and I will use this term and the related scholarship to inform my arguments about the cute Cthulhu meme. I will consider a selection of different cute Cthulhu merchandising centred on Steve Jackson Games' Munchkin Cthulhu (2007) card game. Steve Jackson Games is a games manufacturer based in Austin, Texas which has had a long pedigree in creating humorous games for adults based around geek subcultures, including Munchkin (2001) and Chez Geek (1999). Munchkin Cthulhu, along with its expansions and additional merchandising, is part of a larger series of games called Munchkin which all use the same rules, but each set emphasises different themes through the artwork and card names. The central premise of Munchkin is that it satirises different genres of role-playing games and some of the negative social behaviours in which some role-players engage.

Many of Steve Jackson Games' products, including Munchkin, Munchkin Cthulhu and Chez Geek are illustrated by John Kovalic. Kovalic is the

¹ Susan Blackmore, "Imitation and the definition of a meme", *Journal of Memetics – Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission*, 2 (1998), <http://borkowski.iss.uw.edu.pl/edukacja/Memetyka/Memetyczne/1998,Blackmore-Imitation%20and%20the%20definition%20of%20a%20meme.pdf>, accessed 11 September 2011.

writer/illustrator of *Dork Tower* (1997-present), a comic about four male adult “dorks” and their interest in computer games, role-playing games, fantasy and science fiction films and merchandising. This link to geek culture made Kovalic suitably placed to work on the card illustrations for Munchkin Cthulhu. In addition to illustrating these games Kovalic designed both the Chibithulhu and the My Little Cthulhu toys. The Chibithulhu is produced by Steve Jackson Games and My Little Cthulhu is produced by Dreamland Toyworks. Both of these products were based on card art that Kovalic created for the Munchkin Cthulhu game. The artwork had proved popular with fans of the game and additional merchandising was arranged using the imagery including T-shirts and soft toys. With this background in mind the article will consider My Little Cthulhu by Dreamland Toyworks, and the Chibithulhu from Steve Jackson Games’ Munchkin Cthulhu. The article will also consider Toy Vault’s plush toys to act as a comparator to John Kovalic’s designs. All of these products are intended for consumption by adults, not children.

Cthulhu first appeared in the 1926 short story “The Call of Cthulhu”, by H.P. Lovecraft. The character is just one small element of Lovecraft’s “mosaics of interlocking metatexts”.² Despite this, Cthulhu has often been referenced visually in popular culture and is one of the more recognisable elements of Lovecraft’s work. Lovecraft (1890-1937) worked predominately in the 1920s and 1930s as an author of short stories for pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales*. His stories were influenced by earlier writers of the Gothic and macabre, in particular Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), Arthur Machen (1863-1947) and Lord Dunsany (1878-1957). An important part of his output was an extensive quantity of letters, which he used to correspond with many of his contemporaries, including other writers such as Robert E. Howard, August Derleth and Robert Bloch.

The success of Cthulhu and other elements of Lovecraft’s work were aided by the fact that Lovecraft encouraged these other writers to use his creations in their stories. In return Lovecraft referenced his followers’ work in his own writings.³ As a result, there emerged a rich and densely populated setting termed the “Cthulhu Mythos”. Petley argues that “Lovecraft’s influence on modern culture has been, and

² Robert M. Price, “With Strange Aeons: H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos as One Vast Narrative” in Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (eds.), *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives* (London: The MIT Press, 2009), p.225.

³ Price, p.232.

continues to be, immense, even though in his own lifetime his work was barely known outside the readership of the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*.⁴ After Lovecraft's death, his generosity to other writers encouraged the creation of a genre of fiction that is still used by modern authors including Brian Lumley, Ramsey Campbell and Stephen King. The "Cthulhu Mythos" is, as Miller suggests "an invention big enough for other writers and artists to crawl into, inhabit and expand upon".⁵ The collaborative nature that Lovecraft himself encouraged makes the "Cthulhu Mythos" open to others to use and reinterpret at will. Lovecraft's written work is now out of copyright and his ideas are still being used, not only by writers, but also visual creative professionals such as artists and merchandising designers. As a result the depiction of this character has changed into a range of forms in different media, and Cthulhu's body has morphed from Lovecraft's horrific description into comical and, most importantly for this article, cute forms.

In "The Call of Cthulhu", the chief source of fear, the character Cthulhu, is only ever seen second hand, in dreams and depicted in artwork. However even this second-hand image is horrific. The narrator is shown "a morbid statue whose contours almost made me shake with the potency of its black suggestion".⁶ Lovecraft describes Cthulhu as "a monster of vaguely anthropoid outline, but with an octopus-like head whose face was a mass of feelers, a scaly, rubbery-looking body, prodigious claws on hind and fore feet, and long, narrow wings behind".⁷ This describes an unnatural body that is intended to create fear and loathing in the reader. In the short story Cthulhu sleeps beneath the Pacific Ocean, but can send humans dreams which invoke madness. When the stars are right he will awaken and destroy the human world.⁸ However, Cthulhu has gone on to develop a separate life from his principal text,⁹ and some have suggested that "hardly any reader finds Cthulhu frightening. In fact, by all

⁴ Julian Petley, "The Unfilmable? H.P. Lovecraft and the Cinema" in Richard J. Hand and Jay McRoy (eds.), *Monstrous Adaptations: Generic and Thematic Mutations in Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p.2.

⁵ Laura Miller, "Master of Disgust": *Salon.com*, <http://dir.salon.com/books/feature/2005/02/12/lovecraft/index.html>, accessed 24 April 2010.

⁶ H.P. Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", <http://manybooks.net/titles/lovecraft/other06cthulhu.html>, accessed 27 January 2010.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Lovecraft does not specify Cthulhu's gender but does describe him as a "priest" in "The Call of Cthulhu", which is a gendered title. In most of the sources and artworks since, Cthulhu has been gendered male. For example August Derleth states that Cthulhu is male in his Mythos stories. However "he" has traditionally been used in English as a gender neutral pronoun, and certainly was at the time Lovecraft and Derleth were writing.

indications, the public is very fond of the creature”.¹⁰ This is especially evident in the examples of cute Cthulhu discussed throughout this article.

These cute Cthulhu products are quite complex theoretically and can simultaneously appear to be both character merchandising and designer toys. Character merchandising is any product based around characters. These characters can be from existing media forms such as films or can be specifically created to sell branded products. Designer toys are collectables aimed at an adult market and have strong links with artists and frequently have limited production runs. Steinberg defines character merchandising as:

A form of cultural production and marketing that uses a character (or multiple characters) to generate the consumption of media forms such as television programs and video games, objects such as plush dolls and plastic toys, and products like car insurance and financial services.¹¹

Although Cthulhu is a recognisable iconic character to some people, “The Call of Cthulhu” story itself is out of copyright and Lovecraft encouraged other people to use his creations for their own endeavours, royalty-free. As a result these Lovecraftian-inspired toys are unlicensed products. They don’t exist to generate further consumption of the original short story. In addition unlike other iconic characters such as Mickey Mouse there is no single iconic form for Cthulhu.¹² Instead the character is made recognisable by its combination of strange animal parts such as tentacles and wings. Therefore it could also be argued that some of the products discussed, in particular My Little Cthulhu, fall into what is variously described as “urban vinyl”, “designer vinyl” or the designer toy movement.¹³

Steinberg describes the designer toy as: “a three-dimensional figure based on the design and pattern of a particular artist or graphic designer collective, usually made from rotocast vinyl, but includes resin, plush and wood objects as well”.¹⁴ These toys are made in limited quantities, reflecting the small-scale nature of the companies involved in their production but also the idea that they are limited edition

¹⁰ Miller, n.p.

¹¹ Marc Steinberg, “A Vinyl Platform for Dissent: Designer Toys and Character Merchandising”, *Journal of Visual Culture* 9, no. 2 (2010), p.210.

¹² Steinberg, p.212.

¹³ These terms are used by Steinberg in his essay, and by Woodrow Phoenix in *Plastic Culture: How Japanese Toys Conquered the World* (London: Kodansha International, 2006).

¹⁴ Steinberg, p.210.

artworks to be collected by connoisseurs. A key aspect of these designer toys is that they are made without narratives or backgrounds, and exist solely as desirable objects. This means that they are designed by the artists to be desirable pieces of limited edition art for adult collectors, and are usually not intended to be connected to a specific story. This subverts traditional character merchandising which relies on its connection to other media forms for its desirability.¹⁵ Apart from its name, the Cthulhu merchandising under discussion has little or no connection to “The Call of Cthulhu” story, and is therefore more of a designer toy than an example of character merchandising. The Japanese term *moe* is a useful term to describe these Cthulhu products. Galbraith defines *moe* as “a neologism used to describe a euphoric response to fantasy characters or representations of them”.¹⁶ A character that expresses *moe* is “removed from context, emptied of depth and positioned outside reality”.¹⁷ The character expresses *moe* through appealing characteristics which then encourage the consumer or viewer to feel *moe* towards the object. This expresses the way these Cthulhu products work very well. The other aspect of *moe* characters is that they exist to encourage consumption and are carefully designed to meet that purpose. Azuma argues that:

Those who feel *moe* toward a particular character tend to buy its related goods excessively, [and] the success of a project for the producers of such goods is directly determined not by the quality of the work itself but by its ability to evoke the *moe* desire through character design and illustrations.¹⁸

The cute Cthulhus are marketed to encourage excessive consumption, with multiple versions for consumers to collect. The continued availability over more than ten years of the plush Cthulhus and the creation of the more recent Chibithulhu suggests a level of commercial success and a high degree of *moe*.

¹⁵ Steinberg, p.213.

¹⁶ Patrick W. Galbraith, “Moe: Exploring Virtual Potential in Post-Millennial Japan” in *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* 9, no. 3 (2009), <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2009/Galbraith.html>, accessed 10 July 2013.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (London: University Of Minnesota Press, 2009), p.48.

Kawaii as soft and mouthless

This analysis of cute Cthulhus will also draw on another Japanese term and concept: *kawaii*, which is the Japanese manifestation of cute. Much of the theoretical work on Japanese cute has focussed on *kawaii*, examining items such as Hello Kitty, Pikachu and Loli-goth fashions.¹⁹ There has been comparatively little examination of Western cute, and Western characters that have evolved into cute forms such as Cthulhu have been even less comprehensively studied. This article will therefore draw on recent work on *kawaii*, while acknowledging that there are important societal differences between Japan and the West because of their different languages, art styles, histories, culture and youth subcultures. Sharon Kinsella defined *kawaii* as meaning “childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearances”.²⁰ *Kawaii* is a relatively new word, appearing in Japan during the 1970s. It has quickly become commonly used in daily language with “Japanese teen magazine *CREA* call[ing] *kawaii* ‘the most widely used, widely loved, habitual word in modern living Japanese’”.²¹ The English word “cute”, with its meaning of “attractive, pretty, charming” is similarly a relatively new word.²²

In Japan *kawaii* is used to describe a huge range of things, from Hello Kitty merchandising, to young animals and children. Kinsella argues that “the essential anatomy of a cute cartoon character is small, soft, infantile, mammalian, round, without bodily appendages (arms), without bodily orifices (mouths), non-sexual, mute, insecure, helpless or bewildered”.²³ This description is supplemented by Christine Yano who suggests that “many characters are animals or quasi-animals who

¹⁹ This article will use the main English language theorists on *kawaii* – specifically Sharon Kinsella, Brian McVeigh and Christine Yano. It will therefore not refer to Yuko Hasegawa’s minor essay on *kawaii* art, ‘Post-identity Kawaii: Commerce, Gender and Contemporary Japanese Art’ in Fran Lloyd (ed.), *Consuming Bodies: Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), as it is not directly relevant to the current discussion.

²⁰ Sharon Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan”, in Brian Moeran and Lise Scov (eds.), *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan* (Curzon and Hawaii University Press, 1995), p.220, <http://www.kinsellaresearch.com/new/Cuties%20in%20Japan.pdf>, accessed 10 September 2011.

²¹ Mary Roach, “Cute Inc.”, *Wired* 7, no.12 (1999), <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.12/cute.html>, accessed 27 January 2010.

²² Oxford English Dictionary, “cute”, *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edn.) online version, September 2011, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/46355>, accessed 08 October 2011.

²³ Kinsella, p.226.

must be cared for or trained”.²⁴ This is particularly important because “as living, breathing, active things, they exist somewhere in between being human but not quite human, controllable but not too controllable, allowing us to project our own selves onto them”.²⁵ The ability to project ourselves onto them is a suggested part of the reason for these cute characters’ success. This feeling is created by not just a human/animal hybrid character but by giving the characters a blank expression. This is part of the *kawaii* aesthetic and can be seen in characters such as Hello Kitty, who has small expressionless eyes and no visible mouth. In his work on Hello Kitty, McVeigh argues that:

Her plainness characterizes her as a cryptic symbol waiting to be interpreted and filled with meanings. Thus, she functions as a mirror that reflects whatever image, desire or fantasy an individual brings to it. Her mood is ambiguous; neither happy, sad nor agitated, thus ready to absorb and reflect back to her admirers whatever they are feeling on a certain day.²⁶

In other words, the blank expression of *kawaii* characters allows viewers to project their own feelings and ideas onto it. This means that, however a viewer feels, the character can “respond” by being a blank slate. This is in part aided by some of Sanrio’s most popular characters (including Hello Kitty) not being tied to an existing story or film.²⁷

However it is not just cute characters which exploit this “blank slate” aesthetic. For example, Erica Rand discusses the way in which the creator of Barbie, Ruth Handler, “avoid[ed] giving Barbie any physical or biographical details that would limit the owner’s imagination”, quoting Handler’s statement that “the face was deliberately designed to be blank, without a personality, so that the projection of the child’s dream could be on Barbie’s face”.²⁸ Similarly to Sanrio, Mattel “has deliberately refrained from circulating certain Barbie biographical details or narratives – such as an age, a geographical location, or a wedding – that might foreclose fantasy

²⁴ Christine R. Yano, “Kitty Litter: Japanese Cute at Home and Abroad”, in Jeffrey H. Goldstein, David Buckingham, and Gilles Brougere (eds.), *Toys, Games and Media* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), p.57.

²⁵ Brian McVeigh, “Commodifying Affection, Authority and Gender in the Everyday Objects of Japan”, *Journal of Material Culture* 1, no. 3 (1996), p.295.

²⁶ Brian McVeigh, “How Hello Kitty Commodifies the Cute, Cool and Camp: ‘Consumutopia’ verses ‘Control’ in Japan”, *Journal of Material Culture* 5, no. 2 (2000), p.234.

²⁷ McVeigh (2000), p.234.

²⁸ Erica Rand, *Barbie’s Queer Accessories* (London: Duke University Press, 1995), p.40.

options”.²⁹ Admittedly, the character of Cthulhu already has a narrative associated with it – that of H.P. Lovecraft’s short story, “The Call of Cthulhu”. Nevertheless the cute Cthulhu merchandising discussed throughout this article has for the most part stripped away this narrative, leaving the character of Cthulhu floating free, unrestrained by specific or limiting assigned meaning. In other words Cthulhu starts with a narrative which is removed in the process of creating merchandise, while Barbie never had a fixed narrative to begin with. Mattel provides a selection of Barbie narratives which are not considered canon but open up different possibilities for play as well as giving Mattel options for different new products. For example the *Barbie Mermaidia* (2006) straight-to-DVD film gives Mattel the option to create and sell a Barbie doll dressed like a mermaid. This film does not close down options for Barbie or her consumers, and she can still be a fairy next year, or a ballerina the year after.

The removal of the narrative is essential to drive sales of these products. In each case the intention is to provide a blank slate to enable the consumer to create their own worlds. This therefore allows consumers to interpret the cute Cthulhu merchandising in any way they wish and project their own meanings and desires onto the character. Not all purchasers of Cthulhu merchandise are fans of Cthulhu, or have read the story. Some do not even know what character the merchandising is supposed to represent. For these people it is a purchase based upon the desire for an appealing product.

Take, for example, the Chibithulhu, a soft toy designed by Kovalic for Steve Jackson Games. The design has its origins in art for a card titled “Chibithulhu” that appears in the game *Munchkin Cthulhu*. The term “chibi” is frequently used in *anime* circles to describe a style of character design which is hyper-cute. These characters have big eyes, small mouths, tiny stubby limbs and over-the-top poses. The Chibithulhu soft toy is made from plush and available in a range of colours and sizes from “deceptively tiny” and “insanely medium” to a 20-inch high “mind-crushingly huge” toy (Steve Jackson Games 2012). It has stubby arms and legs and a red embroidered heart on its chest. The embroidered eyes are excessively large for the face, with clearly defined pupils and irises, and long eyelashes. This makes them look like the exaggerated and highly detailed eyes used for *manga* and *anime* characters. Unusually for a cute character it has a mouth, but it is stuck in a big forced smile. The

²⁹ Rand, p.8.

wings are white and rounded, and look more like those of an angel, rather than a monster. The features of the Chibithulhu soft toy outlined here indicate that it is definitely not intended to be monstrous or scary. As a soft toy it is worth comparing with the similar plush Cthulhu toys made by Toy Vault. This Cthulhu is made out of plush fabric and is smooth, soft, and rounded. It is designed with gangly arms and legs and oversized hands and feet. This version of the character is the closest to having claws, with the fingers coming to a rounded point. The eyes are glass studs, similar to many soft toys. They clearly appear to fall into the same category that the Chibithulhus inhabit. However the Chibithulhu and the Toy Vault Cthulhu soft toys are not necessarily cute, as Kinsella defines the term. They are not sweet, vulnerable or weak and although their faces are blank and their bodies soft, they don't appear insecure, helpless or bewildered. This suggests that they might not necessarily be cute, as fits Kinsella's definition, despite being a soft toy. We can say that being soft is not the same as being cute as it is clearly possible to create soft toys that are superficially cute, but which, on closer examination, may retain some of the vestigial horror elements such as claws.

John Kovalic, the designer of the Chibithulhu, also designed My Little Cthulhu, a vinyl toy which is produced by Dreamland Toyworks. This design is also based on card art for Munchkin Cthulhu. My Little Cthulhu is perfectly smooth-skinned, with tiny, placid eyes, no mouth and a huge, monstrously out-of-proportion head, which is far larger than the rest of its body. Tiny wings that could never fly have been affixed to its back. The limited-edition versions produced in the alternative colours of red and black have a different facial expression. The eyes could be interpreted as displaying an emotion like anger through the use of a downward curving eyebrow. The My Little Cthulhu toy is designed to interact with a set of cute human victim figures (sold as "Little Victims") which can be placed in his hands. This allows the owner to pose the My Little Cthulhu in a way that looks like he is eating the figures and apparently care for the cute Cthulhu by feeding him human victims that are almost as cute as the monster to which they are fed.

However this is a perverse simulation of feeding, even as a child's game – rather than feeding carrots to a cute rabbit, the owner is feeding people to a cute monster. The blank expression of Cthulhu makes it easier for the owner to project their feelings onto this Cthulhu toy. Given that the owner is projecting feeding people

to a blank-eyed monster, it seems appropriate to suggest that his/her feelings may include negative ones such as anger and rebellion. Conveniently for the social acceptance of the toy's owner these feelings are concealed from onlookers by the cute and blank-faced nature of this toy.

Although it is difficult to map directly from child behaviours to adult behaviours, it is not impossible that this kind of merchandising may reflect certain kinds of fantasy for a consumer. Phoenix argues that:

Toys are symbols that have a figurative power to embody thoughts and emotions that may have their origins in childhood, but are not childish. We recognise parts of ourselves – our secret, wishing selves – in toys. The part of us a toy touches is our unexpressed, dream(ing) self.³⁰

In the case of licensed character merchandising, their appeal “is based on the image networks to which they belong, rather than the material qualities of the toys themselves”.³¹ This appears to be a deliberate strategy on the part of those responsible for merchandising. For example, David Imhoff, the senior executive president of worldwide licensing and merchandising at New Line Cinema is quoted by Pomphrey on the subject of *The Lord of the Rings* film merchandising; “we want movie merchandise to transport consumers into the unique fantasy world they’ve experienced in the film”.³²

It is the drive to recreate the pleasure of reliving or imagining a fantasy that is the basis for many toys and merchandising. The objects provide the physical elements to support the mental images. The fantasies associated with toys from childhood on take many forms, and it has been argued that negative emotions are not unusual among children who play with dolls. Formanek-Brunell’s research on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century doll play revealed a whole range of behaviours, but “not all the feelings and issues which doll play accommodated were superficial and sweet”.³³ She uncovers different types of play that explored children’s darker feelings: “One eight-year-old doll dentist used toothpicks as dental tools. Another boy shot his doll full of holes with a bow and arrow so that he could dress its wounds. Boys’ play also

³⁰ Phoenix, p.9.

³¹ Steinberg, p.213.

³² Graham Pomphrey, “Franchise Players”, *License! Global* (16 May 2007), p.60.

³³ Miriam Formanek-Brunell, “The Politics of Dollhood in Nineteenth-Century America”, in Henry Jenkins (ed.), *The Children’s Culture Reader* (London: New York University Press, 1998), p.370.

included doll crucifixion and executions”. She also notes “a four-year-old girl [who] disciplined her doll by forcing it to eat dirt, stones and coal.”³⁴ Although these kinds of play may not have been sanctioned by adults, other activities such as the doll funeral were; “these practises were encouraged by adults and mourning clothes were made for dolls. It was not uncommon for fathers to make doll-sized coffins for their daughters’ toys”.³⁵ In a period when infant mortality was high, the rituals of death would have not been unusual to nineteenth-century children. However it seems that these doll funerals may have been cathartic, acting as “an expression of aggressive feelings and hostile fantasies”.³⁶ It is conceivable that similarly hostile fantasies may be given an outlet in the adult consumption of the range of Cthulhu-inspired products under discussion here. Of course, they are also connected with another kind of fantasy too – that of the consumption of multiple desirable objects.

Many of these items of cute Cthulhu merchandising are produced in multiple versions. Each version is almost identical apart from colour, size or elements of costume. This is similar to Mattel’s creation of multiple versions of Barbie. It acts as a way to sell what is essentially the same product many times, often to the same consumer. Rand quotes a 1992 article in which “Jill Barad, president of Mattel USA, stated, ‘The ultimate goal of making each Barbie special is to create the rationale for why little girls need to own more than one Barbie doll,’ adding that Mattel is trying to get girls to think that they need more than the reigning average of seven”.³⁷ Each Barbie, which is essentially the same doll (created from the same factory mould), is made special by the addition of different outfits, accessories and sometimes different hair styles and skin tones. It is these additions that make the dolls different from each other and therefore desirable to both child and adult consumers because they appear to be individuals, when they are not. When undressed, “Barbie Birthday Princess” is indistinguishable from “Barbie Blonde Beach Doll”. The clothes and accessories that come with these blank-faced dolls are what makes them different from each other. However for a collector (whether child or adult), it is the different accessories that make the two dolls worth owning. For the Barbie doll, counter-intuitively it is the accessories that are the important part, and help fuel consumers’ fantasies and play.

³⁴ Formanek-Brunell, p.374.

³⁵ Formanek-Brunell, p.370.

³⁶ Formanek-Brunell, pp.374-75.

³⁷ Rand, p.24.

For example the “Barbie Birthday Princess” may enable fantasies about special birthday parties, while “Barbie Blonde Beach Doll” may facilitate dreams about fun days out at the seaside. “Barbie Birthday Princess” could theoretically go to the beach but she doesn’t come with a bikini like “Barbie Blonde Beach Doll”, so it is harder to envision the fantasy. For Mattel a doll with accessories can be sold at a higher price-point than a set of accessories alone. It also helps to prevent the Barbie brand from being diluted by consumers who might buy just the accessories and dress another eleven-inch fashion doll in Barbie’s clothes. In addition a large boxed doll has a better presence on a shop shelf than a small packet of accessories, and will attract greater sales.

The examples of Cthulhu merchandising this article discusses fall into this pattern of producing multiple versions. The most interesting is the Chibithulhu, which is not only a soft toy, but also acts as a supplement to the Munchkin Cthulhu game. In order to encourage the players of Munchkin Cthulhu to purchase this piece of game merchandising, the Chibithulhus have additional rules for the game printed on the labels of the toys. This is not unusual for Steve Jackson Games, who frequently produce expansions for their games, as well as merchandising such as toys, figures and T-shirts. The rules published on the Chibithulhu label encourage multiple purchases of the toy because it gives players an advantage when playing the Munchkin Cthulhu game for each unique Chibithulhu that they own. These rules make the Chibithulhu desirable, not just as a toy or collectable, but also because of the benefits it confers when playing Munchkin Cthulhu. The other examples of cute Cthulhu merchandising also have multiple versions, but these work more like the different versions of Barbie. My Little Cthulhu has a number of special limited editions, including a red figure called “Angry”, a black figure called “Goth”, a glow-in-the-dark figure and a plain figure that purchasers can paint themselves. The availability of multiple versions is a common strategy in the designer toy industry, and companies such as Play Imaginative, Toy2R and Kidrobot all produce do-it-yourself models for consumers to decorate.³⁸

Toy Vault produces a wide variety of plushes inspired by the “Cthulhu Mythos”. Central to the range is Cthulhu, which is produced in different colours and sizes, as well as a variety of different outfits, including Elvis; a graduate of

³⁸ Steinberg, pp.225-26.

Miskatonic University; and a superhero. These are highly detailed soft toys, especially those dressed in outfits, potentially making them more of an adult collectable than a toy. However some of Toy Vault's plushes such as My First Cthulhu are specifically made to be suitable for children, with embroidered facial details, instead of plastic eyes, and made using "baby-friendly fabrics". These toys are supplemented by other collectable Cthulhu items such as Cthulhu slippers, a Cthulhu mobile phone pouch and a Cthulhu backpack. The range also includes other plush Mythos toys, including plush Shoggoths, Necronomicons, and Deep Ones. These different variations are made in limited quantities and go out of production, making them collectable because of the limited supply.

All of these cute Cthulhus are blank-faced, allowing consumers to project their fantasies onto them. However companies need consumers to buy multiple products. By creating cute Cthulhus with different accessories or colouring they can encourage consumers to buy more than one product, even though the products are essentially the same. All these differences encourage people to be collectors, so each soft toy or urban vinyl becomes a desirable purchase.

***Kawaii* as pitiable and grotesque**

These cute bodies effectively castrate Cthulhu by deliberately reducing the image's power to scare us by making Cthulhu pitiable. Harris argues that cuteness is "an unconscious attempt to maim, hobble, and embarrass the thing [the creator] seeks to idolize".³⁹ This maiming is physical with characters having "stubby arms, no fingers, no mouths, huge heads, massive eyes – which can hide no private thoughts from the viewer – nothing between their legs, pot bellies, swollen legs and pigeon feet – if they have feet at all. Cute things can't walk, can't talk, can't in fact do anything at all for themselves because they are physically handicapped".⁴⁰ This acts as a way of disempowering the cute characters. Harris argues that it "forc[es] them into ridiculous situations and mak[es] them appear more vulnerable than they really are".⁴¹ A key part of this is that the character becomes pitiable and in need of care. Yano suggests that the attraction of a cute object is that the viewer is left "simultaneously wanting to

³⁹ Daniel Harris, "The Cute and the Anti-cute", *Harper's Magazine* 287, no. 1718 (1993), p.26, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=afh&AN=9309300697&site=ehost-live>, accessed 27 January 2010.

⁴⁰ Kinsella, p.236.

⁴¹ Harris, n.p.

care for it, own it, and become it”.⁴² This is confirmed by Cross in his work on the cute child, which suggested the child “evoked in adults a longing to care for, protect, and possess, as well as to sacrifice”.⁴³

Although they are not completely incapacitated, the cute merchandising forms of Cthulhu are still presented as sexless, often mouthless creatures with no means of communicating; those that *are* given a mouth seem incapable of feeding themselves, even when provided with substitute food, because their arms cannot reach their own mouths. Although Chibithulhu is provided with a mouth, it is forced into a permanent smile, which still suggests a degree of submissiveness to its owner, and its stumpy limbs imply it can do nothing for itself. There is of course an argument to be made that mouths are irrelevant to toys as toys are inanimate objects and cannot eat or speak. However in cute the lack of a mouth relates to submission; because the cute has no visible mouth, they are rendered silent, and this makes them submissive to their owners, which is a strong part of the aesthetic. As Roach suggests; “if submissiveness is part of the appeal of cute, what better than to have no mouth at all?”⁴⁴

Cute appears at first to be incompatible with the horrific but Harris suggests that cute “must not be mistaken for the physically appealing, the attractive”.⁴⁵ Instead he links it to the grotesque, his reasoning being that “the grotesque is cute because the grotesque is pitiable, and pity is the primary emotion of this seductive and manipulative aesthetic.”⁴⁶ By comparison Steig, quoting Jennings, describes the grotesque object as displaying “a *combination of fearsome and ludicrous qualities* – or, to be more precise, it simultaneously arouses reactions of fear and amusement in the observer” [Jennings’ italics].⁴⁷ Steig suggests that the grotesque is paradoxical in that “it at once allays and intensifies the effect of the uncanny”.⁴⁸ It is used to deal with feelings of anxiety by expressing fears and then distorting them so that they

⁴² Yano, 2004, p.59.

⁴³ Gary Cross, *The Cute and the Cool – Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children’s Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp.80-81, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195156669.001.0001>, accessed 19 September 2011.

⁴⁴ Roach, n.p.

⁴⁵ Harris, n.p.

⁴⁶ Harris, n.p.

⁴⁷ Michael Steig, “Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29, no. 2 (1970), p.255.

⁴⁸ Steig, p.258.

become harmless. The fearsome is made safe by the ridicule of the grotesque aesthetic, while that with which it is uncomfortable to identify, is made strange.

Lovecraft's description of Cthulhu does evoke the grotesque with its mismatch of animal parts from different species; however it does not evoke pity, which is required for Harris' definition. The nihilistic nature of Cthulhu in Lovecraft's story is more frightening than his appearance. Although powerful, Cthulhu has no interest in humankind, wanting neither worship nor fear because according to "The Call of Cthulhu" he is sleeping unaware of humanity, beneath the Pacific Ocean.⁴⁹ On this basis, according to Steig's work on the grotesque, the grotesque appearance of Cthulhu in the story helps to distance us from the frightening nature of the character. By contrast, the cute merchandising does retain the grotesque mismatch of Lovecraft's story, with additional deformities in the creatures' out-of-proportion eyes and heads, and stumpy limbs. The out-of-proportion elements of these Cthulhus bring to mind children and infantile animals, whose proportions are different to those of adults. They evoke pity because they cannot care for themselves. Their grotesqueries in this cute form help to distance us from them, not because we are frightened, but because we may not want to identify fully with a nihilistic monster.

What is the *kawaii* aesthetic used for?

As an aesthetic *kawaii* has a number of functions. In Japan it is not only fancy goods such as stationary, stickers and key chains that are decorated with cute characters, but also credit cards and passenger jets. Allison argues that "play characters have become a popular strategy used by groups, products, and companies of various sorts to stake their own identity and differentiate it from that of others".⁵⁰ Products such as credit cards are difficult to differentiate from each other in the Japanese marketplace because of universally low interest rates, so the *kawaii* character branding can provide an important point of difference for consumers. For example "twenty three banks, including Mitsui, Sumitomo, Sanwa, and Mitsubishi; fourteen stock companies, including Yamaichi, Daiwa and Nomura; and seven insurance companies, including Nihon Seimei, Sumitomo Seimei and Yasuda Kasai" have licensed cute characters.⁵¹ These branded accounts appear to be popular in East Asia with "Aeon Credit Service

⁴⁹ Lovecraft, n.p.

⁵⁰ Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* (London: University of California Press, 2006), p.17.

⁵¹ Kinsella, p.226.

in Hong Kong issu[ing] 100,000 Hello Kitty MasterCard[s] in nine months”⁵² and long lines for new accounts when Makoto Bank in Taiwan adopted Hello Kitty.⁵³ Brands in the West do not operate in this way, with cute characters mostly confined to discretionary or trivial products, and those aimed at children. Rather than being used in the promotion of unrelated products, the majority of cute Cthulhus observed are instead collectable products in their own right.

Kawaii in Japan is also used to conceal the ugly, whether this is an ugly message or an ugly but essential activity or object. Roach describes this cute layer as “a form of window dressing for the uncute”.⁵⁴ For example cute characters are used on Japanese warning signs and government material meant to “warn or admonish” to “soften and [make] more acceptable” the message.⁵⁵ Kinsella argues that:

In some cases a mismatch between the good’s function and its design had simply gone unnoticed; at other times it was a deliberate attempt to camouflage and mask the dirty image of the good or service in question.⁵⁶

In comparison Western cute child images from the turn of the twentieth century through to the 1930s “were popular because they appealed to adults trying to get ‘back’ to childhood through their children”.⁵⁷ In this case it was a way for adults to connect with their children and a particular state in their lives. The example of cute Cthulhu is very much a case where the function of the original character has been overwritten and camouflaged to mask its central, horrifying premise. Instead it allows adults to return to their childhood and grants them opportunities to engage in playful behaviours.

Consumption of *kawaii* objects by adults can offer a way of escaping from the normal activities of daily life. The focus is on escape because of the pressures of daily life in crowded cities and the social expectations of others. The escape needs to be consumption-based as there is very little spare time for it to be time consuming.

⁵² Barbara Koh, “Cute Power”, *Newsweek* (8 November 1999), <http://www.newsweek.com/id/90086>, accessed 3 February 2010.

⁵³ Roach, n.p.

⁵⁴ Roach, n.p.

⁵⁵ McVeigh (1996), p.300.

⁵⁶ Kinsella, p.228.

⁵⁷ Cross, p.125.

For adults there are two aspects to this escape, an escape from the physical world and an escape from the social world. Allison suggests that something as simple as carrying a cute key chain or phone charm can act as “a reminder [...] of something beyond the reality of [the] office, cramped housing, and daily commutes”.⁵⁸ Even something as quick as a glance can be enough to act as a psychological boost.⁵⁹ Part of the experience of escape is the feeling of nostalgia that consuming cute artefacts creates. The key aspect of this nostalgia is a remembrance of childhood and the feeling of being carefree.⁶⁰ This nostalgia for childhood is expressing a “yearning to be comforted and soothed”.⁶¹ With cute being used to conceal the ugly, this nostalgic consumption is concealing the ugliness of the present: “alienation is increasing [...] [P]eople want to return to their childhood where there is no ugliness”.⁶² The cute characters act as emotional backup that can always be relied upon, like a family member. Allison concludes that “whether a Kitty-chan key chain, Doraemon cell phone strap, or Pikachu backpack, these commodity spirits are ‘shadow families’: constant and reliable companions that are soothing in these post-industrial times”.⁶³ For character merchandising based on established worlds “the character provides a means of accessing the world – this being one of the reasons for its consumption”.⁶⁴ The toy acts as a focus for remembering the film, television programme or computer game, even when you cannot access the source media.

In Japan the escape can also be from what is socially expected and the demands of other people. Yano describes an article in *Kitty Goods Collection* that suggests ideas for “spending one’s leisure time in ‘doing Kitty’”. Here the cute icon inspires fans’ leisure time, “provid[ing] the opportunity to focus on oneself, by oneself, luxuriating within *honne* (one’s true feelings) to a schedule packed tightly with *tatemae* (public face)”.⁶⁵ McVeigh describes cute as “a form of escape from the real world, or at least from the high pressure social world of Japan. ‘Fantasy’ stated one young woman; ‘it’s a way of forgetting about the unpleasant things we all have to put

⁵⁸ Anne Allison, “Cuteness as Japan’s Millennial Product”, in Joseph Tobin (ed.), *Pikachu’s Global Adventure* (London: Duke University Press, 2004), p.43.

⁵⁹ Yano (2004), p.63.

⁶⁰ Yano (2004), pp.62-63.

⁶¹ Allison (2004), p.40.

⁶² Koh, n.p.

⁶³ Allison (2006), p.91.

⁶⁴ Steinberg, p.213.

⁶⁵ Yano (2004), p.62.

up with everyday’”.⁶⁶ In the West these feelings are not as clearly defined as in Japan, and the social pressures are less intense; however there is still a split between one’s desires and what is socially expected. To display a cute Cthulhu is a way of expressing one’s personality and desires in a way that is non-confrontational. The toy can be a form of rebellion, resisting the expectations of society and labelling the owner as such, while remaining non-confrontational in approach – a cute Cthulhu is more visually appealing to the uninitiated onlooker than, for example, the surrealist horror art of H.R. Geiger. Seiter argues that:

All members of modern developed societies depend heavily on commodity consumption, not just for survival but for participation – inclusion – in social networks. Clothing, furniture, records, toys – all the things we buy involve decisions and the exercise of our own judgement and “taste”. Obviously we do not control what is available for us to choose from in the first place. But consuming offers a certain scope for creativity. The deliberate, chosen meanings in most people’s lives come more often from what they consume than what they produce.⁶⁷

The non-essential discretionary purchases that we choose to consume and display are a way of participating in different social groups and showing our allegiances to other people. Cross elaborates on the example of the Kewpie doll, a cute child figure based on the drawings of Rose O’Neill (1874-1944). These dolls were created as character merchandising, and as such were heavily mass produced along with other items bearing the Kewpie image.

Men bought Kewpie dolls for their office desks and women for their dressing tables. They succeeded as “charms,” however, not because they had supernatural power but because they were fads and a fantasy, playfully embraced. As such, they represented the wonder of childhood, a dreamworld that adults, if not children, knew to be mere dream, but that was nevertheless enchanted because it enchanted children.⁶⁸

The Kewpie dolls, although toys, helped adults connect to a desirable fantasy through their consumption. It is important to note that the consumers knew that the ideas that the dolls represented were a fantasy. However it makes the desires the Kewpie dolls

⁶⁶ McVeigh (1996), p.294.

⁶⁷ Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp.3-4.

⁶⁸ Cross, pp.125-26.

represented no less real. Cross argued that these kinds of cute child images take “both the child and the adult to the edge of the acceptable, even across the line of self-control, to a playful, unserious anarchic moment”.⁶⁹ In other words it gives them a chance to step outside of their ordinary lives and society’s prescribed behaviours to explore the boundaries and to return to the experience of play.

Choosing cute Cthulhu character merchandising is a way of consumers creating meaning in their lives. It is useful here to consider Yano’s description of the “wink on pink”, a phenomenon where businesswomen display their femininity through small accessories such as a pink notebook or Hello Kitty rubber stamp. She suggests that “the wink on pink [...] represents a small act of defiance in recuperating and asserting both the playful and the feminine using the kitsch of a Japanese icon in a masculinist world”.⁷⁰ If we consider the consumption and display of cute Cthulhus, they could be seen as a “wink on geek”, in other words a way of expressing affiliation to geekdom. However, unlike the more obvious sign of pink, a cute Cthulhu is less obvious, and is instead a sign to those in the know, a kind of secret handshake for geeks.

Conclusion

The movement from horrific object to cute object has shifted the balance of power in consumers’ relationship with Cthulhu. As a horror icon, Cthulhu has power over his observers because he creates feelings of fear and loathing in them. However, as a cute monster, the power shifts to the observer because the blank expression allows the observer to imbue the toy with their own feelings and emotions. If we consider the cute Cthulhu merchandising under discussion, we see that many of the elements that Kinsella, Yano and McVeigh list have been incorporated into the depictions of the character to make Cthulhu appear cute. All of the forms under discussion have transformed and simplified Cthulhu’s body into a smooth-skinned, rounded, clawless form. The face has been reduced to two main types – either a featureless form with tiny eyes, like Hello Kitty, or a “chibi” form with large eyes, inspired by manga and anime. Cthulhu’s wings become like those of dragons or angels.

⁶⁹ Cross, p.44.

⁷⁰ Christine R. Yano, “Monsterring the Japanese Cute: Pink Globalization and Its Critics Abroad”, in William M. Tsutsui and Michiko Ito (eds.), *In Godzilla’s Footsteps: Japanese Pop Culture Icons on the Global Stage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.157.

These cute artefacts have a valuable function in people's lives. The creation of Cthulhu as a range of consumable objects gives people "a mechanism for interacting with the world through the imagination".⁷¹ This cutification of Cthulhu weakens the original characterisation of Cthulhu; in doing so it offers the consumer a cute imaginary escape from their ordinary lives, in much the same way that Hello Kitty does. This is a significant change in the intended audience reception of Cthulhu from Lovecraft's original vision and represents a strengthening of the consumer's vision over that of the original author. Even when presented in the rounded, large-headed, cute form, Cthulhu still occupies a grotesque form, as it is quite possible to be grotesque-pitiable and cute at the same time. Cute Cthulhu therefore occupies a point somewhere between horror and traditional cuteness, which gives adults the chance to escape from their mundane lives.

⁷¹ Allison, 2004, p.43.