

Careful surveillance and pet wearables

September 6 2016, by Larissa Hjorth, Ingrid Richardson And William Balmford



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The Williams' residence in suburban Melbourne is home to three dogs and five humans. Life is often chaotic as each member of the household negotiates for space and attention. It's one of many Australian homes where animals are an integral part of family and domesticity.

Over the past few months, parents Andrew and John tell us, the dogs

have been misbehaving, damaging furniture and belongings while people are at work and school. Andrew has approached the situation by installing webcams and purchasing a pet wearable device called "Whistle" for his dog Tigger, a German short-haired pointer who he rightly suspects is the main culprit.

Whistle, [according to its website](#), "marries GPS tracking and pet wellness in one band". Attached to Tigger's collar, it connects to a smartphone app that allows Andrew to track and evaluate Tigger's exercise, play and rest in real time. Whistle is part of a [burgeoning pet wearable market](#) that is "[revolutionalising pet health and wellbeing](#)," according to one pundit.

While at work, Andrew can now keep a "friendly" eye on Tigger. He has developed a solution to the dogs' misbehavior that involves locking certain rooms and providing particular play spaces to reflect Tigger's daily rhythms.

Our observations of the Williams family are part of a multi-city research project into domestic practices around digital media, mobile media and games. When we first began our research, we presumed we would focus on human practices and perceptions. But animals kept getting in the way.

Australia has one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world, with nearly five million households including [one or more pets](#). As our work progressed, it became clear that humans and their pets are entangled in various forms of intimacy and kinship, often in digitally mediated ways.

We have observed (or heard tales of) cats playing with iPads and keyboards, of dogs watching television or participating in video calls. One of our Perth participants Anna describes how she frequently Skypes with her Blue Heeler Abby (with her partner's help) when she's away on work trips.

Abby will paw the laptop in anticipation of the evening call when Anna is absent; she gets excited, wags her tail, "talks" and presses her nose against the screen. It is quite well known that some dogs "see" screens while some don't, Anna says, as she shows us the many YouTube videos people have uploaded of their skyping dogs.

As the size of technology shrinks, wearable devices have become hugely popular, from iPods to fitbits. Spurred by the [Quantified Self \(QS\) movement](#) (the use of self-tracking apps and wearables to monitor biometrics and improve daily functioning) and [gamification](#), global shipments of wearable devices are expected to reach [110 million annually by the end of 2016](#). Pet wearables are now worth \$2.62 billion a year of this global market and the Australian market is [tipped to grow](#).

Pet [wearable devices](#) enable surveillance and tracking through devices such as Pod 2, Buddy, WÜF and Nuzzle; monitoring of heart-rate and sleep patterns (Inupathy, PetPace) and may feature geofencing capability and virtual boundary alert systems that let owners know when their pet wanders too far (eg DogTelligent).

Pet owners can "gamify" their pet's exercise with a reward system and leaderboard that ranks their results compared to other pets. They can download an augmented reality app that sees through obstacles such as furniture to locate their pet. Or they can record and vicariously experience their pet's perspective and movement remotely via wearable cameras.

As we explored Andrew's problem-solving strategies further, it became clear that he had gleaned a complex sense of Tigger's character and behaviour in the home when humans were at work. Andrew explained that particular rooms, couches and beds had different associations for Tigger (for example, he would retreat to the main bedroom when anxious). Through tracking Tigger, he said, he had gained a deeper sense

of his pet's moods.

Pet wearables and monitoring systems are also implicated in an ethics of care and surveillance. They originate from a genealogy of care that engages paradoxical notions of constraint and guardianship. Indeed, our relationship with domestic animals is often fraught with ambiguity; pets are both nature and culture, instinctual and social, controlled yet nurtured, at the same time possessions and companions.

Our kinship with domestic animals is deeply informed by what we might call "careful surveillance", either within the domestic sphere as we observed in the Williams household, or away from home.

For instance another study participant, Paul, and his beagle Millie often go for walks together. But Paul told us he worried about Millie wandering off, and so had avoided going for walks at night. Then he purchased a [Halo Belt](#) for Millie, which lit up at night. It meant he could always find her in the dark and lessen the chance of her scaring other people in the park, such as night joggers.

The term "careful surveillance" refers to our emotional bond with [domestic animals](#), our protective concern and love for our pets. But surveillance must also be a "careful" practice, in terms of its effects upon both human and animal.

As we increasingly involve our pets in the gamification and quantification of everyday life - assisted by new technologies—we should reflect on the relationship between concern and control.

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