"Gotta Catch 'Em All!" *Pokémon,* Cultural Practice and Object Networks

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Abstract

The *Pokémon* franchise is over seventeen years old, a networked assemblage of heterogeneous elements (manga, gaming, toys, anime) that is also constitutive of new knowledges around both consumerism and commodification. This paper explores how all of the elements of this franchise, from the brand, to the various media platforms, to the Pokémon trainers, to the pocket monsters themselves (the non-human objects) as well as the designers and the consumers (the humans) function as objects in the construction of a social network. In so doing it seeks to understand not only how the franchise functions but also how the objects in this franchise (particularly the non-human Pokémon creatures and trainers) work in tandem to connect audiences to very specifically Japanese ideas of the "national imagination" (folklore, spiritualism, the supernatural) and environmental concerns (biodiversity, the struggle between conservation and containment) through the larger consumerist framework of acquisition and play structured as cultural practice. In this way, it is argued, that the *Pokémon* object network functions as a gateway into Japanese culture more broadly and a channel through which Japanese culture is itself mainstreamed internationally.

Keywords: Japanese culture - *Pokémon* – franchise – networks – popular culture

"I raised Pokémon, which is why I feel a particular bond with it"
(Kubo Masakazu of Shogakukan Inc, responsible for turning the *Pokémon* Game Boy into manga and overseeing the *anime* television and movie versions, qtd Allison, 2006, p. 193)

Introduction

In the January 2005 issue of *Nature*, Pier Paolo Pandolfi of the Memorial Sloan-Ketterling Cancer Centre in New York referred to the POK erythroid myeloid ontogeniuc gene that causes cancer by the contraction "Pokémon" (Maeda 2005). The metaphor was fairly explicit - the "Pokémon" gene was thought to act as a switch for cancer, responsible for the proliferation of cancer through surrounding cells. Similarly in 2005, *Pokémon* seemed just as prolific. As Hatakeyama and Kubo note, in their five-hundred-page book on *Pokémon*, "in the sense of its international commonness and the spectacular speed as well as breadth of its worldwide circulation, we could say that the phenomenon of Pokémon is unprecedented in human history" (Hatakeyama & Kubo 2000, p. 8). Indeed, by March 31 2013, more than 172 Million units of the video game alone have been sold since its debut in 1996. The total number of licensed and merchandised pocket monsters (Nintendo's *Poketto Monsuta,* abbreviated to Pokémon, that give the franchise its name) appearing in cartoons, toys, comics and clothing have increased from 151 to over 700.

Naturally where *Pokémon* went many would follow, rivals and imitators who adapted the idea of a world where wild creatures exist to be collected, trained and battle with one another in different ways. Perhaps most importantly then, the incredible success of *Pokémon* in the West has acted as something of an "on-switch" for more *anime* products to be screened on American, British and Australian television, from *Sailor Moon*, *Gundam* and *Teknoman* to that cycle of *Pokémon*-imitators *Digimon, Monster Rancher, Duel Masters, Bakugan* and *Monsuno*, each with their own attendant licensing and merchandising campaigns.

Distressed by the flood of "*Pokémon* causes cancer" headlines that followed the release of *Nature*, Pokémon USA threatened legal action and the contraction was dropped, with the gene being referred to by the less-catchy zbtb7 in all subsequent materials (Dennison 2005). However, this idea of *Pokémon* as a living network, an on-switch, aggressively expanding and proliferating throughout the mediasphere, remains a potent one that I want to explore in this paper.

Anne Allison has previously suggested that "encased in the form of popular culture, [*Pokémon*] is a vehicle of and for the national imagination transmitted through a currency of superpowers and lovable characters" (Allison 2006, p. 194). This is because the franchise is built on the concept of *monozukuri* "literally 'thing-making'" but defined in more detail by Roland Kelts as "a primary emphasis on tiny details, a love of production for its own sake, and a constant drive to find innovative ways of crafting the product itself" (Kelts 2007, p. 89). These 'non-human' 'things' operate as some of the most important elements in the social network that *Pokémon* constructs. This is because both the development of and engagement with the franchise (through play, spectatorship or some other form of consumption) is necessarily informed by the idea of *sodateru* (child raising) referenced in the quote that heads this paper: "an ability to relate personally, almost spiritually, with a product/mass-produced

imaginary" (Allison 2006, p. 193). This 'personal, almost spiritual' relationship with a mass-produced imaginary is what constitutes *Pokémon's* social network, connecting both Pokémon's creators and its audience not only to the national *imagination* of Japan itself but also to the particular *concerns* of that nation, its relationship to the environment and its larger place in the world.

All of the elements of the *Pokémon* franchise then, from the brand, to the various media platforms, to the Pokémon trainers, to the pocket monsters themselves (the non-human objects) as well as the designers and the consumers (the humans) function as objects in the construction of this social network. Building on the arguments that *Pokémon* develops "multiliteracies" for democratic participation (Cope & Kalantzis 2000), or teaching through "*learning how to learn*" (original emphasis, Buckingham & Sefton-Green 2003, p. 395), I want to understand not only how the franchise functions but also how the objects in that franchise (particularly the "non-human" Pokémon creatures and trainers) work in tandem to plug audiences into the national concerns of Japan. I want to explore how this "vehicle" functions and I suggest that one of the ways in which the *Pokémon* franchise's "currency of superpowers and lovable characters" can be analysed is as an object network of "cultural practice" (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2003, p. 379).

Pokémon's networked assemblage

Pokémon is currently seventeen years old. On the eve of its tenth anniversary in 2006 *Pokémon, Inc.* had made $25 billon internationally "the annual GDP of Bulgaria" (Kelts 2007, p. 89). But even more important than the profits it generates is "the influence *Pokémon* exerted in the domain of cultural production", for as was noted in Japan itself, the success of *Pokémon* was an indication that Japan was on "the road to becoming a character empire" (Kyarakuta okoku no michi qtd Kelts 2007, p. 89). *Pokémon* co-constructs and affects the creation of new social-technological configurations where the franchise itself is an assemblage of heterogeneous elements (manga, gaming, toys, anime) *as well as* constitutive of new knowledges around consumerism and commodification.

In this way, *Pokémon* functions not just as cross-media merchandising or 'integrated marketing' ("Pokémania" 1999, Kinder 1991, Sieter 1993) but rather as a truly immersive multimedia franchise, an exemplar of what Henry Jenkins terms "transmedia storytelling" running across computer games, anime, manga, toys and trading cards. By way of example, the first *Pokémon* television series sets up the events of the first *Pokémon* movie and the second *Pokémon* movie introduces new elements that are featured in subsequent seasons of the TV series (*Pokémon GS*) and the Game Boy releases *Pokémon Gold and Silver* (Patten 338). *Pokémon* therefore develops as a fully functioning multiplatform ecosystem, developing complexity through the addition of new layers of narrative, new challenges in gaming and new merchandising opportunities. The network grows as a child would grow, plugging the audience into an increasingly larger and more complex networked assemblage of artefacts.

As Kelts goes on to say, it is important to note that "the ideas, the beauty, the concepts, and the messages are somehow secondary to the finished product" (Kelts 2007, p. 89); anime and manga may be the "core products" when we think of

Japanese popular culture but they are "not necessarily the most lucrative ones, and certainly not the most successful when it comes to getting a global audience addicted" (Kelts 2007, p. 89). For *Pokémon*, it is these non-human objects - the character goods licensed through toys, cards and computer games that are the most "lucrative" and "successful" texts; the anime just fills in the textual details (the names, relationships and motivations of characters, similar to the function of *Masters of the Universe* and other toy-generated cartoons of the 1980s). Takazou Morishita, the head of Toei Animation's international division, confirmed the importance of these character goods when he noted that it was "the merchandising links between *Yu-Gi-Oh* and *Pokémon* [that] took it to the mainstream" (Kelts 2007, p. 101). This is what the theorist John Law might term the "relational materiality" of the franchise (Law 1992) or the socializing nature of things in practice (Van der Duim 2007) – things that require "doing" on the part of the audience. This is because the Pokémon are *active* things, things that encourage some sort of investment on the part of the audience, not just time or money, but activities around collecting, battling, evolving and learning aspects of the Pokémon and their world.

Kelts reads the model as working this way: "The anime was the market research, and that was what Nintendo, Bandai, and the others learned in Japan. The viewing figures and the toy sales are part of the same analysis. The characters that work will return for future episodes; the failures do not, making way for new species" (Kelts 2007, p. 97). This is natural selection in the *Pokémon* world those objects which function well in plugging audiences into the network survive. Those that do not are discarded. However, it is the internet that remains the key point of convergence here "enabling new generations of American fans to graduate from TV series and collectible cards to hardcore anime otakudom" (Kelts 2007, p. 179) or as author Patrick Macias puts it "a generation of kids… went from *Pokémon* to *Gundam Wing hentai* in a single mouse click" (qtd Kelts 2007, p.179)[i]. *Pokémon* therefore operates as both a gateway into Japanese culture and "a play that goes beyond the world of the game itself" (Allison 2003, p. 199). For Buckingham and Sefton-Green this means that Pokémon is

> "not merely a set of objects that can be isolated for critical analysis, in the characteristic mode of academic media studies. It might more appropriately be described, in anthropological terms, as a "cultural practice." Pokemon is something you *do,* not just something you read or watch or "consume". Yet while that "doing" clearly requires active participation on the part of the "doers", the terms on which it is performed are predominantly dictated by forces or structures beyond their control…. By the work of their [card and game] designers – and, indeed, by the operations of the market, which made these commodities available in particular ways in the first place" (379).

Pokémon is therefore a "discursively charged space" (Allison 2006, p. 206), drawing on the Foucaultian definition of discourse as "the cartography by which the world is mapped by values, relationships and power(s)" (Allison 2006, p. 206). This discourse is not only articulated through the guidebooks and texts Nintendo and its affiliated companies produce, but also through the interactive and communicative spaces Satoshi Tajiri built into his creation, the playground discussions and Game Boy exchanges, the taxonomies Foster (2008) refers to (see below) and the websites devoted to Pokémon discussion and explanation. We can therefore liken the franchise to what Pickering (1995) might refer to as "material performativity" in which things

"act" or "do" - in that they encourage action on the part of the consumer (through play, trade, knowledge) - but also in their gateway function, encouraging consumers to interact and engage with other elements of Japanese popular culture too. Just as the character goods (the Pokémon) function as objects networking *Pokémon* to the mainstream so too do they network audiences into Japanese culture more broadly, networking that into the mainstream as well.

The *Pokémon* Trainers

The most prominent and familiar aspects of *Pokémon* franchise's narrative come from the anime, revolving around a ten-year-old boy, Ash Ketchum (loosely modelled on Red from the games). His first name, Ash reflects an ongoing interest in nature (replicated in the names of the Pokémon professors, Samuel Oak, Felina Ivy, Elm and Birch) whereas in Japan he is called Satoshi, named after *Pokémon* own creator, Satoshi Tajiri. In the English dub his surname, Ketcham, has the franchise's first slogan, "catch 'em" built into it. He is intended to be a surrogate figure for the *Pokémon* consumer, largely absent of much in the way of motivation or development. But Allison also sees Ash as a somewhat more allegorical figure for Japan in the new millennium "one whose goals, more ambitious now, have moved from the domestic… to the global (becoming the "world's greatest Pokémon trainer")" (Allison 2006, p. 96).

Ash is accompanied by his friends (11 year old) Misty (Kasumi in Japan, later replaced by May and then Dawn[ii]) and (15 year old) Brody (Takeshi in Japan), together with Ash's primary Pokémon (and mascot of the franchise), the 'electric mouse' (Patten 2004, p. 337) Pikachu, who stores electricity in its cheeks and releases it when attacking. As Kelts explains this is an "onomatopoeic term… *Pika* is a sudden extremely bright light, such as lightning, and *don* is a thunderous blast, like fireworks exploding, or something very heavy falling to the floor" (Kelts 2007, p. 39). Interestingly, the Japanese word for the bomb that devastated Hiroshima (what the Americans referred to as Little Boy) was *pika-don*. It is the same *pika* that forms the prefix of Pikachu, referring to his ability to fire lightning bolts from his tail and the basis of his language "pikapika". The *chu* is "Japanese onomatopoeia for the sound of a mouse" (Kelts 2007, p. 39).

Opposing Ash and his friends are the largely camp and ineffectual Team Rocket – James, Jesse and their Pokémon Meowth – whose criminal mastermind boss Giovanni (like the *James Bond* villain Blofeld) remains largely off-screen and unseen, stroking his large feline Pokémon, Persian. All children in this world compete to capture and tame wild Pokémon in Poké balls; the Pokémon is then under the control of their masters to wage non-lethal battles against other Pokémon in what Allison terms a "bond" that "is a mixture of service and friendship" (Allison 2006, p. 195). It is this bond that is perhaps most instructive for Patten claims that "Ash set[s] out at first to grab these Pokémon for fame and glory, but through his developing friendship with Pikachu he gradually comes to recognise the animals as living creatures rather than mere possessions" (Patten 2004, p. 337). This is the major form of character development Ash demonstrates, a deepening appreciation of the Pokémon and the world he is a part of, leading to him being christened "the one who will bring balance" (in the third *Pokémon* film) and linked to the mythical Pokémon hero Aaron (it is claimed he has the same aura or "soul" in the eighth *Pokémon* film).

Allison notes that the "organising trope" for this narrative is "travel… the junior Pokémon trainers are constantly in motion" (Allison 2006, p. 196); *Pokémon* sutures the pleasures of travel to indoor entertainments, the virtual "play spaces" Henry Jenkins (1998) describes of computer games and watching television. Similarly, the story engine that promotes this travel is one that is shared by both the consumers and the central characters, the desire to acquire; while other Western franchises have thrived by building a desire to acquire into their fan bases (most prominently, *Star Wars*), *Pokémon* was one of the first franchises to make acquisition a central part of its narrative; those who acquire a full set of Pokémon (see below) also acquire the title of Master Pokémon Trainer.

In Japan, this is is the concept of *getto suru* ("getting"), becoming "gotta catch 'em all" in the US translation (Allison 2006, p. 197), informed by a strong ideology of capitalism – where Pokémon are "both thingified (valued economically) and personalised (cute monsters inspiring affection, attachment and love" (Allison 2006, p.197). This is what Allison calls "(only half facetiously) *Pokémon* capitalism… in which commodities double as gifts and companions" (Allison 2006, p. 197). It is even easier to think of these creatures as objects given the fact that they lack both gender (almost all Pokémon are simply referred to as "it") and speech (almost all Pokémon simply repeat aspects of their name, understandable to other Pokémon but only rarely to humans; Team Rocket mascot Meowth is a notable exception here, having sacrificed a fighting ability to learn how to speak). To drive the acquisition analogy home, Pokémon are "got" in a spherical Pokéball modelled after the Japanese gashopon balls that can be bought in machines, usually containing some small toy or mass produced "collectible"; indeed, as the *Pokémon* film *Arceus and the Jewel of Life* makes clear, the invention of the Pokéball is what makes these creatures "pocket" monsters. Before the Pokéball they were regarded as "magical" or "mystical" rather than natural.

Roland Kelts views Pokémon as being a central element in what he refers to as "a third wave of Japanophilia – outsiders' infatuation with Japan's cultural character" (Kelts 2007, p. 5)[iii]. This infatuation centres around what he terms "the eccentricities, spastic zaniness, and libertarian fearlessness of Japan's creators of popular culture – and of the mind boggling acquisitive Japanese consumers of that culture" (Kelts 2007, p. 6). Pikachu and his brethren therefore become iconic totems of Japanese culture just as sumo, sushi, *bushido* samurai and *ikebana* have been before them – emblematic of both the design aesthetics and consumptive practices that inform this third wave. Thus the materiality of the Pokémon (in cards and toys), their design and the design of the DVD collections, the films and manga series, all stimulate and order fan mnemonics of and in Japan. It is the *object* (the pocket monster, the trading card, the plush toy) that thereby becomes the nexus of fan sensibilities, needs and desires, the most important part of a network of goods and services.

The Kawaii Aesthetic of *Pokémon*

Pokémon: The First Movie (dir. Kunihiko Yuyama and Michael Haigney) was released in Japan in the summer of 1997, coinciding with the commencement of coverage of *Pokémon* in the west with a series of articles entitled "Pokémon sends children to the hospital." These related to the airing of the "Computer Soldier Porygon" *Pocket Monsters* episode in Japan on December 16, featuring a flash/strobe

lighting effect that caused some 700 children to have seizures (and later parodied by both *The Simpsons* and *South Park*). As Fred Patten (2004) notes, the response in America was largely dismissive of anime; Cartoon Network's vice president of programming Mike Lazzo reassured the American public that their children were safe as anime was not shown in America:

> "CBS, ABC, NBC, Fox, UPN and WB don't air… 'anime'. Nor do the major cable outlets for cartoon: Nickelodeon, The Cartoon Network and the Disney channel… Japanese animation is so different from what airs here. It's far edgier, adult and violent. Anime isn't very story-based and is driven by intense movements. The story is hard to follow" (qtd Patten 2004, p. 109)[iv].

Despite this, the only Westernization *Pokémon* underwent was being translated into English in time for its simultaneous launch in America in September 1998 as a Game Boy video game and a weekday syndicated series (debuting September 8, 1998). According to Ishihara this was despite market research conducted in the U.S prior to the games' release that found:

> "the characters were too childish to catch the fancy of Americans. However, we decided to introduce Japanese-designed characters without any modifications, which in fact captivated American children. This   means that we cultivated demand that had gone unnoticed until then.   *Pokémon* had the power to change the market" (qtd Kelts 2007; 93).

And it did. As Patten notes: "As soon as the entertainment industry noted the mega-popularity of *Pokémon* and all its licensed merchandise, the criticism abruptly stopped. The same TV networks and cable channels that "don't air… 'anime'" hastened to sign up the American rights to *Pokémon* and such imitators as *Digimon* and *Monster Rancher*" (Patten 2004, p. 108). The moral panic around *Pokémon* – and anime as a whole – was replaced by a desire to become part of its success and the first indication of this was the series' move from syndication to the Kids' WB! Network six months later. *Pokémon* home videos started appearing in the US in 1998 and *Pokémon: The First Movie* (released in the West in 1999) "set new records for a November theatrical release, earning over $50 million in its first five days" (Patten, 2004: 336).

Given these figures, it is clear why Sanchez credits "*Pokémon's* rocket-like propulsion to the top of the mainstream culture… [as helping] lay the groundwork for the promotion of the anime medium, and has shown the possibility of its future integration into the culture" (Sanchez 2013). Kelts similarly credits the Pokémon franchise with "delivering" Japan to the U.S. market. He identifies three ways in which this happens: familiarization with Japanese anime aesthetics and themes[v]; the gradual introduction of new characters week by week (somewhat debateable given the similar strategies used in toy-based cartoons like *Masters of the Universe, GI Joe* and *Transformers* in the 1980s) and the idea of the "undying saga… both optimistic and pessimistic" - the sense that there will always be another monster, another master, another enemy to defeat (Kelts 2007, pp. 90-91).

It is the first of these that is perhaps the most important, this idea that *Pokémon* not only serves as a gateway activity into Japanese popular culture (a network that taps

into a greater cultural imaginary and set of related concerns, as noted above) but that it actually overturned preconceptions around anime to make it a more palatable, mainstream experience (a network that taps into the mainstream itself). It does this through its two story engines: the idea of collecting (which is a central part of its narrative, enacted by the trainers) and (as Kelts notes) the ongoing introduction of new species of intricately designed Pokémon, that draw on design elements from mythology (dragons), nature (horses, dogs), science (magnets), animation (ghosts) and occasionally witty one-liners; by way of example, Psyduck is a duck who rather than being psychic (as his name implies) simply has the ability to appear and sigh melodramatically.

In some respects, Pokémon are monsters in the yokai tradition (Japanese folkloric monsters and supernatural beings but more often used to describe any supernatural or unaccountable phenomena). This is true of animal creatures like Vulpix and Meowth, who resemble the *henge* (shapeshifters) of folklore like Kitsune (foxes) or Bakeneko (cats). But it is perhaps best exemplified by the class of Legendary Pokémon that have vast spiritual or supernatural power (such as Lugia, Mew and Celebi) introduced in each of the *Pokémon* feature films. Allison notes that *Pokémon* is therefore a "borrowing and reinvention of a Japanese cultural past (gift exchange, supernatural spirits, otherworldly aestheticism)" (Allison 197). Michael Dylan Foster (2008) similarly links *Pokémon* to the yokai tradition, not just in terms of individual characters, but in the way success is based on knowledge about these creatures:
"handbooks and catalogs list, illustrate, organise, and describe these creatures in classic hakubutsugaku-style: "Pokémon of the prairies", "Pokémon of the mountains", "Pokémon of the forests", and the like" endowing the Pokémon world with its own history and even an academic discipline reminiscent of yokaigaku, appropriately called "Pokémon-gaku", or Pokémon-ology." (Foster 2008, p. 214)

This taxonomy is even built into the franchise in the form of the Pokédex, an electronic device listing Pokémon 's statistics[vi]. For Foster, Pokémon becomes a collusion of ludic and encyclopaedic modes fostering a desire towards a kind of Linnaean taxonomy[vii] of categories, powers and abilities:

> "through which the denizens of an otherworld are named, located, defined, described, and made to come alive… By applying real-world signifying practices to things as elusive as yokai, we create an authentic, authorised systems in which they can reside: a doppelganger universe, fully rendered and complete but somehow separate from our own" (214).

This cultural practice of *Pokémon* therefore encourages its audience to think in terms of world-building, filling in the gaps, nurturing the universe, creating canons that link the various platforms of *Pokémon* together. But more importantly it connects its audience to the larger cultural imaginings and concerns of Japan, drawing them into larger frameworks of folklore and supernaturalism. Like Buckingham & Sefton-Green (2003, p. 388) and Allison (2006, p. 207), Foster argues that *Pokémon* is as much about collecting knowledge as it is collecting species – classification strategies, transferring knowledge between media platforms and discussing the details of this world (Buckingham & Sefton-Green 2003, p. 388-389), "directed to a fantasy world premised far more now on the invisible and unseen – what must be learned and charted through data" (Allison 2006, p. 207). Such knowledge is always contingent

upon objects, the Pokémon themselves; it is a series of embodied knowledges, embodied by creatures like Jigglypuff, Charmander, Mew and Pikachu, hybridised creatures that similarly inhabit a hybridised world of Japanese mythology, pure imagination and occasional real-world locations (as the Pokémon territories in each new expansion are based on a variety of locations in the real world)[viii].

Taking Pikachu as his case study, Kelts notes that the yellow Pokémon is unlike any Disney icon[ix] because he is not a conventional animal (be that mouse, duck or dog). Rather, he is "an animated representation of precisely nothing we know in our physical world" (Kelts 2007, p. 17) – the very definition of yokai -"unnatural", "out of the ordinary" (Foster 2008) and *igyo no mono* ("nonnormal things"). The closest equivalent, Kelts notes, would be the "animated inscrutability" of the Belgian-born *Smurfs* by Peyo (Kelts 2007, p. 17). But the major different between Pikachu and the *Smurfs* is that Pikachu is "but one of 395 [now over 700] different species, all of them fictional. Loosed from the gravity of realism, or even a finite fictional world, *Pokémon's* producers have been able to create what is now known as the multibillion dollar *Pokémon* media franchise" (Kelts 2007, p. 17). This is in part true, but the Pokémon do retain recognisable elements of mice, deer and even other cartoons to inform their design, making them at once familiar yet strange. *Pokémon* may therefore be better thought as an abstraction of the real world through which we can rethink the world and the organisms that inhabit it; as a seven-year-old-girl from the United States interviewed by Allison puts it: "the creators took ideas from nature, but they turned nature around. People care a lot for their Pokémon, but they also use them to fight other Pokémon" (Allison 2006, p. 205).

These asymmetries in both the design of the Pokémon and their world (strange but familiar, natural but unnatural, cute but violent) are part of their diegetic design (on the individual object level) but also part of the extradiegetic operation of the franchise (the network as a whole). Investment in the world of *Pokémon* requires significant amounts of money (for the games, the cards the toys). Similarly *Pokémon* operates as a global franchise, but remains informed by a very Japanese sensibility. It therefore operates as a network between the very Japanese imaginary and the consumerist mainstream.

For example, the continuous expansion of the world and its Pokémon is a fundamental part of the *Pokémon* model. As Tsunekazu Ishihara, president of Pokémon Co, describes it (to *Nikkei Shimbun* in April 2006) "the basic concept of *Pokémon* games has remain unchanged since the first release in 1996. But we have always strived to add new characters and upgrade games so that *Pokémon* fans will never feel they are approaching an end. That is the reason for the prolonged popularity" (qtd Kelts 2007, p. 17). Through this endless introduction of new locations, new species and new challenges, *Pokémon* offers what Buckingham and Sefton-Green term "a kind of economy of scale: the more there is, the more unavoidable it becomes, and so the more one seems obliged or compelled to pursue it" (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, p. 385). *Pokémon* therefore remains asymmetrical in its expansion.

More importantly, the "hyperbolically cute" (Hertz 1999) Pokémon rewrites some of the elements of yokai culture as kawaii culture, the "loveable", "adorable" or "cute" culture that has become a recurrent feature of Japanese popular culture since the 1970s[x]. Kawaii culture began as an underground literary trend in youth culture,

incorporating *burikko ji* (fake child writing) and *koneko ji* (kitten writing) that was then commodified by Sanrio, most notably in *Hello Kitty* (Kinsella 1995), and proliferated so that each Japanese prefecture and company today now has its own *yuru-kyara* ("funny mascots"), that "take part in cuteness competitions observed by expert judges" (Windolf 2009, pp. 124-125).

Ethnologist Konrad Lorenz suggested back in the 1940s that "infantile characteristics – big head, big eyes, the very round face – stimulate caretaking behaviour" (Windolf 2009, p.119). But *kawaii* here refers not just to design aesthetics (like a large head, stunted appendages, large eyes, small or no mouth, no nose and a disproportionately small body, see Allison 2003 or Kinsella 1995) but also to emotional qualities of *amae* (sweetness) and *yasashii* (gentleness). These are aesthetics and qualities that recur in most (if not all) Pokémon – and ones we can certainly identify in characters like Pikachu and Jigglypuff or Celebi and Shaymin. As Okada Tsueno notes, cuteness therefore registers for all people (Allison 2003); it becomes an important way of making Pokémon palatable as objects in these networks, both in terms of their economics and the ideas they present in part because they evoke a nostalgia for a more childlike and simple way of being. Cuteness therefore simultaneously becomes "something one both buys to consume and also cultivates in and as part of the self" (Allison 2003, p. 385); in this way cuteness is "not only a commodity but also equated with consumption itself" (Allison 2003, p. 387) reinforced by the possessive consumption of Pokémon's narrative – that first narrative story engine - "gotta catch 'em all".

As being cute also equates to puerility, an exhibition of kawaii culture is also an exhibition of a "yearning to be comforted and soothed" (Allison 2003: 387). This makes kawaii impliedly redemptive. By way of example, evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould noted the metamorphisis of Mickey Mouse in a 1979 *Natural History* article from "cackling rodent… to the high-voiced, plump-headed figure of the 1950s… as the Walt Disney Company grew more powerful and profitable, its public face grew cuter" (qtd Windolf 2009, p. 119). Cute culture can therefore serve as a kind of apologia for success. But more fundamentally Jim Windolf suggests that "social misery and cuteness are linked… A cuteness craze got started [in Japan]… in the defeated nation's bleak postwar culture of the 1940s and 1950s" (Windolf 2009, p. 122). Quoting Roland Kelts, Windolf goes on to argue that:

> "one theory, which has been proposed by a lot of Japanese artists and academics, is that, after the humiliation and emasculation of Japan in the postwar years, Japan developed this quasi-queer position of 'little brother' or 'little boy'. If you become'little brother' or 'little boy', the only way you can get big brother's or fat man's attention is by being so cute or puppy-like that he has to take care of you… [a desire to] show the face of dependency" (Windolf 2009, p. 124).

To make the point clearer, Windolf points to the way America came up "with cute products and images to express its own sense of need in the wake of the hard times and lousy decisions of the go-it-alone Bush administration" (Windolf 2009, p. 124). I have previously suggested that in the present context, the *kawaii* aspects of *Pokemon* can be read as an apology for the environmental injustices and oversights in relation to biodiversity that have occurred in the past (Bainbridge 2013), where the cute face

of Jigglypuff can be read as indicative of a larger strategy behind *Pokémon*, to talk through often quite complex issues of environmentalism, biodiversity and control.

In a sense then, the yokai-like taxonomy of *Pokémon* identified by Foster is also an adaptation of E.O. Wilson's *Biophilia* hypothesis that "humans have an innate desire to catalog, understand, and spend time with other life-forms. This in turn provides a powerful aesthetic argument for combating the present extinction crisis" (Balmford 2002, p. 2367). Just as the narrative of *Pokemon* interrogates the balance between development and conservation (the very essence of sustainable development) so too does the *Pokemon* model articulate the very concerns to which Andrew Balmford refers, the notion that "as industrialization and urbanization reduce our direct interactions with nature, our interest in the variety of living things is perhaps becoming redirected towards human artifacts, with potentially grave consequences for biodiversity conservation" (Balmford 2002, p. 2367).

Patten suggests that in this way "*Pokémon* uses the mania to be 'in' with the latest electronic games to steer children towards a deeper relationship with animals and nature, as well as an appreciation for the responsibility of caring for pets and the importance of ecological awareness" (Patten 2004, p. 337). Here again, the network taps into the mainstream ("to be 'in'") while maintaining a connection to Japanese imaginings and concerns. Given the enormous investment that fans place in the franchise - economically, temporally and emotionally and more generally the "activity" (outlined above) that accompanies *Pokémon* consumption and engagement (Buckingham & Sefton-Green 2003, pp. 396-7) it is possible to view the users of *Pokémon* as, in Henry Jenkins' terms, a "learning community" (Jenkins 1992). *Pokémon* therefore becomes a way of theorising to children about environmental concerns through a multiplatform media franchise. More importantly, as this is a networked assemblage, the *Pokémon* franchise creates in them an embodied practice, for *Pokémon* offers a:

> "systematising of nature [that] carries this image of accumulation to a totalized extreme and at the same time models the extractive, transformative nature of industrial capitalism and ordering mechanisms that were beginning to shape urban mass society" (Pratt 1992, p. 36).

I would therefore argue that an important aspect of this *Pokémon* network is that it uses its media power to provide a virtual model for the environment that systematically celebrates, critiques and comments upon environmentalism, biodiversity, materialism and consumer culture (Bainbridge 2013).

Conclusion

The importance of the cultural imaginary was something that Oscar Wilde recognised over a century earlier when he stated that: "The whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people" and supported by Roland Kelts when he used Wilde's epigraph to open his book on *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture has invaded the U.S.* in 2007 (Kelts 2007, p. vii). Most significantly popular representation was recognised by the Japanese government itself a year before, when Japan's foreign minister Taro Aso unveiled his government's new campaign to actively promote their pop culture abroad through Japan's global

embassies (Kelts 2007, p. 113), finally embracing Japan's "Gross National Cool", first suggested by American journalist Douglas McGray in his influential 2002 *Foreign Affairs* article.

In this way, Japan has turned away from manufacturing trades to cultural products – and because these products *are* cultural products they function not only as "soft power" (as Joseph S. Nye would suggest) but also as networks; for millions of children the world over, the world of *Pokémon* is Japan-as-metaphor, simultaneously as real and unreal as Oscar Wilde first suggested. As Allison describes it, "identity has become shifting and mobile in/for Japan, tied less to the geographic boundaries of place (and the customs and bloodlines attached to it) than to the production and circulation of virtual landscapes" (Allison 2006, p. 196). *Pokémon* therefore serves as the ultimate symbol of "Japan-as-metaphor" for "folded into a tale about imaginary beings… is an ideological one about Japan's place in the world, tallied on the basis of a science devoted to playthings: a commentary on Japan's rise to global prominence as producer of ("evolved") kids' goods" (Allison 2006, p. 208). Even more specifically, just as Linnaeus' *System of Nature* (1735) provided a taxonomic grid through which "Europeans could apprehend more of the planet as a whole" (Allison 2006, p. 212), what Pratt termed a "planetary consciousness" (1992, pp. 15-37) in its reflection on the environment, both textually and in the taxonomic model that it offers, *Pokémon* similarly provides its networked audience with a set of discursive tools to both reflect on and challenge prevailing notions of the environment, biodiversity, materialism and consumption (Bainbridge 2013).

Understanding the franchise as an object network of cultural practice enables analysis of the textual nuances of *Pokémon* and the way it uses its media power to articulate competing ideas of consumerism, nature, the popular imaginary and the national concerns of Japan. Crucially my goal here was to map the functioning of the multiplatform *Pokémon* franchise through textual analysis of several elements: to provide an affective and performative resonance of its constituent parts and the way they function as vehicles of cultural expression, interaction and media power. If a modern understanding of such media franchises assumes a well-defined distinction between individuals and institutions and their concomitant degrees of agency, the somewhat pre-modern approach of network theory allows recognition and critique of the hybridized objects that are becoming increasingly characteristic of popular media cultures in contemporary society.

As "a vehicle of and for the national imagination transmitted through a currency of superpowers and lovable characters" (Allison 2006 194), the *Pokémon* franchise operates as a complex network of objects - "lovable characters" - connecting very specifically Japanese ideas of the "national imagination" (folklore, spiritualism, the supernatural) and environmental concerns (biodiversity, the struggle between conservation and containment) to the mainstream through a larger consumerist framework of acquisition and play structured as cultural practice. In this way the *Pokémon* object network functions as a gateway into Japanese culture more broadly and a channel through which Japanese culture is itself mainstreamed internationally.

Endnotes

[i] As Kelts notes, this can also become a problem. See Kelts 2007, pp. 106-108.
[ii] Misty subsequently appeared in the spin-off anime series *Pokemon Chronicles* on Japan's "Pokémon Sunday". Dawn was based on the female protagonist of the *Pokémon Diamond, Pearl* and *Platinum* games.
[iii] Kelts suggests "[t]he first wave occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when European artists discovered a uniquely Japanese aesthetic, and the second in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when beatnik writers and poets were drawn to Japan's acetic spiritual traditions" (Kelts 2007, p. 5).
[iv] The original article quoting Lazzo appeared in *USA Today* December 19, 1997, p D1.
[v] Kelts provides a detailed list of these aesthetics and themes, some of which again seem debateable given the prevalence and popularity of anime earlier, like *Speed Racer*, *Kimba* and *Astroboy* but the list includes "the hairstyles, the big eyes, the stop frames, the complete visual transformation of facial expressions during emotional and dramatic peaks, and the attentiveness to minute details… the acceptability of the illogical and the ambiguous, the hero's sense of duty above all else, the concepts of child as hero and of unending quest, the undependability of a happy ending, and the fact that no individual episode ever satisfactorily ties up the various and addictive narrative threads" (Kelts 2007, pp. 90-91).
[vi] In the games, players add Pokémon to their Pokédex when they are caught. In the manga and anime the Pokédex is a form of exposition describing Pokémon statistics before they are caught.
[vii] From Linnaeus's *System of Nature* (1735).
[viii] Bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net notes that since *Pokémon Heroes* (the fifth film, released in the US in 2003) animators for the films have based them on a real-world location outside Japan.
[ix] With the possible exception of the alien Stitch, from *Lilo and Stitch*, himself so popular in Japan he has a Japanese-specific female equivalent. Interestingly, another popular Disney character in Japan is the white kitten Marie from *The Aristocrats*, one assumes, because of her stylistic similarity to *Hello Kitty*.
[x] For more on this idea see Nakazawa Shin'ichi whose book *Poketto no naka no yasei* (Wildness in the Pocket, 1997) is cited by Allison as suggesting "pocket monsters anchor this space as entities that hover between the known and unknown, visible and invisible, real and fantastic… these beings exceed phenomenal existence and fill in, imaginatively for its lapses and lacks (Allison 223; Nakazawa 1997:90)

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