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Article

‘It is a Pokémon world’: The *Pokémon* franchise and the environment

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Abstract

Originating in 1996, *Pokémon* has become the second most successful game-based franchise in the world and arguably one of the best-known examples of transmedia storytelling in youth media today. Based around creator Satoshi Tajiri’s love of insect collecting, *Pokémon* imagines a world where wild creatures exist to be collected, trained and battle with one another. Such an ideology, simultaneously embracing both the conservation and consumption of nature, is emblematic of the larger challenges Japan has had to negotiate as a nation trying to balance economic development and environmental protection. In this way, this article argues that, when subjected to textual analysis, the *Pokémon* franchise can function as *vernacular theory*, interrogating the relationship between environmentalism, materialism and sustainable development, a series of popular youth media texts engaging with issues and subjects that are usually reserved for academia.

Keywords

environmentalism, games, media franchises, *Pokémon*, sustainable development, toys, youth media

> Our world, their world, it is a Pokémon world. Filled with the most amazing creatures imaginable. They fill the oceans, thrive in the mountains, soar high over the horizons and share the sparkling landscapes of cities. Try and count them if you dare but then try and count the grains of sand on your favourite beach. Mankind and pokémon alike have long journeyed together to experience the thrill and challenge of the pokémon battle, living and learning together, as teammates, sometimes opponents yes, but ever friends. Yet, there are those who blindly take advantage of a pokémon’s trust to further their own selfish, egotistical ambitions in the name of darkness. But, as the pendulum swings both ways there are the Pokémon rangers as well whose job it is to protect pokémon and protect nature, reflecting the balance that is nature. (Narrator, pre-credits sequence to *Pokémon Ranger and the Temple of Sea*, dir. Kunihiko Yuyama, 2006)

Japan has long imagined a world populated by monsters.

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From the *yokai* of Japanese folklore to the increasingly metaphorical *kaiju eija* of the *Godzilla* film series (commencing in 1954), to the long-haired, pale and hungry ghosts of the J-horror cycle (in the 1990s and 2000s), Japanese popular culture teems with monsters of all types and sizes. But in 1996 a different kind of monster appeared, Nintendo's *Poketto Monsuta*, pocket monsters, or as they became known in the western world, pokémon.

Over 17 years there has been a great deal written about *Pokémon*'s business model (what it *does*), including its relation to commercialism (see for example articles in the Tobin, 2004 collection or Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2003), the social production of value (Haiven, 2012) and cultural power (Iwabuchi, 2002). But with the notable exception of authors like Anne Allison (2006), Tim Jordan (2004) or Mark Gibson (2002), there has been relatively little written about the *textuality* of *Pokémon* (what it is *about*), particularly in connection to Japanese conceptions of the environment. This lack of interest in *Pokémon*'s textuality seems to be reflected in Roland Kelts' description of the iconic 'Hello Kitty' when he notes: 'In Japan, Hello Kitty sells everything from pork dumplings to coach tours. But she has no story, and even if she did, she has no mouth through which to tell it' (Kelts, 2007: 106). Those famous 17 lines that make up Kitty also make her 'an icon that doesn't stand for anything at all … [she] never has been, and never will be, anything. She's pure license' (Tom Sachs quoted in Anderson, 2001: 121).[1] Like Hello Kitty, some gaming, anime and manga characters can be seen purely as licences, solely aimed at selling products. But I would argue that this is not true of Pikachu and his pokémon brethren. For close to 20 years, *Pokémon* intertexts have produced transmedia storytelling that informs and reflects upon larger issues of environmentalism, biodiversity and materialism. For reasons of space, this article will concentrate its textual analysis on a few of the 13 *Pokémon* theatrical releases. It will briefly outline the environmental context of Japan and consider how the textual origins, narrative style and storytelling model of *Pokémon* articulate Japan's often-difficult relationship with its environment.

The environmental context of Japan

Globally, 1969 is a significant date in regard to the 'circumstances surrounding the emergence of public discourses of the environment in places such as Europe and North America' (Adam, 2000: 3) – and Japan. As Adam notes, it was during 1969 that the public saw, for the first time, images of the planet Earth, relayed from the surface of the moon. This iconic image of the Earth, as a blue marble hanging in space, inspired an ideological shift in the public's perception of their world. From this perspective, the Earth appeared complete and fragile in the vastness of space, leading to what Adam describes as a fundamental 'recast[ing of] the environmental perceptions of what was for a fleeting instant a near-global citizenry … these images evidently contributed to what may be appropriately described as an "epistemological break" at the level of media representation' (Adam et al., 2000: 3). It is an image echoed in the opening of at least four of the *Pokémon* feature films, overlaid with images of all of the pokémon species identified at the time of production (*Pokémon Ranger and the Temple of the Sea*) or as a globe

itself encased in a pokéball (*Pokémon: Giratina and the Sky Warrior*, dir. Kunihiko Yuyama, 2008).

Immediately after this image of the Earth first appeared, *Time* magazine created an 'Environmental' section (Adam, 2000: 3) and, as Hansen (1991: 443) notes, the 'considerable ups and downs' that have marked public interest in the environment over the past 20–30 years largely coincide with media coverage, which in turn responds to dramatic environmental conflicts highlighted by periodic natural and man-made disasters. Environmental policies enacted throughout this period have often had to navigate the balance between economic development and environmental protection – what has latterly become known as *sustainable development* [2] – and none more so than the environmental policies of Japan, which have been dealing with the environmental pollution wrought by industrialization since the Meiji period.

The year 1969 was a similarly important one for Japan, as it marked the foundation of the Consumers Union of Japan, focusing primarily on environmental concerns around health and food contamination, false claims by companies and, throughout the 1970s, campaigning against nuclear power. Environmental policies continued to be tightened throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s (though some see this as a period of 'stagnation', see Sumikura, 1998), culminating in the legislation of the Basic Environment Law in 1993 and the promotion of the Environmental Agency to the Ministry of the Environment in 2001. But while Japan has significantly improved air quality, it still suffers in a range of areas – most importantly for this article in the area of biodiversity.

Writing on the-then Environment Agency in 1998, Ichiro Sumikura noted that, unlike pollution control, the agency had no direct enforcement powers as regards nature conservation (Sumikura, 1998: 245). This itself is an indication that conservation and allied concerns around biodiversity were not taken as seriously as pollution reduction and waste management, confirmed by Mike Danaher's (1998: 102) non-exhaustive list of Japan's poor record of wildlife protection in the 1990s. Some of these concerns have been addressed through Japan's National Biodiversity Strategy of 2010, with Japan (as the host nation for the Nagoya Biodiversity summit in October 2010) making 2010–2019 the International Decade of Biodiversity (Hance, 2010).

But the environmental context of the 1990s, when *Pokémon* began, was quite different. 'Sustainable development' had become a political term since its prominent use at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and biodiversity was a core part of the concept. Writing on these areas in 1998, Danaher noted that 'the challenge for Japan is to recognize the social, political and economic value of protecting biodiversity … then it might be possible for them to achieve ecologically sustainable development as an integral part of public policy making' (1998: 101). A 1988 United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) survey previously found that Japan had the lowest level of concern for and awareness of environmental issues among policy-makers and the lowest percentage of people believing they should contribute time and money to environmental organizations (Brazil, 1992). Furthermore, as Barrett and Therivel (1991) note, Japan's environmental problems remained, most often, a result of their economic growth. Danaher's own survey found a disjunction between the environmental concerns of the public and the apparent lack of environmental concern by the government (Danaher, 1998). *Pokémon* first appeared in 1996 and it is the argument of this article that, throughout its permutations

and up to the current day, this 'popular imagining' has reflected and commented upon the ways in which the Japanese people have conceptualized the relationship between their economy and their environment and translated these ideas to a much broader, global audience.

The textual origins of *Pokémon*

Pokémon itself is 'a Japanese juvenile slang abbreviation of *Pocket Monsters*, adopted in America as the official title' (Patten, 2004: 336).[3] Its relation to nature is evident in its beginnings in 1996 as a software game for Nintendo's Game Boy, based as it was around creator Satoshi Tajiri's love of insect collecting. Tajiri imagined an entire (non-localized) world where wild creatures existed to be collected, trained and battle one another.[4] When Tajiri came across a Game Boy for the first time in 1991 and saw that two Game Boys could be linked with a cable (a *tsushin keburu* or Game link) he 'imagined an insect moving back and forth across the cable.… My idea was for information to go back and forth, to be shared.' He therefore envisioned a game based upon trading and evolving creatures into new and better beings,[5] involving not just battles but bartering. Indeed, despite the 'gotta catch 'em all' slogan a number of pokémon can still only be caught or evolve through exchanges (trading); interactivity therefore became a major part of the game design.

This insect aesthetic exists at the heart of Japanese popular culture, in part because anime and manga pioneers, like Tajiri, Osamu Tezuka and Hayao Miyazaki, growing up in the 1960s, also collected insects. Kelts provides a virtual shopping list of insect-inspired design as evidence including:

> Ultraman's praying-mantis eyes, the beetlelike space ships in *Battle of the Planets*, and just about any Japanese sci-fi robot or monster, which often featured enlarged insect appendages that appear to have been magnified – or irradiated. (2007: 41)

Potent examples would include the movie monster Mothra (a giant caterpillar that becomes a giant butterfly/moth) and Mushi King, a *Pokémon*-like franchise where insects are traded and battled via barcoded trading cards, read by a computer, that list biology, habitat and duelling skills (the first two in extreme entomological detail). The insect aesthetic displays a yearning for a time when the environment had not yet been overtaken by industrialization. According to Allison, it reflected Tajiri's desire to translate his childhood 'interactions with both nature (exploration, adventure, observation, gathering) and society (exchanges and information-sharing with other kids) … [through] virtuality: digitally constructed worlds, activities, and monsters' (2006: 201). Gibson takes it further arguing that 'in the hyper-consumerist world of cartoons and animation, Tajiri rediscovered a space for the animist sensibility of his youth' (Gibson, 2002: 113). In this way, both Allison and Gibson point to the tension implicit in the franchise from the beginning, between a yearning for nature and a desire to contain it.

Following six years of development *Pokémon* was released in 1996, reviving Game Boy technology in the process. Much like *Record of Lodoss War, Street Fighter* and *Final Fantasy, Pokémon*'s success as a game generated its own manga (in summer 1996 in

Korokoro Komikku) and a weekly TV cartoon (in April 1997, produced by Shogakukan Production Co. Ltd and Terebi Tokyo) (Patten, 2004: 123). The franchise was a form of youth media, aimed at younger children (aged 7 to 14) who were not being targeted by Nintendo's rival, Sony (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2003: 381). *Kawaii* (cute) pokémon appealed to girls while *tsuyoi* (strong) pokémon appealed to boys (see Allison, 2006: 205 for more on this). As Patten suggests, *Pokémon's* 'most visible and popular incarnation [now] is as a TV cartoon series' (2004: 135) that also forms the basis for the films considered within this article. In between, the ubiquitous *Pokémon* trading cards appeared (from Media Factory) along with merchandise by Tomy (in spring 1997). *Pokémon*'s status as a 'social phenomenon' (Yamato, 1998: 247) was subsequently confirmed when All Nippon Airways launched a number of pokémon-decorated air carriers (Allison, 2006: 199) and Pikachu appeared as a balloon in New York's famous Macy's Day Parade.

The narrative style of *Pokémon*

As noted above, the most prominent and familiar aspects of *Pokémon*'s narrative come from the Pokémon anime, revolving around a 10-year-old boy, Ash Ketchum (loosely modelled on the character Red from the games). His first name, 'Ash' reflects an ongoing interest in nature (repeated in the names of the pokémon professors, Samuel Oak, Felina Ivy, Elm and Birch); in Japan he is called Satoshi, named after *Pokémon*'s own creator, Satoshi Tajiri. In the English dub his surname, Ketcham has the franchise's first slogan, 'catch 'em all' built into it. He is intended to be a surrogate figure for the *Pokémon* consumer, largely without much in the way of motivation or development, though Allison argues for 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")' (2006: 196).

Ash is accompanied by his friends (11-year-old) Misty (Kasumi in Japan, later replaced by May and then Dawn)[6] and (15-year-old) Brody (Takeshi in Japan), together with Ash's primary pokémon (and mascot of the franchise), the 'electric mouse' (Patten, 2004: 337) Pikachu, who stores electricity in its cheeks and releases it when attacking. 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 Bond villain Blofeld) remains largely offscreen and unseen, stroking his large feline pokémon, Persian. All children in this world compete to capture and tame wild pokémon in pokéballs; the pokémon is then under the control of their masters to wage non-lethal battles against other pokémon in what Allison (2006: 195) terms a 'bond' that 'is a mixture of service and friendship'. 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' (2004: 337). This is the major (some might say only) 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 *Pokémon 3 – The Movie*, dir. Kunihiko Yuyama and Michael

Haigney, 2000) and linked to the historical hero Aaron (he has the same aura or 'soul' in the eighth film).

Allison notes that the 'organising trope' for this narrative is 'travel … the junior pokémon trainers are constantly in motion' (2006: 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 fans (e.g. *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.

This is the concept of *getto suru* ('getting'), becoming 'gotta catch 'em all' in the US translation (Allison, 2006: 197), informed by a strong ideology of capitalism – where pokémon are 'both thingified (valued economically) and personalised (cute monsters inspiring affection, attachment, and love)' (2006: 197). This is what Allison calls '(only half facetiously) Pokémon capitalism … in which commodities double as gifts and companions' (2006: 197). It is even easier to think of them as objects given the fact they lack both gender (almost all pokémon are referred to as 'it') and speech (almost all pokémon simply repeat aspects of their name, understandable to other pokémon but only rarely to humans; 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 Japanes *gashopon* balls that can be bought in machines, usually containing some small toy or mass-produced 'collectible'; indeed, as *Pokémon: Arceus and the Jewel of Life* (dir. Kunihiko Yuyama, 2009) 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.

This decision to focus on the *Pokémon* anime and, more particularly, the *Pokémon* films (films in the sense that they are all theatrical releases in Japan in July of each year)[7] is first and foremost informed by space and time: the multiple texts that make up the *Pokémon* franchise are too many for one article. Furthermore, the anime series follows a relatively predictable format, as noted by Allison, 'touched by the altruism of humans, pokémon leave their "own kind" behind to join the human mission – a worldly journey to discover and pocket more monsters' (2006: 230). The films, on the other hand, typically deal with (comparatively) more complex topics around ethics and, more overtly, the environment. They form a critical (sometimes self-critical) space in the franchise though they too follow a pattern, of Ash and company interacting with a legendary pokémon (a pokémon marked out by its uniqueness and considerable powers, closely linked to the *yokai* tradition – see further below) that someone else seeks to exploit. Of the 649 pokémon species identified at the time of writing, 37 are legendary and the pokémon become increasingly legendary as both the game and film series progress, from ancient ancestors (like Mew), to personifications of the elements (like Zapdos, Articuno and Moltres), to 'deities' of time and space (Dialga and Palkia respectively), to the very creator of the universe – or pokémon-as-God if you will – Arceus.[8]

More importantly, as Jordan (2004: 474) notes, it is in the films (and to a lesser extent the anime series, particularly in the initial Charizard storyline) that we see a deepening

of the 'mastery and acquisition' theme that is so prominent in the card and videogame elements of the *Pokémon* franchise. Here, in the anime and filmic narratives, '[r]elations between trainers and Pokémon are more complex than possession and dominance' focusing instead upon the 'integration of mastery and care' (Jordan, 2004: 474). So while this article would be reluctant to argue for the *Pokémon* franchise as one single unequivocal system of meaning,[9] I would follow Jordan's reading that the anime elements (and most importantly the films) do provide a wider narrative context for the franchise as a whole, where 'what present themselves as relations of mastery and possession turn out to be relations of respect and mutual care' (Jordan, 2004: 478), not just between the trainers and their pokémon, but also between the trainers and the larger environment these pokémon represent.

Pokémon: The First Movie (dir. Kunihiko Yuyama and Michael Haigney) was released in Japan in the summer of 1997. Released in the US in 1998 (and subtitled *Mewtwo Strikes Back*), the film 'set new records for a November theatrical release, earning over $50 m in its first five days' (Patten, 2004: 336). More importantly for this article, it also points to how self-critical the films can be. Mewtwo, a psychic-type pokémon cloned from the legendary pokémon Mew sets out to build a new world for itself and its cloned pokémon,[10] questioning the basic ideologies informing the franchise – ownership and control. Most powerfully, in a franchise that had previously been accused of racism (the Jynx character was seen as being based on African-American stereotypes and therefore recoloured from brown to purple, and later banned altogether from US broadcasts), Metwo accuses its fellow pokémon of being slaves and the pokémon trainers of being slave traders, as in the following exchange:

Mewtwo: You humans are a dangerous species. You brought me into your world with no purpose but to be your slave. But now I have my own purpose. My storm will create my own world by destroying yours.
Brock: So you hate all humans. And you're going to destroy us to save pokémon.
Mewtwo: No. Your pokémon will not be spared. They have disgraced themselves by serving humans. Those pokémon are nothing but slaves.

Pikachu, as the franchise's mascot, also defends the franchise's ideologies, objecting that it is not Ash's 'slave' but rather his 'friend'. Mewtwo responds by blasting Pikachu with psychic power and turning its cloned pokémon on the real pokémon in a battle royale. Mew also reveals itself and engages Mewtwo in conflict.

It is during this conflict that the hypocrisy of the *Pokémon* world is revealed. Effectively sidelined during this battle, Brock, Misty and their fellow trainers object to what is happening around them, as in the following exchange:

Trainer: Pokémon aren't meant to fight. It's useless. Not like this. What can come out of it?
Trainer 2: Nothing but pain.
Brock: Why can't you two understand? [referring to Mew and Mewtwo] It's not right to force pokémon to battle this way.
Misty: They're all living creatures. This just proves that fighting is wrong.

Even Team Rocket's ethically compromised James says: 'Now I can see how wrong fighting really is.' The trainers therefore defend their right to train and set pokémon to fight as being somehow better than this because it is for a *purpose*. This idea of 'purpose' is reinforced by *The Official Pokémon Handbook*, which notes that battles occur for sport, to collect new pokémon, to sharpen a trainer's skills, to evolve a pokémon and because pokémon enjoy it as they 'like to play' (Barbo, 1999: 14). Rogue battles like this one engendered by Mewtwo are therefore 'outside the rules' and an unforgiveable use of resources (the pokémon) in the eyes of the trainers. A similar example occurs in the second film where a pokémon collector, Lawrence III, throws the environment into chaos when he captures three legendary pokémon:

Lawrence: Moltres the bird of fire and Zapdos the bird of lightning. Of course, without Articuno it's not a complete set but –

Misty: That's disgusting. The way you talk it's like Pokémon are just things to collect like dolls or stamps. What type of trainer are you?

Lawrence: I'm afraid I'm not a trainer young lady. I am merely … a collector. I began my collection with a Mew card and now I have all this. Legendary Pokémon have always been my passion. And soon my collection itself will be legendary.

Once again then, the trainers' rationale for catching, breeding and getting pokémon to fight each other is held out as something more special and desirable than merely collecting. It is ethical acquisition for a purpose, consumption and containment with the goal of producing something at the end of it, a sustainable use of resources in the sense that they are fulfilling a role in the biology of the pokémon, assisting them to evolve (by providing them with battles).

The questions raised during the Mewtwo battle are neatly sidestepped when Ash is injured protecting Pikachu, prompting Mewtwo to not only end its campaign but make everyone there assembled forget what happened; one assumes the ethical questions Mewtwo raises and the trainer's own hypocrisy is similarly forgotten, allowing Ash and his teammates to go back to their weekly anime adventures. But Mewtwo's parting remarks do raise two further tropes that will be explored in the subsequent films – namely, symbiosis and balance:

Mewtwo: The human sacrificed himself to save the pokémon. I pitted them against each other. But not until they set aside their differences did I see the true power they all share deep inside. I see now that the circumstances of one's birth are irrelevant, it is what you do with the gift of life that determines who you are.

This idea of a *symbiosis* between humans and pokémon and pokémon and the environment, is made clearer in the second film *Pokémon: The Movie 2000* (subtitled *The Power of One*, dir. Kunihiko Yyama and Michael Haigney, 1999). Here the harmony of the three birds Moltres (titan of fire), Zapdos (titan of lightning) and Articuno (titan of ice) is disturbed when Lawrence III kidnaps them.[11] This idea of 'harmony' (a kind of

sustainable development) becomes ever more important. Professor Oak, the scientist, notes: 'Pokémon are more in tune with nature than we are. When something goes wrong they can sense it', and actively links the pokémon to the natural world when he refers to ancient writings on the area:

> disputed by scientists for centuries but it does make some poetic sense when you consider what forms when combining fire and ice.… Imagine if an imbalance of power occurred between lightning, ice and fire.… Here's potentially how the underwater current has formed …

This idea of a natural connection is also reinforced by a reporter who notes that:

> The pokémon seem to be gathering because they feel a sense of impending doom. Pokémon are acutely in tune with the balance of nature. The urge to correct this imbalance is causing them to gather, possibly to try to save the planet though they may be unable to do anything about it.

Of course, it ultimately falls to Ash, as the 'chosen one', with Lugia (a legendary water pokémon) to restore the balance, once again confirming that pokémon and humans need to work together. This is echoed in later films, as where the narrator refers to Ash, his friends and their pokémon as 'a microcosm of the vast world of pokémon and people together' (in *Pokémon Ranger and the Temple of the Sea*); the garden and space-time towers at Alamos Town, the design theme of which is 'the harmony between humans and pokémon' as 'a beacon of hope for the happiness of people and Pokémon' (Brock and Alice respectively, in *Pokémon: The Rise of Darkrai*, dir. Kunihiko Yuyama, 2007) and the restoration of the land of Michina which is a result of 'your ancestors dedicat[ing] their entire lives to cultivating and restoring this land. This place was brought back to life by the efforts of people and Pokémon alike' (Arceus, in *Arceus and the Jewel of Life*).

The idea of achieving balance, of sustainable development, becomes more pronounced as the films move on. The pokémon come to more directly personify aspects of the environment – Suicune personifies the North Wind, Celebi is the spirit of the forest, Shaymin the gratitude pokémon 'breathes in polluted air it purifies it in its body separating it into light and water and then expelling it' (Nurse Joy, in *Giratina and the Sky Warrior*) – and the villains act more and more as ecoterrorists.[12] By way of example, in *Pokémon 4ever* (dir. Kunihiko Yuyama, 2002) Team Rocket operative, the Iron Masked Marauder, captures and corrupts Celebi with a Darkball, 'forcing the spirit of the forest to destroy the forest', creating a 'big twig monster' that devastates the countryside. The 'unnaturalness' of these villains is underscored by the fact that digital animation (in contrast to the hand-drawn animation of the pokémon) is used to animate their machinery – the flying machine of the pokémon collector Lawrence III, the twisted nature golem of the Iron Masked Marauder, the submarine of the Phantom (*Pokémon Ranger and the Temple of the Sea*) and the flying machine of Zero (*Giratina and the Sky Warrior*).[13] Correcting an imbalance, in the sea, on the land and (ultimately) following the collision of time and space, becomes the obstacle to be overcome in each film .

Similarly ideas of symbiosis become more pronounced. The climax of *Pokémon: Lucario and the Mystery of Mew* (dir. Kunihiko Yuyama, 2005) depends on the fact that legendary pokémon Mew shares a symbiotic relationship with the Tree of Beginning for

'if the Tree doesn't survive this crisis, neither will Mew'. The Tree has antibodies that defend against humans (it views them as 'infections') whereas 'Pokémon are not considered dangerous'; it once again falls upon Ash to prove that humans appreciate the need for ecological balance. He helps save Mew and all of the trainers (and Team Rocket) are released. When Ash asks why, Meowth replies: 'Mew had a chat with that old Tree. Told it you wasn't nasty germs after all' (sic). The point is clear, humans are accepted as part of the ecosystem – and only together can humans and pokémon achieve balance; both are important to the sustenance of the planet.

In this way, across the years, the *Pokémon* world comes to resemble the world of Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (commencing in 1995); whereas each human has a daemon in the latter, each human appears to have (at least) one pokémon in the former and each completes the other. As in Shinto, humans are only part of nature (the pokémon are the other part) so for Nagao Takeshi, pokémon become both tools (helping a 'trainer' become 'a champion') and companions or spirit guides (1998: 132,134).

For Allison, always present in *Pokémon* is the ability for 'nature to collapse into capital (wildness in acquisition) and capital into culture (a relation of things into interpersonal relations)' (2006: 230). This is particularly evident in the *Pokémon* merchandise – the Pocket Monsters version of *Monopoly* where pokémon are bought and sold like properties; the cards, which are ranked by price according to scarcity and, quite literally, 'collapse into capital' when sold in the playground or online. But the films always pull back before this collapse, restoring a sense of harmony, between human and pokémon, and restoring balance to the world. Echoing Jordan (2004), Kubo Masakazu claims that the foundation of the *Pokémon* franchise was a 'harmony' built on the characters (pokémon and humans) and a general sense of 'cuteness' or 'gentelness' (quoted in Allison, 2006: 225). So too do the films preach harmony, between human and animal and between humans and nature, offering up different ways of navigating, negotiating and handling issues of biodiversity, environmental protection, exploitation and containment within the competing demands of commercialism and environmentalism.

Pokémon and the environment

Aside from the textual examples cited earlier, *Pokémon*'s relationship to environmentalism was perhaps first confirmed with the 1999 launch of *Pokémon Island* 'a synthetic, self-contained tourist environment … the setting for Nintendo's best-selling Pokémon Snap game' (Hertz, 1999), made for the Nintendo 64. Here, players acted as photographers for Professor Oak, taking photos of 'wild' pokémon roaming 'free' in their 'natural' habitat; catching the pokémon is not permitted (to preserve pokémon biodiversity) and instead the object of the game becomes 'to document a virtual environment … [gamers] accumulate images … [rated by Professor Oak] for content and composition' (Hertz 1999). In this way children learn that rare species are often captured on *film* to preserve them (rather than in a pokéball). As Hertz notes: 'what's really provocative is its near-perfect simulation of the modern tourist experience. Pokémon Snap is media filtered through media' (1999: n.p.). In this way, the abstracted strangeness of the pokémon again reminds us of our relationship to real organisms. And the unreality of *Pokémon* is part of its strength, as Hertz goes on to say:

> It's true that the environment is a simulation of nature. But the San Diego Wild Animal Park is also a simulation of nature. Nintendo's creatures are marketing mascots. But so are lions and tigers. Like *Pokémon*, lions and tigers belong to institutions that make money because people want to see charismatic fauna. The difference, from a business standpoint, is that no one owns the idea of a zebra, whereas *Pokémon* are the intellectual property of Nintendo.… It's [also] true that the only way for a child to experience *Pokémon Island's* wild animals is through media. But for most children, that's the case for African highland gorillas as well. Practically speaking, gorillas are a media experience, no less than the jigglypuffs and charmanders and metapods that populate *Pokémon Island*. As a kid, you experience gorillas when your mom [sic] buys a National Geographic special at Blockbuster. (1999: n.p.)

Pokémon thereby encourages reflection on the ways in which we represent, engage and contain nature. It offers ways of interacting with the natural world, not always uncritically, as demonstrated in the earlier examples from the *Pokémon* films. In the best tradition of vernacular theory, *Pokémon* therefore becomes a kind of theoretical petrie dish for testing and exploring ways of interacting with the environment and negotiating those interactions with the real, the representational, the material and the contingent.

Another manifestation of this has been the development of the Phylomon project (commencing 2009) to promote knowledge of biodiversity. The project came into existence following a letter Andrew Balmford wrote to the academic journal *Science* in 2002 (Balmford, 2002: 2367). Balmford was lead author of a study of children as young as 8 that found children had an incredible capacity to identify and characteriza upwards of 120 pokémon, but when the same rubric was applied to real-life flora and fauna they failed to recognize less than half. Balmford writes:

> Our findings carry two messages for conservationists. First, young children clearly have tremendous capacity for learning about creatures (whether natural or man-made), being able at age 8 to identify nearly 80% of a sample drawn from 150 synthetic 'species'. Second, it appears that conservationists are doing less well than the creators of *Pokémon* at inspiring interest in their subjects: during their primary school years, children apparently learn far more about *Pokémon* than about their native wildlife and enter secondary school being able to name less than 50% of common wildlife types. Evidence from elsewhere links loss of knowledge about the natural world to growing isolation from it. People care less about what they know. With the world's urban population rising by 160,000 people daily, conservationists need to re-establish children's links with nature if they are to win over the hearts and minds of the next generation Is Ecomon the way ahead? (Balmford, 2002: 2367)

Here *Pokémon* is essentially articulating the materialism/conservation debate and, more importantly, provides a model for how to address it – the Phylomon project, essentially using the *Pokémon* model but with real biodiversity and ecology informing the content. In a sense the yokai-like taxonomy of *Pokémon*, identified by Foster (2008), 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 is turn provides a powerful aesthetic argument for combating the present extinction crisis' (Balmford, 2002: 2367). Just as the narrative of *Pokémon* interrogates the balance between development and conservation (the very essence of sustainable development) so too does the *Pokémon* model articulate the very concerns to which 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: 2367). Similarly to the examples from Pratt that Allison draws on in her analysis of the phenomenon, *Pokémon* too 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: 36)

Through the exploits of its young protagonist Ash, *Pokémon* provides a virtual model for the environment that systematically celebrates, critiques and comments upon environmentalism, biodiversity, materialism and consumer culture.

Furthermore, the fact that *Pokémon* is a *multiplatform media franchise* rather than just a single cartoon or film means that, following Buckingham and Sefton-Green, it might be more 'appropriately … described, in anthropological terms, as 'cultural practice'. *Pokémon* is something you *do*, not just something you read or watch or "consume"' (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2003: 12). 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: 337)

Given the enormous investment that fans place in the franchise – economically, temporally and emotionally – and, more generally, the 'activity' that accompanies *Pokémon* consumption and engagement (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2003: 396–7), it is possible to view the users of *Pokémon* as a 'learning community' (in Jenkins' [1992] terms).

In this way *Pokémon's* vernacular theories are reinforced in its consumers as embodied practices. Of course, *Pokémon*'s popularity is also a danger for it, in that its intended youth audience may become more besotted with the abstracted representations of nature (the pokémon) than with nature itself. As Hertz (1999: n.p.) notes: 'most kids would be more upset about the disappearance of *Pokémon* than by the disappearance of zebras. Pokémon are part of their lives in a way that zebras are not. *Pokémon Island* is more real to them than Kenya.' But perhaps here we can take some comfort from Walter Benjamin's famous pronouncement referring to art in the age of mechanical reproduction, that in a similar way the popularity and proliferation of synthetic species of pokémon may encourage children to place more emphasis and importance on the original (Benjamin 1968 [1936]).

Conclusion

In September 2001, with Japan facing down political and economic disasters that had been developing throughout the 1990s, *Wired* magazine asked 'Is Japan still the future?' (Anderson, 2001: 117). Their answer was that 'Japan-as-metaphor' *is*, 'the Japan that represents hypermodernism.… Japanese innovation and creativity continues unabated' (2001: 117). It was something that Oscar Wilde recognized 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 was supported by Roland Kelts when he used Wilde's epigraph to open his book on *Japanamerica* (Kelts, 2007: vii). Most significantly, it was recognized by the Japanese government itself in 2006 when Japan's then-Foreign Minister Taro Aso unveiled his government's new campaign to actively promote their pop culture abroad through Japan's global embassies (Kelts, 2007: 113), finally embracing Japan's 'Gross National Cool', as American journalist Douglas McGray had suggested in his influential 2002 *Foreign Affairs* article. Japan has turned from manufacturing trades to cultural products – and because these products *are* cultural products they function not only as 'soft power' (to use Joseph S. Nye's term) but also as vernacular theories.

Pokémon therefore serves as the ultimate symbol of 'Japan-as-metaphor' for as Allison notes:

> 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. (2006: 208)

But even more than this, 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: 212) – what Pratt termed a 'planetary consciousness' (1992: 15–37) – in its reflection upon the environment, both textually and in the taxonomic model that it offers, *Pokémon* similarly provides its audience with a set of discursive tools to both reflect on and challenge prevailing notions of the environment, biodiversity, materialism and consumption.

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Notes

1. By way of example the article notes that there is a 'Hello Kitty vibrator and douche … but not a letter opener. Sanrio, the company that owns the license, draws the line at sharp objects' (Anderson, 2001: 121).
2. For the purposes of this article, sustainable development is defined as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1990: 87).
3. The US based creators of the earlier 'Monster in My Pocket' unsuccessfully sued Pokémon Inc. over trademark infringement; their idea of 'pocket' related to a group of 'classic' monsters (the vampire, the invisible man, the werewolf, etc.) being shrunk to pocket-sized. For the reasons behind pokémon being 'pocket monsters' see below.
4. Satoshi and his staff at Game Freak worked on Pokémon for over six years before it was bought by Nintendo and released in February 1996 (Allison, 2006: 198).
5. See: http://www.crystal-islands.com
6. Misty subsequently appeared in the spin-off anime series *Pokémon Chronicles* on Japan's 'Pokémon Sunday' programming initiative. Dawn was based on the female protagonist of the *Pokémon Diamond, Pearl* and *Platinum* games.

7. Only the first five films were released theatrically in the United States. The remaining films were released direct to video/DVD and, commencing with the ninth movie, *Pokémon Ranger and the Temple of the Sea* (2007) this release has been preceded by an airing on the Cartoon Network. All dates listed herein are American release dates (usually a year after the Japanese release).
8. The films also provide a measure of *Pokémon*'s enormous global popularity: as the second annual Pokémon film, *Pokémon: The Movie 2000*, reached number 3 at the American box office (on 21 July 2000), the third annual film, *Pocket Monsters: Lord of the Unknown Tower*, reached number 3 at the Japanese box office (on 8 July 2000).
9. It is also worth noting here that there is some ongoing debate in the fan community over the canonicity of the films, with arguments for and against their inclusion (see bulbapedia.com). Given the multiple canons already in existence (for *Pokémon* games, manga and anime) for the reasons stated, this article proceeds on the notion that the films remain indicative of the franchise's larger concerns, given the fact their length and development means they have more narrative depth through which to articulate these ideas than any other element of the franchise.
10. In this sense, Mewtwo is similar to Marvel Comics *X-Men* villain (and sometime hero) Magneto who fights for the rights of his species – mutantkind.
11. This idea of 'harmony is first expressed in the voice-over which opens the film, an ancient prophecy recited by Lawrence III:

    Disturb not the harmony of fire, ice or lightning lest these titans wreak destruction upon the world in which they clash. Though the water's great guardian shall arise to quell the fighting, alone its song will fail lest the earth shall turn to ash. Oh Chosen one, into thine hands bring together all three their treasures combined tame the beast of the sea.

    Of course, the play on 'ash' again points to the boy's connection to nature.
12. Later series featured ecoterrorists based in Hoenn, Team Acqua and Team Magma, who sought to create ecological chaos by awakening Kygore and Groudon respectively (from the *Pokémon* Sapphire and Ruby games).
13. Interestingly, Zero casts himself as a champion of the environment when he attacks the real world to defend the reverse (or parallel) world. 'This beautiful world is being constantly polluted', he says, 'I'm protecting it.'

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