Pikachu's Global Adventure

Joseph Tobin

In the last years of the last millennium, a new consumer phenomenon developed in Japan and swept across the globe. Pokémon, which began life as a piece of software to be played on Nintendo's Game Boy (a hand-held gaming computer), quickly diversified into a comic book, a television show, a movie, trading cards, stickers, small toys, and ancillary products such as backpacks and T-shirts. Entering into production and licensing agreements with Japanese companies including GameFreak, Creatures, Inc., Shogakukan Comics, and TV Tokyo, and with companies abroad including their wholly owned subsidiary, Nintendo of America, Wizards of the Coast (now a division of Hasbro), 4Kids Entertainment and the Warner Brothers Network, Nintendo created a set of inter-related products that dominated children's consumption from approximately 1996 to 2000. Pokémon is the most successful computer game ever made, the top globally selling trading card game of all time, one of the most successful children's television programs ever broadcast, the top grossing movie ever released in Japan, and among the five top earners in the history of films worldwide. At Pokémon's height of popularity, Nintendo executives were optimistic that they had a product, like Barbie and Lego, that would sell forever, and that, like Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, would become enduring icons worldwide.

But by the end of 2000, Pokémon fever had subsided in Japan and the United States, even as the products were still being launched in such countries as Brazil, Italy, and Israel. As I write this article, Pokémon's control of shelf-space and consumer consciousness seems to be declining, most dramatically in Japan and the United States. As the Pokémon phenomenon winds down we are left with the task of analyzing its significance and understanding the dynamics of its rise and, just as interesting, its fall. To analyze these phenomena, I hosted a Pokémon conference in Honolulu, U.S.A., in November 2000. Presenters came from Japan, Hong Kong, Australia, Israel, France, the U.K. and the U.S., from the fields of anthropology, communication, sociology, and media studies. The papers presented at the conference serve as the cornerstone for a forthcoming book,[1] which tells the story of Pokémon's global travels and discusses what the

Pokémon phenomenon can teach us about children's engagement with the new media, Japan's rise as a culture and software exporting nation, and the globalization of children's popular culture. I'll review each of these issues in this article.

Japan's mouse

Pokémon isn't just any globally circulating childhood craze; it's a globally circulating craze from Japan. This is a matter not just of profit to Nintendo, but also of national pride and even strategic economic importance to Japan. To the Japanese Pikachu, the little yellow electric mouse who is the most popular character in the Pokémon universe, is 'our mouse', Japan's long awaited answer to Mickey. In order to appreciate the cultural and economic significance of Pokémon in contemporary Japan, it is necessary to place the development and marketing of Pokémon in the context of Japanese history.

In 1854, when U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry led his fleet into Tokyo Bay, Japan's centuries-old strategy of barring Western people, ideas, and goods came to end. In response to the threat of Western military power, Japan's strategy changed to one of borrowing and domesticating foreign goods and concepts while retaining Japanese core values, as summed up by the mantra of that era: 'Japanese spirit, Western learning'. During the years leading up to and including World War II, Japan switched course and pursued a belligerent approach in relating to the West and to Asia. The postwar period was a second period of intense cultural borrowing, this time coupled with growing success in selling 'Western goods' to the West. Japan began rebuilding its postwar economy by exporting simple, inexpensive goods; but by the 1970s Japan was enjoying success as a producer of such high quality, high-tech goods as watches, cameras, and cars. In the 1980s, having established dominance in the global market in home electronic goods, Japan seemed well positioned to reign for many years to come as one of the world's most economically powerful nations. But while Americans fretted about how we would ever close the trade gap with Japan, many Japanese knew their success was fragile. Japan's postwar formula for economic success, based on exporting consumer goods and computer hardware to the West, proved to be difficult to maintain because as the Japanese standard of living and salaries rose, they became vulnerable to being undercut by other countries. In the 1990s, the 'New Economic Tigers' – Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and, eventually, China – became Japan's Japan, as their lower labor costs allowed them to end Japan's dominance in many sectors of production. Anticipating this turn of events, by the early 1980s, Japanese companies and government economic planners were already strategizing to shift the economy from heavy industry to high tech and then from high tech to information and cultural products. Most globally circulating media products are played on Japanese-made machines (stereo systems, TV sets, VCRs, CD and DVD players, karaoke machines, and computers), but the majority of the content is produced in Los Angeles and New York. Lacking software of their own, in the 1980s and early 1990s

Sony and other Japanese hardware corporations invested in American movie studios, music labels, and publishing houses (du Gay et al., 1997). The challenge facing Japan in the mid-1990s was to shift from purchasing rights to Western cultural products to producing cultural export products of their own.

Japan has a robust domestic culture industry, with billions of yen spent each year on domestically produced and consumed movies, pop music, television shows, and sports teams. But converting this domestic market to an international one is a daunting task. Despite its success in selling hardware to the West, with the notable exception of computer game sales worldwide and pop music and television show rights in Taiwan and Hong Kong (Iwabuchi, 1998), Japan has had little success and in fact has made relatively few aggressive attempts to export cultural software. Japan's net trade surplus masks the fact that Japan suffers from a big deficit with the West in the exchange of cultural products. American films are among the top grossers in Japan, while Japanese films play only in art houses in the United States. Jazz receives stronger support in Tokyo than in New York, and American and British pop music competes at the top of the Japanese charts while Japanese pop music finds only a niche market outside of Asia. Japanese haute couture has made inroads in the global high fashion world, but sales of Isse Miyake and Hanae Mori are tiny compared to sales of Levis jeans and Calvin Klein underwear in Japan.

Why this cultural trade imbalance? It is primarily an effect of the linguistic and cultural hegemony of the Anglophone West. The cultural and economic power wielded globally over the past three centuries first by England and then by the United States has meant that the Japanese and the rest of the non-English speaking world have had to learn to consume foreign language cultural products while Americans and Britons have not. Since the days of Perry's arrival, the Japanese have understood that to relate to and compete with the United States and Europe, it is they who would have to adapt.

The Japanese have been adapting Western cultural products long enough and well enough (Tobin, 1993) that by the beginning of the new millennium there is no longer a clear, fixed boundary between Western and Japanese things or ideas. Japanese culture, no longer/never pure or unitary, is a hybrid construction that, like all cultures, is continuously reinventing itself (Iwabuchi, 1998; Tobin, 1993). Japanese products exported abroad, including Pokémon, are already a mixture of indigenous and borrowed elements even before they are subjected to repackaging by their Japanese exporters and localization by their foreign importers. Ironically, several of the Pokémon television episodes that have been considered inappropriate for release in the United States feature plot elements that are explicitly Euro-American in origin, elements including the Pokémon characters Misty, Team Rocket, and Ash's mother entering a beauty contest in Acapulco; a six-gun toting game warden who points his pistol at Ash; and a Tarzan-like feral child Ash and Misty meet in the jungle.

Although cultural trade between Japan and the West has been an unequal process, this is not to say that before the Pokémon invasion Japanese culture had not already entered Europe and North America. Japanese aesthetic traditions

have had a subtle but profound influence on Western painting, theater, letters, movies, fashion, architecture and design. Zen has influenced Western spirituality. Judo and karate are the best-known martial arts around the world. Soba, sushi, and wasabi now can be consumed in European and North American shopping malls. Japanese *manga* (comic books) and *anime* (feature length cartoons) are consumed by aficionados overseas. Nevertheless, despite these successes, it was not until Pokémon that a Japanese cultural product broke through as a worldwide consumer craze.

In addition to Western economic, political, and cultural hegemony, another factor contributing to Japan's cultural trade deficit with the West is Japanese ambivalence about the exportability of their culture. Many Japanese believe that their culture is too idiosyncratic to be appreciated abroad and they are not so sure that they like the idea of the rest of the world consuming their culture and sharing their tastes. The Japanese have a term for this ambivalence: *Nihonjinron*, or theories of Japanese uniqueness. When I first lived in Japan in the 1960s, Japanese acquaintances would routinely ask me: 'Can you eat sushi?' At first I wasn't sure what this question meant. I eventually figured out the meaning behind the question was a combination of fear that Westerners would find their culture bizarre or distasteful and an ethnocentric pride that their culture is too special and refined to be appreciated by anyone but themselves. I do not believe that Japanese culture is inherently more idiosyncratic and therefore less globalizable than Euro-American culture. But the Japanese belief in their cultural uniqueness coupled with their ambivalence about being consumed by foreigners can lead to a certain awkwardness or even hesitancy in marketing their culture to outsiders.

The cultural hegemony of the English-speaking West combined with the Japanese belief in the uniqueness and inaccessibility of their culture to produce a late twentieth century dynamic in which Japan, although a major global player in the export of hardware, was only a minor force in the export of cultural products. This all changed with Pokémon. Kurosawa, *Godzilla, Hello Kitty, The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, sumo and sushi found niche markets overseas, but it was the little yellow electric mouse Pikachu who took the world by storm. This success, however, did not come without a price; Pokémon's producers decided that if Pokémon were to make it globally, it would have to reduce what Koichi Iwabuchi (1998) calls its 'cultural odor'.

Glocalization

A common assumption of the global popular culture industry is that for a Japanese cultural product to find a mass market abroad, it must not seem to be too Japanese. De-Japanization can be accomplished during the act of creation, by designing a cultural text to be universal in its themes and lacking specifically Japanese images and references, and/or after the fact, by erasing explicitly Japanese content and references.

These processes are more easily done with some kinds of cultural products than with others. Japan's most successful cultural exports to date have been computer games. The global computer game market originated with Japanese designed games including *Duck Hunt, Space Invaders, Donkey Kong, Super Mario Brothers,* and *Pacman*. These games were relatively easy to export, as they had no explicit Japanese cultural content. *Mortal Kombat* and *Street Fighter* were the first globally distributed computer games that were explicitly Japanese/Asian, with lead characters including sumo wrestlers, ninjas, karate specialists, and kung-fu masters.

But this is not to suggest that there is nothing Japanese about Pokémon. The Pokémon computer game, television show, and movies have many distinctively Japanese elements and concerns. Pokémon's creator, Tajiri Kojiro, has stated in interviews that his dream was to create a computer game that would allow contemporary Japanese children to reconnect with nature through learning to identify and care for insect-like creatures, as he did as a boy who gathered beetles in the woods, an activity that is difficult to pursue in an urbanized Japan. Other readily identifiable Japanese plot elements include the *sensei-deishi* (master-disciple) relationship between the Pokémon characters Satoshi (Ash) and Professor Okido (Professor Oak) and Satoshi's quest, in the Japanese martial arts tradition, to climb the Pokémon trainer ranks until he reaches the level of Pokémon Master.

Elements in Pokémon that are more subtly Japanese include the themes of miniaturization (Du Gay et al., 1997); encapsulation (once captured, the Pokémon 'Pocket Monsters' are trained to live in 'Pokéballs'); metamorphosis (in the 'change-robot', 'Power Up' tradition of *Voltron*, *The Transformers*, and *The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*); and heroes having 'special' attacking moves (in the tradition of both *anime* and computer fighting games). Another *anime* and *mang*a trope that appears in Pokémon is the presence of sexualized girls and curvaceous, mini-skirted young women. Although cuteness is a common feature of Western as well as Japanese cartooning, Pokémon is *kawaii* (cute) in a particularly Japanese way. The aesthetic style of the Pokémon television show and movies is representative of the Japanese *manga* and *anime* tradition that features a clean, flat drawing style, a lack of fluid motion (in marked contrast to the greater three-dimensionality and realistic motion of characters in Disney and Warner Brothers cartooning) and such movie-like effects as overhead, tracking, and point of view shots and the inclusion of special effect shots, such as split screen and the interpolation of negative images. The major human characters in Pokémon are *mu-kokuseki* (nationality-less), neither clearly Japanese nor not Japanese, but minor characters include such unambiguously Japanese figures as ninjas and samurai. Satoshi/Ash and his friends move through a fictional world that includes such culturally generic locations as Pallet Town and Pewter City, but they occasionally enter restaurants with signs and curtains printed in *kanji* and once inside they eat rice balls and slurp noodles.

The artful manipulation of the Japaneseness of Pokémon in both its domestic and export versions has been crucial to its success. The terms 'global localization', 'glocalization', and 'glocal' were coined, some say, by Sony to refer to the

need for a product that is to succeed globally to be modified to be sold in foreign markets (Iwabuchi, 1998). The process that allowed Pokémon to be so successful in overseas markets began not with glocalization but with another factor discussed by Iwabuchi, 'de-odorization', which involves developing cultural products designed from the start to be scrubbed of any obvious Japanese 'cultural odor'.

How systematic and planned was the de-odorization of Pokémon? Tajiri and Kubo deny consciously reducing the Japaneseness of their original products (the computer game and television series, respectively). But Iwabuchi's conceptualizing of de-odorization does not require conscious intent. My hunch is that the de-odorization of Pokémon at the time of its creation was less a conscious global marketing strategy than it was the result of its creators working within already de-odorized genres. Japanese computer games and *anime* are made up of such de-odorized tropes as cultureless landscapes, nationality-less characters, and hybrid intertextual references. Unless the *mise en scene* is explicitly Japanese (as, for example, in a folktale such as *Princess Mononoke* or a domestic comedy such as *Crayon Shinchan*), Japanese *anime* illustrators create *mu-kokuseki* characters because that is how they and their readers expect characters in *anime* to look. I suspect this is what happened with the creation of Satoshi (Ash), Kasumi (Misty), Nurse Joi (Joy), Professor Okido (Oak) and the other only vaguely or not at all Japanese-looking human characters in Pokémon. If the conscious intent of the Pokémon developers from the onset had been to develop a cultureless, globally marketable product, more care would have been taken from the start to avoid the inclusion of *kanji,* Japanese foods, and plots with specifically Japanese intertextual references, such as when 'Bakabondo', a character borrowed from a popular *manga*, turns up in the feral child episode. The presence of such Japanese elements in the original Pokémon game and in the first series of the television series created the need for extensive and, in some cases, no doubt, expensive localization.

When Tajiri and Kubo began their work on Pokémon they had no reason to expect their products would make it big domestically, much less overseas. But by 1999, with Pokémon fever already sweeping the United States, Kubo was fully aware of the need to limit the Japanese odor of Pokémon in order to facilitate localization for the American and other markets. Kubo explains that unlike the original Pokémon television series, considerable care was taken in the production of the Pokémon movies to reduce the Japanese odor:

> Another Japanese *anime* TV and movie series called *Sailor Moon* was popular a few years ago. When the movies went on the silver screen in the United States, very little was altered visually. The outcome was a moderate hit, but the series never got to be like the big craze it was in Japan. Our research on this case suggests that things like Japanese writing showing up on signboards in the background and uniquely Japanese family settings distract American kids, preventing them from really becoming absorbed in the movie's fictional world. With these examples in mind, from the start we had our hearts set on thoroughly localizing *Pokémon: The First Movie,* though we may not have been completely successful in doing so. (Kubo, 2000, p. 2)

As it turned out, they were not. Despite their attempts to produce a culture-free product, much work remained for the localizers.

Localizers are key workers in the contemporary culture industry. Japanese computer game makers are among those companies that hire employees in overseas markets to localize their products by, for example, renaming characters and by reducing the intensity of the color of the blood in shooting games. The localizing of Pokémon for the North American market was a collaborative Japanese-American effort. Kubo and Tsunekazu Ishihara of Creatures, Inc. took the lead on the Japanese side while the key American localizers were Gail Tilden of Nintendo of America and Al Kahn (creator of the Cabbage Patch Doll) and Norman Grossfeld of 4Kids Entertainment/Leisure Concepts.

In his accounts of his interactions with his American localizers, Kubo comes across as a somewhat anguished figure, torn, like a novelist whose work is being translated, between the desires to reach a wider audience and to protect the integrity of his original creation, between trusting his American collaborators and fearing they will rob his text of its passion and subtlety:

> Once we actually started looking at the requests of Warner Brothers, however, it often gave us headaches. […] According to them, the Japanese original [script] does not distinguish clearly enough between the good guys and the bad. Such a movie would not be successful in a multiethnic country like the United States, they insisted, because the viewers would not know who to identify with and who to cheer on. In other words, the heroes and villains needed to be identified clearly. They accomplished this by revising the various characters' lines. (Kubo, 2000, p. 3)

Whatever the backstage struggles between creators and translators, the translated versions of Pokémon are of high quality, and this quality has contributed significantly to Pokémon being the most successfully exported Japanese cultural product. A prime example of the quality of Pokémon's localization can be seen in the great care and creativity that went into the renaming of the Pokémon in English and other languages. Following the lead of the Japanese original, the localizers devised names that make it easy for children not only to memorize the Pokémon but to understand the relationship among each Pokémon both to their evolved higher forms and to their family group (e.g., water, fire, earth, or air). The names are rich in both cute puns and in a pseudo-Linnean attention to family and genus. For example, the little lizard with fire on its tail is Charmander in English, his more evolved version Charmeleon, and his most evolved, ferocious version Charizard.

Similarly clever names have been devised for Pokémon's French, Italian, and German versions. The 'grass' type Pokémon originally named Fushigisou – a combination of the Japanese words *fushigi* (strange) and *sou* (plant) – was renamed Ivysaur in English, Herbizarre in French, and Bisaknosp in German. The trading cards, television series, movies, and Game Boy cartridges have been translated into other languages, but without translating the names of the Pokémon. Spanish and Italian versions of the cards are available, with descriptions of their

special attacks fully translated, but the names of the Pokémon are those from the English version, making it difficult for children to appreciate the puns and taxonomic relationships.

What these linguistic examples reveal is that the glocalization of Pokémon is an incomplete and unequal phenomenon. Children in many parts of the world have access to Pokémon, but not equal access. If you speak Japanese, English, German, or French, and live in the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, Germany, or France you have access to the full range of fully translated and localized Pokémon products. In Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese-speaking countries most of the products are available, but the translations are not as thoroughly localized. In the case of a smaller market country such as Israel, the television show has been translated into Hebrew but the only cards available are in English. In smaller market countries, there is a sense of loss among fans not just about not getting fully translated versions of the full range of products, but also about being behind. Pokémon's product release cycle was collapsed in Israel, with the TV show, cards, and movies introduced over the course of several months rather than, as in Japan and the U.S., several years. This was necessary because by the time Pokémon officially was introduced to Israel, over one hundred TV episodes, two movies, and five versions of the Pokémon Game Boy game had already been produced and released in Japan and the United States, English language versions of these products had already entered Israel through various means, and children were keenly aware of what they were missing and what they should be offered. This dynamic between consumers and producers is very different in a cultural commodity's country of origin where fans feel a sense of excitement about being the first to engage with a new product and enjoy the power of getting to help decide if this product should and will succeed in the marketplace in contrast to the situation in 'downstream' countries such as Israel, Holland, Mexico, and the Philippines where all but the youngest consumers are aware that they are behind the wave. This sense of being behind comes across in statements posted to Pokémon bulletin boards on the Web. For example, in August of 2000, a thirteen-year-old boy from Manila wrote:

> Well, I'm from the Philippines, an Asian country. I guess most TV networks here play anime series which have already been shown to other countries. It's a bit annoying to know that other people have already finished the series when we are just halfway through. Well that's how things work around here!!!

That same summer a Dutch fan wrote:

> I live in Holland and already have seen all episodes three times or so, but the movie 2000 is not yet here.

Another Dutch fan added later in the summer:

> In Holland the first movie is just out for one month so nope I haven't seen the new movie. …tell me, is Brock in the movie?

Pokémon is much less available in poorer countries than richer ones. In countries where Nintendo has no offices, third parties may import Pokémon products on their own, but without a mass marketing campaign and diverse distribution networks, Pokémon's market penetration is small. Pokémon's presence is also limited in countries that are antagonistic to the spread of Western (and Japanese) popular culture. Clerics in Qatar and Saudi Arabia issued a Fatwa (holy edict) against Pokémon in April of 2001, citing the presence of Shinto, Christian, and Zionist symbols and themes. Sheik Yousef al-Qaradawi of The Research and Fatwa Administration of Dubai is quoted in an AP (Associated Press) story (4/5/2001) as saying that Pokémon is "dangerous to a child's mentality and behaviour, involves gambling, promotes Zionism and Darwin's theory of evolution".

The schedule that determines when and where the Pokémon train will stop is set for the most part not in Kyoto or Tokyo but at Nintendo of America headquarters in Redmond, Washington. Pikachu's global adventure has carried him not from Japan to the world, but from Japan to the United States, where he was given a make over before sending him on to the rest of the world. It is Nintendo of America, Hasbro, 4Kids Entertainment, and Warner Brothers, and not their Japanese counterparts that hold the rights for selling Pokémon products in most markets. The versions of the Pokémon cards, television shows, and movies that are available everywhere but Asia are translations of the American rather than Japanese versions. The fact that Pokémon reaches most of the world via the United States means that the global Pokémon empire is not quite the challenge to American pop-culture global hegemony that it first seems to be. Pikachu, at least for the moment, may be outselling Mickey Mouse, but American corporations including Hasbro and Warner Brothers are earning a large share of the profits. Lacking the know-how and global distribution systems for cultural products, Nintendo, Shogakukan, Creatures, Inc., TV Tokyo and the other Japanese corporations involved in the development of Pokémon had little choice but to turn to the United States to gain worldwide distribution. The experience, profits, and confidence Japanese producers are garnering with Pokémon may allow them to develop their own distribution networks in the future. But for now, as both the world's largest market for and exporter of children's culture, the United States is an economic and cultural force more sensibly worked with than against.

Asian markets are the one significant exception to Pokémon reaching foreign countries via the United States. Nintendo and the other Japanese Pokémon producing corporations export their products directly to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, and other Asian nations. It is the Japanese rather than the American versions of the Pokémon cards, TV series, and movies that are being marketed in Asia. With China a sleeping giant when it comes to importing children's culture, the Asian market is still relatively small, but Japan's ability to market its cultural creations in Asia has the potential to become a significant economic factor in a Japanese economic recovery.

Iwabuchi (1998) points out that the cultural products Japan exports to Asia are not traditional Japanese products but instead Japanese re-makings of West-

ern cultural products. Memories of Japanese military aggression still fresh, many Asian countries have an antipathy to anything marked as traditional Japanese culture, but these same countries are increasingly open to importing Japan's expertise as a localizer and disseminator of Western popular culture. Iwabuchi points out that the Japanese versions of American and British pop-music and television dramas recently have become more popular in Taiwan and Hong Kong than their Western equivalents. Hong Kong and other Asian countries are eager to import the latest goods and cultural products from Japan because they view Japan as a more advanced capitalist culture and economy and hope that by purchasing Japanese goods they can further their own cultural and economic development.

Unofficial/grassroot localizers

The glocalization processes I've discussed so far are all corporate planned and directed. But these official routes of Pokémon's global dissemination are only part of the story of its success. The first versions of Pokémon to make it to the U.S. came not via Gail Tilden's and Norman Grossfeld's carefully designed localization efforts, but instead via unofficial consumption networks. Back in 1997, before Nintendo of Japan directed Nintendo of America to launch a localization campaign for Pokémon and before 4Kids Entertainment began work on translating the TV series into English, Pokémon was already being consumed outside Japan. By the autumn of 1997, just months after the television series was first aired in Japan, pirated versions were being sold and otherwise exchanged hand to hand, by mail, and over the Internet by *anime otaku* (Japanese animation fans) in various locations outside Japan. By the autumn of 1998, as the TV series was first being broadcast in English in the United States, the Japanese versions of Pokémon videos and trading cards were already on shelves in *anime*, role playing, and Japanese import stores around the world and pirated copies of the TV programs, dubbed into Mandarin and Cantonese, were available in small shops in Chinatowns worldwide. By the winter of 1999, when Pokémon fever began to sweep through elementary schools across the United States, there was already a vanguard of kids in the schools knowledgeable about the computer game, cards, and TV series.

In most American and many European communities there is a small group of 'geeky' young people who are experts on Japanese popular culture. Many, but by no means all, of these young people are of Asian backgrounds and most, but not all, are males. These *otaku* – through friendship networks; school-based gaming clubs; informal as well as structured gatherings at role-playing game stores; web sites and list serves; and magazines such as *Giant Robot* – are a repository of cutting-edge knowledge of popular cultural trends in Japan.

I can illustrate the importance of informal dissemination networks through vignettes of three early moments in Pikachu's global adventure:

1) It is January of 1999 and Kenji Takata, a seven-year-old boy who had moved to Honolulu from Tokyo with his parents six months earlier, is suddenly a source of valuable cultural information in his second grade classroom. American children bringing the Game Boys they received for Christmas to school eagerly seek Kenji's advice on how to beat Pokémon Red. He is glad to oblige.

2) I visit an *anime/manga* store in Honolulu in the fall of 1999, just as the Pokémon craze is really getting going in the U.S. When I ask Spencer, the manager, if he has any Pokémon tapes he points me to the *anime* section, but not before giving me a quick lecture that goes something like: 'We have some tapes from the first television series, in Japanese. Right over there, between Macross and Ranma. Are you looking for you or for your kids? You know, Pokémon isn't a children's thing. It's *anime*. A lot of my customers have known about Pokémon since it was first released in Japan, way before all the hype and before the little kids got into it.'

3) In the winter of 2000, Sue Chinn, a University of Chicago undergraduate in my course on 'Children and Popular Culture', explains to me how she happens to know so much about Pokémon. She tells me that what she knows about Pokémon came mostly through her twelve-year-old brother, Tom. Two years earlier, their cousins in Hong Kong sent Tom a VCD (video-CD) that contained pirated copies of episodes of several *anime* (in Japanese), including Pokémon. On a visit to Hong Kong the next summer Tom's cousins took him to software and electronic shops in the Mongkok district where he purchased 'non-taxed' (illegally imported and/or copied) Pokémon cards, videos (some in Japanese, some dubbed into Chinese), and merchandise (mostly unlicensed from Taiwan). (Hong Kong plays a special role in both the Asian and global economies as a broker, mediator, hijacker, and disseminator of Japanese cultural products.) Back home in Chicago, Tom spends his weekends hanging out with his friends at 'Cards and Comixs', a comic book/role playing games store in a neighborhood on the city's Southwest side. Although perceived as nerds at school, their knowledge of Pokémon and other Japanese *anime* and role playing games and their access to pirated Japanese cultural products give them celebrity status at their local gaming store and in their *otaku* community.

Young people like Kenji, Spencer, and Tom are key facilitators of Pikachu's global adventure. Although Nintendo complains about unauthorized copying of tapes, illegal importation of games and cards, and posting of web sites that use Pokémon graphics without permission, I would argue that these informal and in some cases illegal routes of introducing Pokémon and other Japanese cultural products abroad do more to facilitate than to interfere with Nintendo's global marketing mission.

Pokémon's pleasures and meanings

The pleasures children find in Pokémon vary from country to country, from rich neighborhoods to poor ones, from young children to adolescents, from girls to boys, and from the beginning to the end of the craze. As discussed above, national and social class variations in children's engagement with Pokémon can be attributed to local customs and traditions and to unequal access to Pokémon products. Drawing on a concept of Michel de Certeau (1984), who makes a distinction between the strategies of the powerful (colonizing governments, in-vading armies, bosses) and the tactics of the weak (colonial subjects, resistance fighters, employees), we can see children as tacticians who use the means at hand to extract pleasure where and when they can find it. If all that is available to them is stickers, they will create pleasurable forms of Pokémon play around stickers. Children wealthy enough to have their own Game Boys will spend many hours engaged in solitary Game Boy play, which has its own pleasures to offer. It is possible that the kids who have only the TV show and stickers get as much pleasure from Pokémon as the kids with Game Boys and albums full of shinies.

We can also look at the pleasures of Pokémon developmentally. Very young children play Pokémon by being Pokémon: 'I'll be Charizard. You be Squirtle.' The pleasures here are the pleasures of projective identification. Children who are a bit older also engage in dramatic play, but they tend to imagine themselves as trainers rather than as Pokémon: 'I'm Misty and you're Ash.' This develop-mental sequence may not be universal – Kubo (2000) has observed that American children are more attracted to Ash and the other trainers while Japanese children focus more on the Pocket Monsters themselves. As children get older, they tend to find pleasure less in dramatic play and identification with the characters than in collecting the cards and mastering such arcane information as the point values and market prices of the cards and cheat codes for beating the game.

There seems to be a developmental sequence to the pleasures children find in the Pokémon trading cards. When asked to identify their best card, the young-est children tend to select the one with whom they most readily identify (little girls, for example, choosing Jigglypuff and little boys Squirtle or Charmander). Children a little older identify the best cards as those of the characters that have the most social status: 'Charizard is the best card because he's the coolest.' Social status is gradually replaced by notions of scarcity and monetary value: 'This one is my best because it's the hardest to get. I could sell it for more than $50.' A smaller group of older children who master the complex rules of the trading card game identify their best cards as those that have the most strategic value.

Another important pleasure of Pokémon is that it provides children with a common culture. One of the downsides of being a child is that you get dragged along to functions where you don't know anybody. During the height of the Pokémon craze, children meeting for the first time had a reliable opening line: 'Who's your favorite Pokémon?' Young children, who tend to have relatively little control over what they wear, can perform their gendered identities and show that they are cool by donning Pokémon T-shirts, caps, and backpacks. The

world of Pokémon is diverse enough to offer children a variety of stylistic options: little boys in North America and in Europe tend to go for Ash caps and brightly colored Pikachu gear. Older boys tend to favor black Pokémon T-shirts, caps, and backpacks, sporting scenes of tough or scary Pokémon, such as Charizard, Mewtew, and Gengar engaged in battle. Girls tend to go for pink-hued Pokémon gear picturing the cutest (smallest and most infantile) of the Pokémon, characters such as Togepi, Exeggcute, Wigglytuff, Purin, and Ponyta. Older girls, and even some college students, adorn their backpacks with tiny Pikachu and Clefairy icons.

One of the keys to Pokémon's success is that it allows children to tap into a variety of themes, including competition, fighting, cooperation, friendship, nurturance, and even sexuality. These themes are available to both boys and girls, especially when they are very young. But as children get older, their engagement with Pokémon tends to divide along gender lines. For pre-adolescent boys, Pokémon offers a PG-rated[2] version of the *Dungeons and Dragons/Mortal Kombat* world of adolescent masculinity. For girls, Pokémon's most salient attraction is cuteness.

Cuteness, a powerful theme in contemporary Japanese character merchandising, developed out of the *shojo* (girls) culture of the 1970s. Eager to acknowledge and celebrate Japan's newfound prosperity after the hardships of the war and occupation eras, Japanese society in the 1970s embraced the tastes of adolescent girls for 'fancy' goods and a carefree lifestyle that seemed to value cuteness above all other virtues. The producers of *anime* and *manga* developed cute characters such as *Doraemon, Arare-chan*, and *Hello Kitty*, characters who both reflected and appealed to *shojo* culture. Sony and other corporations brought technological sophistication to the culture of cuteness in their development of products that are perky, portable, personal, and miniaturized. In the 1990s, Nintendo was the leader in companies who combined cute hardware with cute software. Pokémon, to date, is the most globally successful of Japan's cute products.

Pikachu's golden years

For all its inherent attributes (virtues as a multidimensional, polysemic product) and all of its marketing muscle, Pokémon seems to be reaching the end of the line. Visiting a toy store anywhere in the U.S. in the summer of 2001, it is clear that Pokémon's shelf space is a fraction of what it enjoyed in the fall of 1999. Pokémon merchandise still available in stores is likely to be marked 'reduced'. The third Pokémon movie opened and closed with one-tenth the hype and much less box office than the original. Perhaps the most telling sign of Pokémon's declining fortunes is that on playgrounds and classrooms across the U.S. it is clear that Pokémon has lost its cool.

And yet, as I write this in 2001, press releases on the Nintendo corporate web site proclaim that Pokémon is thriving. How can we explain this apparent disjuncture between children's declarations that Pokémon is dead and the pro-

ducer's claims that it is still going strong? Some of Nintendo's optimism can be chalked up to corporate hype and to executives whistling in the wind to try to convince themselves and others (including not just customers but also toy store owners, movie theaters, and TV schedulers) that there is still a lot of money to be made on Pokémon. Another way to explain the disparity is to see it as a matter of relativity. Sales of Pokémon products and viewership of the TV series and movies can drop significantly from Fall of 1999 levels and still leave Pokémon as a top selling children's products. Pokémon *Stadium* is not nearly as big as Pokémon *Yellow* was in 1999, but it's still among the top three selling computer games in the world. In other words, Pokémon at its peak was so big that it can drop two-thirds and still be one of the world's most profitable children's products. We should remember that Nintendo's game characters have a very long life (or in the language of computer games, many lives). After all, the *Mario Brothers* are still around, as is *Donkey Kong*. Pikachu himself/herself seems to have reached a level of fame and affection that will allow him/her to live on for many years to come, if nothing else than as an item of nostalgia. However, as we attempt to make sense of Pokémon's residual economic viability, it is important to remember that the Pokémon juggernaut is made up of a loose configuration of companies with different financial stakes and fortunes. Pokémon living on as a Nintendo computer game does not necessarily mean that it will live on much longer as a TV show, nor that there will be more successful movies, nor that sales of Pokémon merchandise will not continue to drop off each year.

Another way to make sense of Pokémon's rise and (apparent) fall is to think about Pokémon temporally and spatially. There are innovative, complex issues of time and space both within the Pokémon narrative and the structuration of the computer game and also in the global circulation of Pokémon, from the moment that it began as gleam in Tajiri Satoshi's mind's eye at his Game Freaks office in Tokyo in 1994 to the 2001 Fatwa banning Pokémon in the United Arab Emirates.

Most children seem to be well aware that Pokémon, as a social phenomenon, exists in time and space. Children know that Pokémon comes from Japan. The fact that children in the U.S. and Europe know the relative values of the Japanese and English versions of the trading cards suggests that they are well aware of the global dimensions of the phenomenon. What children understand most clearly about Pokémon is that it once was hot and now it's not. Age is another important dimension of time in the rise and fall of Pokémon: when Pokémon was new, it was a form of techno-culture that was cool even for older kids to like. Several years later, as the Pokémon phenomenon winds down in the U.S., it is only little kids, losers, and *otaku* who are still interested.

I suggest that to make sense of Pokémon's rise and fall we need to think about time and space not separately, but together, in a sort of Einsteinian notion of relativity (a space time continuum). Pokémon is much older in Japan than in the U.S., older in the U.S. than in Europe, and older in Europe than in Israel, Brazil, and the Philippines. Perhaps what's needed is to view Pikachu's global adventure, as Einstein taught us to view light, as both particle and wave, that is, both as physical commodities that get shipped to specific sites around the globe

and also as a wave of interest and awareness that began in Japan, washed over Hong Kong, Asia, and the U.S., and even now, as I write, no doubt is just reaching some economically and culturally (if not geographically) distant and remote outpost of global consumption. Time is relative: when it's midnight in New York, it's noon in Tokyo. But time is also absolute: the New York stock market opens instantaneously around the globe. Thus in one sense, whenever Pokémon reaches a new market, it is new for the children who are encountering it for the first time. But because the world is globally culturally connected, even before the official wave of Pokémon merchandise, movies, and TV episodes arrive, foretellings will have already come via the Internet and world travelers who bring news and sometimes products with them, making consumers in places like the Philippines and even Holland painfully aware that they are latecomers to the craze. The almost instantaneous pace of the global circulation of information leads to a time compression of product roll outs and life cycles in places like France and Israel, where consumers already know a lot about a new cultural product before its official release. Knowing they are behind, these consumers feel the need to catch up, a feeling of urgency shared by producers who release products rapidly in these downstream markets to make money before their consumers' appetites abate.

Somewhere in the world, for some very young and sheltered children, Pokémon is totally new and fresh and the little yellow mouse Pikachu is young again, waiting to meet his master, Ash. But in the rest of the world, Pikachu is well into his golden years. This is a core reality of globalization: the world is getting smaller, but all points are not equally close in time or space. The travel time of information often precedes the travel time of goods and some destinations are much further away than others, not so much because of their geographic location, as their location in global capitalism.

Notes

1. J. Tobin (Ed.) (forthcoming). *Pickachu's Global Adventure: Making Sense of the Rise and Fall of Pokémon*. Duke University Press.
2. PG = Parental Guidance Suggested

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