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Cuteness as Japan's Millennial Product

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What about Pokémon has made it such a global sensation? And how has Japan achieved this success in what is one of the toughest corners of the world market, long dominated by the United States? The field of children's entertainment is as lucrative as it is fickle. To do well here, particularly when the arena is global, requires massive capital and a creative formula with appeal that can travel. Until recently, only the cultural industries of Hollywood have produced mass fantasies for children with worldwide cachet. They did this, in part, by using high-tech media production and the prestige of American culture, with its tropes of ingenuity, individualism, and wealth. But Japan's newfound influence in this domain of global children's (mass/popular) culture signals a change. Pikachu is Japan's long awaited answer to Mickey Mouse. Pokémon's success follows on the heels of previous waves of successful Japanese products that, starting in the late 1980s, have impacted childhood consumption around the world. These include technological goods (Sony's Walkman, transformer toys, Tamagotchi, video games, and game systems), stories (television shows such as *The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* and the cartoon *Sailor Moon*), and characters (Pokémon and Sanrio's Hello Kitty). It is premature to call Japan the new superpower in the global culture of children. At the very least, however, the global success of Pokémon and other Japanese child products signifies a shift in the entertainment marketplace until recently monopolized by the United States.

Drawing on fieldwork I did on the production, marketing, and consumption of Pokémon both in Japan and the United States, in this chapter I trace how what is distinct about this playscape is encapsulated in a notion Japanese call *kawaisa* (cuteness). Variable in meaning, *kawaisa* involves emotional attachments to imaginary creations/creatures with resonances to childhood and

also Japanese traditional culture. The way in which *kawaisa* gets packaged, however, is in a hyperconsumerist form that is technologically advanced and nomadically portable. All of this is at work in the millennial play products Japan is selling—and using to sell itself—in the popular marketplace of global kid culture.

CUTENESS AS NATIONAL EXPORT AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Ishihara Tsunekazu, one of Pokémon's producers (president and CEO of Creatures, Inc.), characterizes Pokémon as a product that is endlessly expandable and easy to connect to other media. The product lends itself to being played in a variety of different ways and by different demographics of players (by both girls and boys, and by children ranging in age from four to fourteen). Pokémon is often described as being less a single product than a world or universe. Thus, while it may be rooted in one medium (in Japan, this is often said to be the video game), the aura of Pokémon extends outward, encompassing the player in a world that is both imaginary (with imaginary places, creatures, and adventures) and real (involving the player in exchanges, purchases, and peer relations).

It is this larger world that the Japanese journal *Gendai*, in an article on the "unprecedented social phenomenon" of Pokémon (Yamato 1998), recognizes as key. The *Gendai* article suggests that Pokémon's popularity stems from its character merchandising and its aura of "cuteness," which appeals across gender and age. As evidence, the article cites a young female office worker (O.L.) who buys Pokémon figures because they're cute and inexpensive; young mothers who play Pokémon with their children after school; a housewife whose entire family likes Pokémon, with each member having his or her own favorite; and young women in their teens and twenties who consume cuteness in everything from Kitti-chan to, now, Pokémon. The play world is built on three pillars—the electronic game, the movie and TV series, and the card game—which sport a host of elements with diverse appeal to a diversity of audiences. Overarching this is a "harmony" among the components that Kubo attributes to the characters and a quality he refers to as "cuteness." Speaking specifically of Pokémon and its success on the export market, Kubo (2000) adds that cuteness gives Japan "cultural power" and is something Japanese are "polishing" overseas.

Cuteness, as the Japanese cultural critic Okada Tsuneo states (quoted in

Yamato 1988:247), has universal appeal. As evidenced by the revenues it has generated (over \$8 billion in 2001), Japan's business of cuteness is booming around the world. The children's entertainment business, in fact, is one of the few that has not only survived, but grown in Japan in the period of recessionary economics following the country's economic bubble. For this reason, Okada concludes that cuteness may be Japan's key to acquiring foreign capital in the twenty-first century (quoted in Yamato 1998:247). Others suggest that Japan's future in influencing, even leading, global culture, will come through three industries—video games, *anime* (animation), and *manga* (comic books). The market for these three industries has surpassed that of the car industry in the last ten years, leading some economists to hope this will pull Japan's economy out of the red. As one economist notes, what Japan has instead of the Silicon Valley is the "*anime komikku* game valley," which will be the root of the new twenty-first century's culture and recreation industry (quoted in Nihon Keizai Shinbun 1999:3).

What makes Japan newly successful in its marketing of games, comics, and cartoons is not simply technological or business prowess but what some call the "expressive strength" (*hyōgenryoku*) of Japanese creators. According to some, the stories, images, and ideas generated by these products constitute an emerging "international common culture" (Nihon Keizai Shinbun 1999:3) in which Japan's contribution is both significant and historically unprecedented. This signifies a shift away from the reputation Japan has held for three decades as a global power based almost exclusively on its economic prowess. Known as a producer of high-quality consumer technology (automobiles, vcrs, televisions), Japan's cachet in the cultural sphere of "soft" technology—music, televisual dramas, pop idols—has been far more limited. As the designer of the Sony Walkman has lamented, while Japanese technology circulates widely around the world, few people (outside of Japan) have been similarly impressed or moved by its culture (Kuroki Yasuo 1995:14). But with hits such as Pokémon, Japan is becoming recognized not only for its high-tech consumer goods but also for what might be called postmodern play aesthetics.

For these reasons, Pokémon's success as it travels so popularly and profitably around the world has been watched with great interest back home. Particularly impressed with the reception it has garnered in the United States, the Japanese press has called Pokémon a "*sekai teki kyarakuta*" (global character); a sign, as *Dime* magazine put it, that America is "boiling over" (*wakikaeru*) with Japa-

nese goods (1999:11); and, as many magazines and newspapers report, Pokémon's success is a symbol of Japan's cultural power (*bunka pawa*-), which, at long last, is getting recognized and spread around the world. In this discourse, an association is made between Japan's influence in global culture and the circulation of its (entertainment or recreational) goods overseas. Products (*shōhin*) are the currency by which Japanese culture enters the United States, a reporter wrote in the *Asahi Shinbun* (Kondō 1999:4). He added that it gave him great pride to see American children buy Pikachu and Pokémon in their local supermarkets. Similarly, when *Pokémon: The First Movie* opened in the United States in November 1999, much attention was given to the fact that it played on over three thousand screens (in contrast to two thousand in Japan) and was the week's top-ranked movie, grossing close to the first-week sales for *Star Wars, Episode I* (and surpassing those of *The Lion King*.) A reporter in the *Mainichi Shinbun* commented that should the success of Japanese animation and children's entertainment continue in the United States, Japan would easily overtake Disney—and this in a country where Disney is synonymous with the country itself (Hamano 1999:4).

Many of the North American producers and localizers of Pokémon I interviewed concurred with the Japanese assessment that Pokémon's strength comes from its flexibility, multidimensionality, and cuteness. A game designer for Wizards of the Coast (the distributors of the Pokémon cards in the United States, now a subsidiary of Hasbro), told me that the fact that Pokémon is game-based makes it more interactive than a mere cartoon or film. The latter is the purview of Disney, whose products do not become engrained into a child's "lifestyle" to the degree Pokémon does. He believed that Japan's strengths in the field of children's play rest in interactivity as generated by game-based play complexes. Many of my interviewees noted that Disney is behind in developing game technology and that its strengths—mirroring those of Hollywood—are in the screen-based media of film and television. Japan is ahead in new-age play technologies. It is not only that the imaginary characters of Pokémon are cute in a way that differs from Disney, but that cuteness here invites a different type of interaction. Bringing these characters out of the screen, so to speak, triggers the fantasy of enveloping them into everyday life. These are Pocket Monsters, after all. And, to "pocket" a monster means to carry (in a Game Boy, deck of cards, or plastic ball containing a Pocket Monster) a portable fantasy wherever one goes.

**POSTWAR PROSPERITY:
CONSUMPTION, CUTENESS, AND THE SHŌJO**

In the eyes of Japanese, what is cute? According to three high school girls I interviewed in Tokyo (in spring 2000) on this subject, *kawaii* (cute) is associated with the qualities of *amae*—sweet, dependent—and *yasashii*—gentle. While *kawaii* is linked to girls and girlishness, it is not exclusively feminine. A male's personality can be called *kawaii*, for example, and so can a boy's face, though this could also mean it is girlish. Toys for kids are seen as *kawaii*, and my interviewees said they sometimes buy such children's goods precisely for this reason. All three girls also admitted that they themselves would like to be called *kawaii* and that this, along with *yasashii*, is how they would want a partner or boyfriend to see them. Cuteness, for these girls, is something one both consumes and also cultivates as part of the self.

Yasashii, referring to the gentle aspect of cuteness, is precisely the word the Japanese producers I spoke with used to describe the marketing of Pokémon in Japan. Gentleness was not its original sensibility, however, when it began as a role-playing/action game targeted primarily to boys aged eight to fourteen. Once its marketers sensed that this Game Boy game could be turned into a full-blown fad, however, gentleness was added to popularize Pokémon with a wider audience. Expanding the game first into a comic-book series and then into collector's cards, a television cartoon, movies, and toy merchandise, their strategy was to select a character that could serve as an icon for the entire phenomenon. Hoping to draw in younger children, girls, and even mothers, what was chosen was not a human character (such as Ash, who aims to be the "world's greatest Pokémon trainer"), but a Pokémon with whom fans would not so much identify as develop feelings of attachment, nurturance, and intimacy. This was Pikachu. Merely one of 151 monsters in the Game Boy game, Pikachu became the central focus in the cartoon iteration and subsequent fad. Much like Japan itself as it strives to become the new "superpower" of global kids' properties, Pikachu is not only cute, but also fiercely tough. It rides atop Ash's shoulders like a dependent child, but is a formidable warrior under this gentle façade.

When Pokémon entered the U.S. market, it was made more dynamic and bold, and its cuteness slightly muted. Brighter colors were used in the advertising, and Ash replaced Pikachu as the central character, under the assumption that American kids need a heroic character with whom to identify. The movies

were subtly altered, to relieve what was assessed by the U.S. localizers to be ambiguity of both plot and morality in the Japanese original. Norman Grossfeld, the director of the English-language version of *Mewtwo Strikes Back*, told me that he altered the storyline to make the cloned Pokémon, Mewtwo, more clearly evil and the battle Ash waged against it more definitively "good." As Grossfeld explained, the convention in U.S. children's media is to feature clear-cut heroes with a moral dynamics that sharply differentiates good from evil. By contrast, ambiguity; in the sense of a murkiness that blurs borders (good/bad, real/fantasy, animal/human), is a central part of cuteness as generated by the cute business in Japan. This cuteness and ambiguity get muted a bit by its U.S. importers. But even in its exported version, Pokémon retains a gentleness, cuteness, and ambiguity that is characteristic of Japanese children's media culture.

The "cute" business started in the 1970s in Japan. The toy business began much earlier, of course, and immediately after the Second World War, became a major source of economic growth both for the high number of workers it employed and for its success on the export market, particularly the United States (Dentsū 1999:74–75). By the 1960s, the domestic market for toys had grown and was shaped, in large part, by the new business in character merchandising. This involved the marketing of goods and toys based on characters who, in the 1950s and 1960s, were mainly television characters and, by the 1970s, increasingly came from manga. In the 1970s Sanrio began its Hello Kitty line, which stimulated a rise in miniaturized, cute consumer products referred to as "fancy goods." At the same time, a national fixation developed around the cuddliness of "real" animals; two pandas received as gifts from China (Ranran and Kankan) became national mascots, and a fad for koalas followed shortly thereafter. In the 1980s, commercial businesses started adopting cute characters in promotional advertising. All Nippon Airways, for example, turned around a lagging ski campaign by employing the character Snoopy, and Japan Airlines followed suit by using Popeye to target young women for tour packages. By the late 1980s banks had adopted the practice of utilizing characters as a type of company logo (Dentsū 1999:75–77); by the 1990s, personalizing cell phones with character straps (for adult men, the favorite is Doraemon, the blue robotic cat of the long-running anime and manga series) was a common practice.

Character branding has become trendy, even fetishistic, in Japan today. In part, according to a book on the character business put out by the Japanese

history

advertising agency Dentsū (1999), this is because cute characters are appropriated as symbols for identity—personal, corporate, group, or national. The “essence” of character merchandising, Dentsū states, is that it “glues society at its roots” (95). A character accompanies the development of a group and becomes part of, and a symbol for, that identity. Characters, it continues, are a “device for self-realization” (*jikojitsugen*) (95). Certainly, the images of cute characters are omnipresent in the landscape of urban, millennial Japan. Iconized onto commercial goods, they appear on T-shirts, book bags, lunch boxes, pencils, hair ribbons, hand towels, rice bowls, bath soap, cooking pans, calendars, and erasers. Characters also embellish posters for public events or neighborhood fairs, show up on government notices or service announcements, and are stamped onto computers, copy machines, and even bulldozers.

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How does cuteness get produced in and through such character goods as Pokémon? As the Japanese high school girls I interviewed on the subject defined it, *kawaii* connotes sweetness, dependence, and gentleness—qualities they associated with comfort and warmth, and also with something loosely connected to their childhoods. Scholars who have written about the rise and fetishization of cute goods in the 1970s and 1980s in Japan (Treat 1996; Kinsella 1995; Ōtsuka 1999) link it to growing consumerism and the increasing role, real and imaginary, played in it by girls (*shōjo*) as they pursue desires of self-pleasure by consuming clothes, accessories, music, and digital games. Consumptive pleasures are counterposed to the rigors demanded elsewhere in Japanese life, in the contexts of school, work, and parenting. These pressures exist for males as well as for females, and both genders consume, of course. But due, in part, to the fact that school and work identify males more than females and girls have not yet assumed the duties of motherhood, the figure of the young girl epitomizes the figure least constrained by social expectations.

Starting in the 1970s, more goods were produced precisely with the *shōjo* in mind, which increasingly entailed cuteness. Cuteness became not only a commodity but also equated with consumption itself—the pursuit of something that dislodges the heaviness and constraints of (productive) life. In consuming, and more specifically in consuming cuteness, one expresses the yearning to be comforted and soothed: a yearning that many researchers and designers of play in Japan trace to a nostalgia for experiences in a child’s past. Cuteness, in this sense, is childish, and its appeal has increasingly spread to all elements of the

Japanese population—men as well as women, boys as well as girls—so that, in Japan today, it is no longer confined to the *shōjo* alone.

CUTE RELATIONALITY: VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION AND IMAGINARY COMPANIONSHIP

In designing the Pokémon Game Boy game, Tajiri Satoshi had two motivations. One was to create a challenging yet playable game that would pique children’s imaginations. The other was to give children a means of relieving the stresses of growing up in a postindustrial society. Born in 1962, Tajiri shares the opinion of many in his generation that life for children today is hard. In this “academic record society,” the pressure to study, compete, and perform starts early. Space and time for play has diminished. And in an environment where everyone moves fast to accomplish more and more every day, the human relationships once so prized have begun to erode. Increasingly, people spend more time alone, forming intimacies less with one another than with the goods they consume and the technologies they rely upon (cell phone, Walkman, Palm Pilot, Game Boy). Children are particularly susceptible to atomism, or what some have called “solitarism.” One study reports that most Japanese ten- to fourteen-year-olds eat dinner alone, 44 percent attend cram school, and the average time to return home at night is eight. For such mobile kids, companionship often comes in the form of “shadow families”: attachments made to imaginary characters, prosthetic technologies, or virtual worlds (Hakuhōdō 1997).

In Tajiri’s mind, millennial Japan is at risk of losing its humanity. Nostalgic for a world not yet dominated by industrial capitalism, he strove to recreate something of traditional times in the imaginary playworld of Pokémon. To tickle memories of the past, Tajiri drew on his childhood experiences in a town where nature had not yet been completely overtaken by industrialization. As a boy, his favorite pastime had been insect and crayfish collecting, an activity involving interactions both with nature (exploration, adventure, observation, gathering) and society (in exchanges and information sharing with other children). At once fun and instructive, this was the form of play that Tajiri wanted to introduce to present-day children who live in urban, overprotective settings where they are deprived of contact with nature and social interaction with

peers. The format he chose was virtual: digitally constructed worlds, activities, and monsters. A game junkie (*otaku*) himself from the age of twelve, when a video arcade featuring Space Invaders came to his town, Tajiri became as hooked on these virtual worlds as he had once been on nature. Here, he rediscovered the type of adventure, exploration, and competition he'd found collecting insects as a younger child. Yet, unlike the latter, which opens children up to the world of nature and society outside of themselves, games are often self-absorbing. Since the late 1980s, the trend in game design has been toward greater complexity that pulls players into solitary engagements with their virtual game worlds.

Disturbed by this current tendency toward atomism, both in gaming and in society at large, Tajiri aimed to design his game to promote social interaction. He accomplished this by making the game challenging but doable even by children as young as four (unlike many games on the market today that are targeted to far older children, even adults). Given the surfeit of detail involved in playing Pokémon, youngsters are also encouraged to gather and exchange information, making the game world something like a language that promotes communication. *Tsūshin* (communication) is, in fact, the keyword used by Tajiri and Nintendo's marketers in the promotion of Pokémon. To acquire all 151 Pokémon on one's Game Boy, one needs to make exchanges with other children. Fighting matches is the standard mode of acquisition (and the staple of virtually all action games), but by adding exchanges, Tajiri aimed to promote social interactions among children. Interactiveness was built into Pokémon in yet a third way, which relates more directly to the topic of cuteness. This was giving youngsters what a number of child specialists I spoke to called a "space of their own": a play environment that is imaginary but also emotionally real, and that cushions kids from the world of school, home, and daily pressures. Pocket Monsters are the embodiment of this imaginary space. They come as digitalized icons in Game Boys that children carry with them wherever they go. Both literally and figuratively, these are pocket fantasies. And, as such, they straddle the border between phantasm and everyday life.

Imaginary play friends are a staple of childhood, of course. Across cultures and time, children take things from their environment—sticks, wooden blocks, dolls—and invest them with personalities, stories, and life. Children develop attachments to these objects that help them navigate and survive the bumpy road of growing up. Functioning as personal resource, companion, possession,

and fantasy, imaginary creations provide an avenue for both engaging with and escaping from the real world. This type of interactivity is what Tajiri had in mind by building "communication" into the game design of Pokémon. His goal was to create imaginary life forms that children could interact with (as pals, tools, pets, weapons) in various ways. What is appealing about these fantasy creatures is not merely how they look or act but what they evoke. When I asked children to define what a Pokémon was, they almost always did so in terms that emphasized the relationships they had with them. For example, a ten-year-old boy in Tokyo whom I interviewed told me that Pokémon are "imaginary partners, creatures that can be your loyal pet if you control them. They're companions until the end, sort of like animals that are real except mutated." To a seven-year-old girl in the United States, they're "like creatures that are made up. The creators got ideas from nature, but they turned nature around. People care a lot for their Pokémon, but they also use them to fight other Pokémon."

People in Japan speak about cuteness the same way. What is mentioned continually in discussing cute characters is not merely their physical attributes (big head, small body, huge eyes, tiny nose), but also, and more importantly, the relationships people form with them. This is true, for example, of how Yukio Fujimi (1998), a long-time fan of Doraemon and now an adult in his thirties, describes his deep attachment to this character, a fixture of pop culture—with comic books, a television cartoon, movies, tie-in merchandise—since the 1970s. A blue robotic cat that lives with the sweetly inept Nobita, Doraemon is constantly retrieving futuristic devices ("tools") from his magical pouch to assist the ten-year-old boy in his various dilemmas. Inhabiting an imaginary space that mediates between fantasy and reality, Doraemon is what Fujimi, drawing on the work of the object relations theorist D. W. Winnicott, calls a "transitional object." Moving between the outside world and the inner self, this character/space is "part of me," the author states (20). What is cute here is not only the figure he cuts (blue color, pouch-lined tummy, oversized head, cuddly paws), but also the relationship Doraemon establishes with an imaginary world. Devices such as the "dokodemo doa" (door that opens into anywhere) are a reminder, for this adult fan, of something beyond the reality of his office, cramped housing, and daily commutes. This is what Fujimi carries with him from his childhood fascination with Doraemon: a mechanism for interacting with the world through the imagination. And for him, this is soothing in an age marked by heightened alienation, atomism, and flux (20).

According to Sengoku Tamotsu, a specialist in children's culture, children's trends are different in Japan and the United States. Popular characters in the States are typically strong, active, and sharply drawn: they are typically heroes with whom children positively identify (and here he includes not only Superman but also Mickey Mouse). By contrast, Japanese favorites tend to be like Tarepanda, a slow, lumbering panda with droopy eyes. According to Sengoku, this latter trend in cute characters started in the 1970s when economic conditions began to improve in Japan. At this time, the character of animated characters shifted from the hard work and ambitiousness of Tetsuwan Atomu (Tezuka Osamu's comic and cartoon character of the 1950s, who was a boy-robot with atomic powers, a humane heart, and an industrious mindset) to softer, "escapist" models that dominate today, such as Miffy and Pokémon. Such characters are not so much inspiring as reassuring to children. Doraemon is a personal protector: a fantastical figure who is more an object of love than identification. Something that simultaneously is and is not the self is also how the director of Japan's most recent Godzilla movie, *Gojira 2000 Mireniamu* (Godzilla 2000 Millennium) describes the relationship Japanese audiences have with this monster (Tōhō Eiga 2000). In the United States remake by TriStar Pictures in 1999, Godzilla is a rationally efficient killing machine that, depicted as a pure and evil "other," generates sentiments only of repulsion. This version was found to be so alien to Japanese that they created yet another iteration of their own: one where Gojira is once again the more ambiguous character audiences find sympathetic, yet fearsome. Japanese dream of repelling this monster, but also becoming him. Gojira movies express both dreams and nightmares, and both these images "exist inside us."

In Japan as well as the United States I was told that the construction of fantasy in children's entertainment differs between the two countries. In the States, the trend is for greater realism and clear-cut borders (for example, in plots that emphasize battles between good and evil). In Japan, by contrast, the preference is for greater phantasm and ambiguity: characters and stories that would be unimaginable in real life. This preference carries over to other objects of play. Describing the difference in doll fashions, Kobayashi Reiji (1998) writes that Japan and the United States are at the opposite ends of the spectrum. Reality is important in the States, whereas in Japan, if a doll looks too real, children get uneasy. Contrasting the two doll cultures of Barbie and Licca-chan (until recently, Japan's leading doll), she argues that while Barbie dolls are "real

life," Licca dolls are "cute." Again, cuteness carries with it the feelings of comfort and reassurance. Increasingly, this production of cuteness in Japan is moving into the new, technologized terrain of children's playscapes: from dolls, stuffed animals, and cartoon characters to the digitalized screens of Game Boys, cell phones, and Palm Pilots. One common toy trend in the 1990s has been "growing" imaginary, digital characters that become cute pets or close companions. With Casio's *petto wa-rudo* (pet world), for example, cute pets appear on the screen and grow if walked and shampooed by the child, tasks performed by manipulating controls on the screen (Morishita 1999:32). Similarly, with the kid hit Tamagotchi, players hatch an egg on the screen and cultivate a virtual pet, an amalgam of nature and artifice. What kind of pet develops and how long it lives depends on the caretaking (serving food, cleaning up poop, disciplining and entertaining) a player gives it. Cuteness here involves not only interaction with a virtual creature, but also its creation and maintenance. Children must perform labor to ensure the viability of their cute pets. As long as they do this, however, they carry with them a portable companion with whom they can interact wherever they go: pocket intimacy.

MONSTERS AND CAPITALISM

In writing about his personal attachment to Doraemon, Fujimi (1998) is dismayed by certain conditions in millennial Japan. With modernity has come a society where material things are valued more than interpersonal relations and everything is seen in coldly rational terms. Nostalgic for cultural traditions, he speaks of premodern Japan as a time when otherworldly spirits—ghosts, monsters, demons, fairies—constituted an important feature of everyday life. Interactions with these liminal beings—positioned neither inside nor outside phenomenal reality—were a meaningful, often playful, part of the social landscape. Such an ambiguous life form no longer has the currency it once did in a society that has become so rationalized and commodified as postindustrial Japan (Fujimi 1998:20). Yet, mirroring Tajiri's hope of recovering a tradition of insect collecting through the collecting of digitalized pocket monsters, Fujimi sees vestiges of traditional spirits in the modern-day cuteness of mass produced characters like Doraemon. For both these men, contemporary life has lost something in the way of humanity. And both see relief for this loss in play they associate with not only their own childhoods but also the childhood of Japan.

"Healing" is a word commonly used in Japan these days to laud the social and psychological merits of cute character goods and of interactive products such as Pokémon that are seen as having the power to relieve loneliness and reduce stress. It is also common to see Japanese sensibilities or traditions in these postmodern stress relievers. The anthropologist Nakazawa Shin'ichi (personal interview, Tokyo, March 2000) suggests that a game world such as Pokémon allows players a conduit into what he calls (after Lévi-Strauss) the "primitive unconscious," into interaction with things, thoughts, beings, and spaces that hover between the "real world" and beyond. Just as the wild imaginations of children get tamed when they become adults, society's imagination has been tamed by the process of industrialization. Yet even in its postmodernity, according to Nakazawa, Japan has managed to hold onto the "primitive unconscious" in its play industry, whose products capture childrens' (and adults') imaginations. They also yield enormous profits—a paradox that, in his opinion, encapsulates the direction in which capitalism is headed today (personal interview, Tokyo, March 2000). Certainly, the sales generated by Japan's entertainment industry in the domestic and global marketplace are a bright spot in an economy debilitated by recession. And the capital generated, as mentioned already, is not only real but also symbolic. The cachet of Japanese culture has risen along with the circulation of made-in-Japan consumer/play goods around the world. In this sense as well, cute play goods are healing Japan.

Increasingly, play(ful) technology coming from Japan is identified as something distinctly Japanese. This identification is made not only by culturalists like Nakazawa (who takes nationalist pride in the cultural traditions and capitalism he associates with products like Pokémon), but by non-Japanese commentators as well. For example, in *Wired* magazine, an article on DoCoMo (Japan's wireless internet service) reports that Japan is "putting its stamp on the times" by leading the world in consumer electronics (Rose 2001:129). It notes how Japanese technology is not only flexible and convenient but also cozy and fun. In the case of DoCoMo, a cell phone is also a hand-held computer and a wireless e-mail receiver: multiple functions in one sleek device. It is also possible to adorn one's screensaver with Hello Kitty. This serves as a stress reliever, the article adds. "Gazing at Hello Kitty on their handsets, they'll relax for a moment as they coo, 'Oh, I'm healed'" (129). High-tech "healing" via a new-age link-up to the primitive unconscious is a commodity Japan now exports to the rest of the world.

This healing, however, comes embedded in consumer fetishism of epic pro-

portions. In the millennial marketplace of cuteness, images such as those of Pikachu and Doraemon appear everywhere, on anything, in never ending editions. As the Japanese toy company Bandai articulates this principle (Bandai 1997), a child's happiness can be maximized by spreading her favorite character on everything from pajamas, backpacks, and lunch boxes to breakfast cereal, bath bubbles, and galoshes. Corporate profits are maximized as well, of course, when children's play pals are not just dolls and action figures, but images that cover their clothing, food, bath toys, backpacks, bedding, and wallpaper. The parameters of play and fantasy change in the process. No longer confined to particular objects (e.g., a lunch box), spaces (e.g., the playground), or times (e.g., recess), "play" becomes insinuated into far more domains of everyday life. The border between play and nonplay, commodity and not, increasingly blurs. In its Pokémon campaign, for example, a Japanese airline (All Nippon Airways) has painted the exterior of some of its aircraft with huge (flying) Pokémon. Passengers riding on these planes have a voyage that is thoroughly thematic: everything is encased in Pokémania, from headrests, the attendants' uniforms, and food containers to in-flight entertainment and take-home goody bags. A plane ride is transformed into a flying theme park, and a jet becomes an imaginary monster that both is, and promotes, a popular child fad.

The fact that "getting" is the very logic of the Pokémon game is a sign of the progression of the entwinement of play in commodity acquisitiveness. "Gotta catch 'em all" is the slogan by which Pokémon is marketed. This refers, literally, to the game's object of catching all the Pocket Monsters within the game. Metaphorically, however, catching stands for the player's relationship to this entire play world, which is situated within the world of consumerism, which Pokémon itself mimics in play(ing) capitalism. Access to this world comes through the medium of Pokémon consumer goods. And to keep access (and interest) alive, ever more goods cry out to be bought. While cuteness may bring postmodern relief, it comes at the expense of a cascading commoditization. Pokémon, while pocket fantasies and portable pals, are at the same time a paradigmatic currency of and for millennial capitalism.

With play products such as Pokémon, Japan's cultural industries have touched a pulse in the imaginations and lives of millennial children in this era of cybertechnology and postindustrial socialization. They have done this by blending flexibility and fantasy into technology that is conveniently portable, virtuality that is intimately cute, and a commodity form that is polymor-

phously perverse. And, as its stock in the marketplace of children's entertainment rises (slowly) around the world, Japan is moving itself closer to the center of global culture. One consequence of this is the decentering of cultural (entertainment) trends once hegemonized by Euroamerica (and particularly the United States). The implications of this, I suggest, are profound.

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