

Portable monsters and commodity cuteness: *Pokémon* as Japan's new global power

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By any means of calculation, *Pokémon* has been a spectacular success. Starting as a GameBoy game in a single market (Japan in 1996), it expanded into a media-mix, global operation outstanding for both the longevity and expanse of its popularity. In a children's marketplace where even trends tend to peak at one year, *Pokémon* has exceeded seven years of operation and even today (2003) is generating new products and profits.¹ Its global spread has been equally impressive. Moving from East Asia and Australia to the Americas (North, South, and Central), Western Europe, Israel, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia, *Pokémon* has sold successfully in markets literally across the world. And its popularity, like that of Coca-Cola, has percolated into even remote villages. *Pokémon* toys were seen by a friend in a marketplace in upland Peru and, in a feature on the isolated Dani in Indonesia, *The New York Times* reported that, despite their 'stone age ways', kids there wore *Pokémon* outfits.²

One of the most burning questions raised by the *Pokémon* phenomenon around the world is the secret of its success. What precisely about this product has made it such a global sensation? And, along with this question, another has been posed as well. How did Japan achieve this victory in what is one of the toughest corners of the world market long dominated by the US? Dictated by trends, 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 and Disney produced children's mass fantasies 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. By the late 1980s, however, Japan was beginning to break into global kid trends with a number of popular products. Starting with the Sony Walkman, transformer toys, and video games (software and hardware), these successes moved, in the 1990s, into television shows (*Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*), cartoons (*Sailor Moon*), digital toys (the virtual pet, *tamagotchi*), and the multi-media hit, *Pokémon*. It is still premature to call Japan, as some have done, the new 'superpower' in the global culture of children today. At the very least, however, the worldwide fury caused by *Pokémon* and other Japanese kid products signifies a shift in the entertainment styles and marketplace once monopolized by the US.

What are the implications of this shift in the popular imagination and

production of children's mass culture at this millennial moment? And, what is at the root of *Pokémon*'s amazing popularity: the technology, the marketing strategies, or the construction of play, fantasy, and the imagination? Drawing on fieldwork I did on the production, marketing, and consumption of *Pokémon* both in Japan and the United States, I trace how what is distinct about this playscape as well as others coming from Japan in recent years is often encapsulated in a notion Japanese call 'cuteness' (*kawaisa*). Variable in what this actually refers to, cuteness involves emotional attachments to imaginary creations/creatures with resonances to childhood and also Japanese traditional culture. The way in which cuteness gets packaged, however, is in a hyper-consumerist form that is also technologically advanced (digital screens) and nomadically portable (Game-Boys). All of this is at work, I argue here, in the millennial play product(s) Japan is selling—and using to sell itself—on the popular marketplace of global (kids') culture.

Cuteness as national export and cultural capital

While opinions vary on what accounts for *Pokémon*'s success, many attribute it to its media-mix configuration, a brilliant marketing campaign, and also the play concept itself. Joining all this is the assessment that *Pokémon* is highly diverse, malleable, and open-ended. Ishihara Tsunekazu, one of its producers (president and CEO of Creatures, Inc.), characterizes *Pokémon* as a product that is endlessly expandable and easy to connect to other media. According to Kubo Masakazu, another *Pokémon* producer, these characteristics are true of the play *Pokémon* engenders as well. 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 4 to 14). Throughout discussions of *Pokémon* is the observation that, in terms of how it crosses media, products, and play-nodalities, it is less a singular product *per se* than a broader (and more flexible) world or universe. Thus, while it may be rooted in one medium (in Japan, this is often said to be the game), the aura of *Pokémon* is said to extend outwards encompassing the player in an entire world—a world that is both imaginary (with imaginary places, creatures, and adventures) and real (involving the player in exchanges, purchases, and everyday involvement with *Pokémon*).

It is this larger world that the Japanese journal *Gendai*, in an article on the 'unprecedented social phenomenon' of *Pokémon*,³ recognizes as key. In its words, *Pokémon*'s popularity stems from not the game alone but also its character merchandising and its aura of 'cuteness' which appeals across gender and age. The *Gendai* 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 their own favorite pocket monster, and young women in their teens and twenties who consume cuteness in everything from Kitti-chan to, now, *Pokémon*. 'Cuteness' is also the word Kubo Masakazu⁴ uses to describe the appeal of the entire *Pokémon* operation. The playworld is itself 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' between the components which Kubo attributes to the characters and a quality he refers to as 'cuteness'. Speaking specifically of *Pokémon* and its success on the export market (such as becoming the top-ranked children's show on Saturday morning TV in the US), Kubo adds that cuteness gives Japan 'cultural power' and is something Japanese are 'polishing' overseas.

Cuteness, as the Japanese cultural critic Okada Tsuneo states,⁵ is one thing that registers for all people. In his mind, *Pokémon* defines cuteness. As evidenced by the revenues it has generated (over 8 billion dollars in 2001), Japan's business of cuteness is booming and well established around the world. The children's entertainment business, in fact, is one of the few that has not only survived, but grown, in this post-Bubble period of recessionary economics in Japan. Observers have noted that, if Japan could sell *Pokémon* electricity, houses, and trains,⁶ its economy would recover overnight. But, to follow in the footsteps of *Pokémon*, this would require substantial sales overseas. For this reason, Okada concludes that cuteness may be Japan's key to working foreign capital in the twenty-first century.⁷ Others put this somewhat differently and 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.⁸

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 'international common culture'⁹ 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 more cultural sphere of 'soft' versus 'hard' technology—music, televisual dramas, pop idols—has been far more parochial. As the designer of the Sony Walkman has lamented, while Japanese technology circulates popularly around the world, few people (outside of Japan) have been similarly impressed or moved by its culture.¹⁰ But with kid hits like *Pokémon*, Japan is becoming recognized for not only its high-tech consumer goods, but also what might be called postmodern play aesthetics. Japan's achievements here signal another important change in its brokering of the globalised landscape of culture/economics. Unlike the policy it has adopted in postwar times of culturally neutering the goods it sends overseas in order to assure their marketability, Japan has marketed *Pokemon* as clearly 'Japanese.' National origins are imprinted rather than effaced here, indicating a shift away from what Iwabauchi Koichi has called Japan's policy of 'de-odorizing' the cultural aroma of its exports.¹¹

For the above 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 US, the press has called *Pokémon* a '*sekai teki kyarakuta*' (global character); a sign, as *Dime Magazine* put it, that America is 'boiling over' (*wakikaeru*) with Japanese goods for the first time in ages;¹² and, as many magazines and newspapers report, a symbol of Japan's power or 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 US, a reporter wrote in the *Asahi Shimbun*.¹³ 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 US in November 1999, much attention was given to the fact that it played on over 3,000 screens (in contrast to 2,000 in Japan) and was the week's top-ranked movie, grossing close to first week sales for *Star Wars, Episode I* (and surpassing those of *Lion King*). A reporter in the *Mainichi Shimbun* wrote, should the success of Japanese animation and children's entertainment continue in the US, Japan will easily overtake Disney and this in a country where Disney is synonymous with the country itself.¹⁴

As for American children themselves, all whom I interviewed knew that *Pokémon* came originally from Japan. And while none linked this fact to their reasons for liking the product ('I don't like *Pokémon* because it's Japanese'), many said that, as a result of *Pokémon* and other 'cool' Japanese goods, they have developed an interest in Japan. A number said that they now wanted to study Japanese and travel there one day. When I then asked what image they had of the country, a number answered that Japan was the producer of 'cool' products. In the words of one 10-year-old boy, 'I like Japan. It's a good place because they make cool things for us like Nintendo game systems, Sony Walkman, and now *Pokémon*.' In the minds of these young American kids, Japan has a positive association directly linked to its production of play technology. When I asked what precisely it was about *Pokémon* that they liked, one 7-year-old answered readily. This came down to three things: the diversity and constitution of the *Pokémon* pocket monsters (part nature, part make-believe), the relationships kids have with them (warriors that one trains and owns, but also cute pets), and the world of *Pokémon* itself (interesting and 'different'). For other kids, the appeal of *Pokémon* was more that it represented an entire world—of cards, trading, matches, cute *Pokémon*—that they experienced as their own. As most of the children I spoke to expressed in some way, *Pokémon* is enticing because it is different, comfortable, and full of multiple (and changing) parts.

It is this polymorphous, open-ended, everyday nature of *Pokémon* that many of its Japanese producers or commentators refer to under the umbrella of 'cuteness.' While rarely using the same word, many in the US entertainment field I spoke with concurred that the strength of the product is connected to its flexibility and everydayness. According to a game designer for Wizards of the Coast (the distributors of the *Pokémon* cards in the US, now a subsidiary of Hasbro),¹⁵ the fact that *Pokémon* is game-based makes it more interactive than a mere cartoon or film. The latter is the purview of Disney, which translates into

a certain kind of product, but doesn't become engrained into a child's 'lifestyle' to the degree *Pokémon* does. As he and others believed, Japan's strengths in the field of children's play rest in interactivity as generated by game-based play complexes. Many noted that Disney is behind in developing game technology and that its own strengths, as well as those of Hollywood, have been built through the screen-based media of film and television. Japan is ahead in new-age play technology, was the consensus. 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 (on a gameboy, deck of cards, 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* is associated with the qualities of *amae*—sweetness connected to dependence—and *yasashii*—gentleness. While *kawaii* is linked to girls and girlishness, it is not exclusively 'feminine'. Someone's personality can be called *kawaii*, for example, and so can a boy's face, though this could also mean it was 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 buys to consume and also cultivates in and as part of the self.

Yasashii or the gentle aspect of cuteness is precisely the word Japanese producers used to describe the marketing of *Pokémon* in Japan. Gentleness wasn't its original sensibility, however, when it began as a role-playing/action game targeted primarily at boys aged 8–14. Once its marketers sensed that this GameBoy game could be turned into a full-blown fad, however, gentleness was added to popularize *Pokémon* with a wider audience. Expanding the game into, first, a comicbook series, and then 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 Satoshi, called Ash in English, who aims to be the 'world's greatest *Pokémon* trainer'), but a pokémon with whom fans would not identify but develop feelings of attachment, nurturance, and intimacy. This was Pikachu. Merely one of 151 monsters in the GameBoy game, it became the central focus in the cartoon iteration and subsequent faddishization. According to the producer who oversaw the cartoonizing of *Pokémon*,¹⁶ Pikachu was chosen for a number of reasons: its bright yellow color, memorable chant ('*pika pika chuuuuuuuu*'), unforgettable shape, and, most importantly, its cuteness which could attract just about anyone. Much like Japan itself as it strides to become the new 'superpower' of global kids' properties, Pikachu is not only cute, however, but also fiercely tough. It

rides atop Ash's shoulders like a dependent child, but is a formidable warrior under this gentle façade. (And the guise of cuteness has greatly helped in securing a warm reception in American pop culture where, only ten years earlier, Sony's buy-out of Columbia Studios provoked cries of cultural take-over.)

When *Pokémon* entered the marketplace of the United States, the image given it was more dynamic and bold than the cuteness accorded it in Japan. Brighter colors have been used in the advertising, for example. And instead of making Pikachu the central character, Ash has been forefronted, under the assumption, not entirely borne out, that American kids need a heroic character with whom to identify. Centering Ash and playing up his heroism have also been adjustments made to the movies in their US remake. This was intended, in part, to relieve what was assessed to be an ambiguity at the level of both the story and its morality in the Japanese movies. In *Mew Two Strikes Back*, for example, the US director, Norman Grossfeld, altered the storyline to make the cloned *Pokémon*, Mew Two, clearly evil, and the battle Ash waged against it, definitively 'good'¹⁷—two features that were much hazier in the Japanese original. As Grossfeld has explained, the convention in US kids' culture 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 rather than gets contained by them (good/bad, real/fantasy, animal/human), is a central part of cuteness as generated by the cute business in Japan. The latter gets retooled as it enters an export market like the US. But, in the emphasis given non-human monsters (that don't, for the most part, get anthropomorphized as do Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck) and the polymorphous attachments kids make with them, ambiguity linked with 'gentleness' remains central to Japanese kid products as they travel so successfully around the world.

The cute business started in the 1970s in Japan. The toy business began much earlier, of course, and, immediately after the 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 US. 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 which, in the 1950s and 1960s, were mainly television characters and, by the 1970s, increasingly came from *manga*. After the first postwar economic burst of 1968 when the economy turned more towards consumption, the flavor in children's styles changed from what has been called '*moretsu*' (hard work) to '*byūchifuru*' (beautiful) which really means cute. Sanrio began its Hello Kitty line in the 1970s, 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 something like national mascots, and a fad for koalas followed shortly after. In the 1980s, commercial businesses started adopting cute characters in promotional advertising. ANA airlines, for example, turned around a lagging ski campaign by employing the character Snoopy, and JAL (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 (and insignia on bankbooks)¹⁸

and, 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 advertising agency, Dentsū (1999), this is because cute characters are appropriated as symbols for (personal, corporate, group, national) identity. The ‘essence’ of character merchandising, Dentsū states, is that it ‘glues society at its root. 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*). Certainly, the images of cute characters are omnipresent in the landscape of urban, millennial Japan. Iconized onto commercial goods, they appear on T-shirts, bookbags, lunch-boxes, pencils, hair-ribbons, hand towels, rice bowls, bath soap, cooking pans, calendars, and erasers. Characters also embroider posters for public events or neighborhood fairs, show up on government notices or service announcements, and are stamped onto computers, xerox machines, and even bulldozers.

What defines cuteness in this national fixation on *kawaii* in Japan, and how does it get produced in and through such character goods as *Pokémon*? As the 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 Japan¹⁹ 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 counter-posed to the rigours demanded elsewhere in life which, in Japan, are for discipline and performance at school, work, and home. These pressures exist for males as well as 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 cuteness, one has 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* GameBoy 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 kids a means of relieving the stresses of growing up in a post-industrial 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 as early as birth. Space and time for play has diminished. And in an environment where everyone moves fast to accomplish more and more everyday, the 'human relationships' once so prized in the society 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 phones, walkmans, palm pilots, GameBoys). Children are particularly victimized by what one person has called 'solitarism'. For 10–14-year-olds, most 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.²⁰

In Tajiri's mind, millennial Japan comes with a loss to 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 borrowed on his own childhood experiences in a town where nature had not yet been overtaken by industrialisation. 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 (ala exchanges and information-sharing with other kids). At once fun and instructive, this play-form is what Tajiri wanted to both capture and transmit to present-day kids for whom nature is not a ready-made playground. The format he chose for this new-age insect collecting was virtuality: digitally-constructed worlds, activities, and monsters. A game-junkie (*otaku*) himself since the age of 12 when a video arcade featuring *Space Invaders* came to 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 had found collecting insects as a younger child. Yet, unlike the latter, which opens kids 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 towards greater complexity that, demanding intense concentration, pulls players into solitary engagements with their virtual gameworlds.

Disturbed by this current tendency in atomism, both in gaming and the society at large, Tajiri aimed to design his game to promote more interactivensess. He did this by, first, making the game challenging but doable even by children as young as 4 (unlike many games on the market today that are targeted at far older children, even adults). Given the surfeit of detail involved in playing *Pokémon*, kids are also encouraged to gather and exchange information, making the gameworld something like a language that promotes communication. *Tsūshin*, communication, is, in fact, the keyword used by Tajiri and its marketers in the promotion of *Pokémon* in everything from the guidebooks to instructional books that accompany the game. This communication is literalized further in that, to acquire all 151 pocket monster (and, now, 351 with the latest—Ruby and

Sapphire—GameBoy game versions), one needs to make exchanges with other kids. 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 between kids. Interactiveness was built into *Pokémon* in yet a third way which relates more directly to the topic of cuteness. This was giving kids 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, 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 GameBoys 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 (their construction) and everyday life (the context in which they get played—on GameBoys as a child commutes from school to home, for example).

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’. With these entities, children develop attachments that help them navigate and survive the bumpy road of growing up. Becoming a personal resource/companion/possession/fantasy, imaginary creations provide an avenue for both playing with and escaping the real world. This type of interactivity is what Tajiri also had in mind by building ‘communication’ into the game design of *Pokémon*. By this, he attempted to create imaginary life-forms that children could interact with (as pals, tools, pets, weapons) in various ways. And, as numerous kids have conveyed about their own attachments to pocket monsters, what is appealing about these fantasy creatures is not merely how they look or act but what they evoke in the way of emotions. 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 a 10-year-old boy in Tokyo, for example, 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 7-year-old girl in the US, they are:

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 in the same way. What is mentioned continually in discussing cute characters is not merely their physical attributes (big head, small body, huge eyes, absent nose), but also, and more importantly, the relationships people form with them. This is true, for example of how 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 10-year-old boy in his various dilemmas. Inhabiting an imaginary space that mediates between

fantasy and reality, Doraemon is what Fujimi calls a ‘transitional object’ (after the object relations theorist, Winnicott). Moving between the outside world and the inner self, this character/space is ‘part of me,’ the author states. 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.²¹

According to Sengoku Tamotsu, a specialist in children’s culture,²² kid trends are different in Japan and the United States. Popular characters in the US are typically strong, active, and sharply drawn: heroes with which children positively identify (and here he included not only Superman but also Mickey Mouse). By contrast, Japanese favorites tend to be like the panda Tarepanda: a slow, lumbering animal with droopy eyes that is lovable and unreal. According to Sengoku, this latter trend in cute characters started in the 1970s when, as we have noted already, economic conditions began to improve in Japan. Accordingly, the motif in character trends shifted from the hard work and ambitiousness of *Tetsuwan Atomu* (Tezuka Osamu’s comic and cartoon character of the 1950s which was a boy-robot with atomic powers, humane heart, and an industrious mind-set) to softer, ‘escapist’ models that dominate today, such as Miffy and, as Sengoku includes in this category, *Pokemon*. Such characters are less inspiring than reassuring to children. This is like the flawed Nobita for whom Doraemon is a personal protector: a fantasy creation that, an appendage to a human, is more loved as a useful tool/buddy than identified with. Something which both is and is not the self is also how the director of Japan’s most recent Godzilla movie²³ describes the relationship Japanese audiences have with this monster. In the US 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 they created yet another iteration of their own: one where Gojira is a more ambiguous character, one that audiences find sympathetic yet fearful at the same time. Japanese dream of repelling this monster but also of becoming him because of his power and strength. *Gojira* movies express both dreams and nightmares, and both these images ‘exist inside us’.

In Japan as well as the US, I was told that the construction of fantasy in children’s entertainment differs between the two countries. The trend, in the US, is for greater realism and clear-cut borders (good versus evil in plotlines, for example). In Japan, by contrast, the preference is for greater phantasm and ambiguity: characters and stories that would be unimaginable in ‘real life’. Describing this difference in doll fashions, a Japanese scholar²⁴ writes that Japan and the US are at opposite ends of the spectrum. Reality is important in the US, whereas, in Japan, if a doll looks too real, children get uneasy. Contrasting the two doll cultures of Barbie and Ricca-chan (Japan’s leading doll until recently), Kobayashi argues that Barbie dolls are ‘real live’ but Ricca dolls are ‘cute’.

Again, cuteness carries with it an emotion of comfort or reassurance. Increasingly, this production of cuteness in Japan is moving into the new, technologised terrain of children's playscapes: from dolls, stuffed animals, and cartoon characters to the digitalised screens of GameBoys, 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).²⁵ Similarly with the kid hit *tamagotchi*, players hatch an egg on the screen and cultivate a virtual pet (designed, in appearance, as amalgams of both nature and artifice). What kind of pet develops and how long it lives depends on the care (serving food, cleaning up poop, disciplining and playing with the pet) a player gives it. Cuteness here involves not only interaction with a virtual creature, but also its creation and maintenance. Kids must perform labour 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 is dismayed by certain conditions in millennial Japan.²⁶ 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 post-industrial Japan. Yet, like the insect-collecting Tajiri tries to recoup with digitalised 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 a 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 play merchandise like cute character goods and the interactive *Pokémon*. Their value in relieving loneliness and stress is widely acknowledged and praised in commentary that is generally positive. Also fairly common is the tendency to see Japanese sensibilities or traditions in these postmodern stress-relievers. As the anthropologist Nakazawa Shin'ichi has put this, a gameworld like *Pókemon* allows players a conduit into what he calls (after Lévi-Strauss) the 'primitive unconscious': an interaction with things, thoughts, beings, and spaces that hovers between the 'real world' and beyond. Just like children whose wild imaginations get tamed as adults, the same has happened to society over the course of industrialisation. Yet even in its postmodernity, according to Nakazawa, Japan has managed to hold onto the 'primitive uncon-

scious' in its play industry. Products here capture children's imaginations. They also, paradoxically, yield enormous profits—a paradox that, in his opinion, 'encapsulates the direction in which capitalism is headed today'.²⁷ 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 gets identified with/as something distinctly Japanese. This is true not only of culturalists like Nakazawa (who takes nationalist pride in the cultural traditions and capitalism he associates with products like *Pokémon*). In the American publication, *Wired* magazine, for example, a recent 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.²⁸ It notes here how Japanese technology is not only flexible and convenient but also cozy and fun. In the case of DoCoMo, what is a cell phone is also a hand-held computer and a wireless email receiver: multiple functions in one sleek device. Available as well are numerous play services, such as adorning 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."' ²⁹ The notion of 'healing' via a new-age link-up to the 'primitive unconscious' goes along with the consumer electronic/play goods Japan is marketing so sensationally in the global marketplace. Like a return of the repressed, this has become a commodity Japan now exports to the rest of the world.

What is a retro nod to the past in the cute endearments of a DoCoMo wireless service or *Pokémon* GameBoy game also comes embedded, however, in a consumer fetishism of new-age proportions. In this millennial marketplace of cuteness, the product appears everywhere, on anything, and into never-ending editions. If there is something soothing and appealing about a Doraemon or a Pikachu, the aim of marketers has been to extend and expand this emotional relationship into more and more vistas of commodifiable existence. As the Japanese toy company, Bandai, articulates this principle,³⁰ a child's happiness can be maximized by spreading her favorite character on everything from PJs, backpacks, and lunch boxes to breakfast cereal, bath bubbles, and galoshes. Corporate profits are maximized as well, of course, when children's play pals go from mere dolls and action figures to the endless surfaces of daily existence (what we wear, eat, sleep in, bathe with). The parameters of play and fantasy change as well in the process. Less segmented off into particular objects, spaces, or times (a playroom, toy chest, recess at school), 'play' becomes insinuated into far more corpuscles of everyday life. In this, the border between play and non-play, commodity and not, increasingly blurs. In its *Pokémon* campaign, for example, a Japanese airline (ANA, All Nippon Airways) has painted the exterior of some of its aircraft with huge (flying) pocket monsters. For passengers riding inside these planes, their voyage is thoroughly thematic; everything is encased in Pokemania from headrests, attendants' dress, 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 kids' fad.

One impassioned 8-year-old fan told me proudly, '*Pokémon* is my entire life'. He had three editions of the GameBoy game, the television video game, endless trading cards, several *Pokémon* toy figures, the three movies, several recorded episodes of the cartoon, and *Pokémon* insignia on slippers, T-shirts, cereal bowls, and notebooks. His entrancement with this imaginary playworld fed an appetite to both acquire and accumulate great stacks of 'stuff'. Not all these things were entirely commercial. He spent hours drawing pictures of various pocket monsters, for example, and even traded these with his sister who had her own collection. And according to many parents I have spoken to whose kids have been similarly struck by the Poké-bug, there is a lot about the fixation that breeds desires beyond mere materialism. It cultivates interests in reading, organizing, gathering information, math, exchanges, calculation, strategy, and storytelling. While not reducible to commodity fetishism, however, this play also feeds an appetite for more and more *Pokémon* things. Virtually all the kids I spoke to who self-identified as hot-and-heavy *Pokémon* fans either wanted or had recently acquired some new *Pokémon* stash. Play and acquisition go hand in hand here. Of course, there is nothing particularly new or particularly Japanese in any of this. In today's era of consumer brand capitalism, everything shape-shifts in a marketplace where desires and commodities spread like an infectious disease.

The fact that 'getting' is the very logic of the *Pokémon* game, however, may be one sign of further progression of the entwinement of play in commodity acquisitiveness. 'Gotta catch em all' is the catchphrase by which *Pokémon* has been advertised and sloganized in the US. 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 world—of play 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, then, it comes at the expense of a cascading commoditization. And *Pokémon*, while pocket fantasies and portable pals, is at the same time (and in this very form) a currency of and for millennial capitalism.

Conclusion

It is warm day in summer 2003 and, like many times over the past few years, I have arranged a 'play date' with the children next door. These are rabid *Pokémon* fans—a girl and a boy now aged 7 and 9—who have been thoroughly ensconced in the phenomenon for over two years. Today the kids want to engage in some trades. First, though, we show each other our new stuff. For me, this is a guidebook of the newest gameboy game version—Ruby and Crystal; for Jake, this is the new cube for his television (to which he can play video games and attach his GameBoy); and for Emma, these are the pokémon she has recently

captured on her Ruby version of the gameboy game. After this, we hook up our GameBoys—first Jake and I, then Emma and Jake—to transfer pocket monsters between our systems using the hook-up cable we all, by now, own. Infused by what is new capital for them, the two kids return to their own GameBoys and the path they're on to capture all 351 monsters (up from the original 151) within the game that will signal ultimate victory. I sit back and take a sip of the tea the children's mother has made me. She laughs and says *Pokémon* mystifies her. Unlike other fixations the children have had (like *Harry Potter* which is a story she follows and likes), this one feels much more alien. When the kids manoeuvre their GameBoys or excitedly relate some of the endless details they have mastered about a pokémon's attacks, strengths, or evolutions, she doesn't 'get' it—neither the appeal nor the rules of this gameworld.

Yet, both this woman and her husband approve of the play. *Pokémon* has stimulated their kids' reading, motivated them to study and learn a minutiae of facts, helped create a cooperative play atmosphere between the two children, encouraged creativity and strategy building, and fed interest in something they approach as active rather than passive consumers. Certainly, a lot of purchases have been made along the way: different GameBoys (and contraptions), a number of (GameBoy) game editions, the television video game, a boardgame, books, movies, merchandise, and strategy guides. But the parental opinion on all this is that the kids really play with the goods rather than want them to simply own or have as badges of coolness. And, in their mind, *Pokémon* is a healthy, stimulating, and socially beneficial play-form. *Pokémon* is also a sign of new times. Play is organized differently here, through GameBoys and virtual game systems where characters are digitalized icons manipulated by controls in a gamespace that is interactive rather than (merely) watched on a screen or read from a printed page. This is a media-mixed playscape demanding multi-skilled players who adeptly move from space to space. Both the skills and orientation at work in *Pokémon* mirror those increasingly demanded of subjects in the millennial/global workspace of today: manipulation of data on the information highways of computers, the internet, and venture capital.

That *Pokémon* mimics and prepares kids for a new kind of world is something my neighbors keenly sense. In their own case (unlike the tendency more in Japan), they don't connect any of this to the country where *Pokémon* was produced, nor to its cultural traditions (belief in otherworldly spirits, an aesthetics of ambiguity, a kids' play tradition of insect collecting). Yet they refer to this gameworld as being in a league of its own for the intensity with which it has captured and held the interest of their children for so long. Even when not being overtly recognized for doing so, then, we can say that, with play products like *Pokémon*, Japan's cultural industries have touched a pulse in the imaginations and lives of millennial children in this era of cyber-technology and post-industrial 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 polymorphously perverse. And, as its stock in the marketplace of kids' entertainment rises (slowly) around the world, Japan is putting itself into/onto the map of global culture at the same time.

One consequence of this is the decentering of cultural (entertainment) trends

once hegemonised by Euroamerica (and particularly the United States). Another is the spread, ever deeper, of children's marketing—the selling to, and of, kids—into the global economy, and the role, played in this, by Japanese cuteness in this era of *Pokémon* capitalism.

Notes

- ¹ In spring 2003, two new GameBoy editions (for GameBoy Advance) were released, Ruby and Sapphire, adding 100 more pocket monsters to an empire that has sold 100 million games to date.
- ² Calvin Sims, 'Stone Age Ways', *The New York Times*, March 11, 2001, section 1, p 8.
- ³ Michikazau Yamato, 'Kūzen no Shakai Genshō "Pokémon" Chō hitto no Nazo' (The Riddle of the Super-hit *Pokémon* that is an Unprecedented Social Phenomenon), *Gendai*, January, 1988, pp 242–249.
- ⁴ Japan Society presentation.
- ⁵ Cited in Yamato 1988.
- ⁶ 'Shin hitto no Shingenchi Pokekuro Sedai' (The *Pokémon* Generation from the Earthquake of the New Hit), *Nikkei Entertainment*, January, 1998, pp 48–50.
- ⁷ Yamato 1988.
- ⁸ 'Nihon Anime Kaiga ni Eikyōryoku' (The Influence of Japanese Animation Overseas), *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, December, 1999, pp 1, 3.
- ⁹ 'Shin hitto no Shingenchi Pokekuro Sedai'.
- ¹⁰ Yasuo Kuroki, 'Nihon no Monotsukuri wa Sekai ni Eikyō o Ataetiru ka?' (Is Japan's Style of Making Things Influencing the World?), in *Sekai Shōhin no Tsukurikata: Nihon Media ga Sekai o Seishita Hi* (The Making of Global Commodities: The Day Japanese Media Conquered the World), ed. Akurosu Henshūshitsu, Tōkyō: Parco Shuppan, 1995, pp 10–16.
- ¹¹ Making its goods '*mukokuseki*' (non-national) was meant to disassociate them from unpleasant associations with Japan. In Euroamerican markets, these associations were of Japan as the producer of cheap trinkets (such as tin toys and paper umbrellas), following the war, and in East and Southeast Asian countries, the memories were more of Japan's legacy as brutal colonizer. Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.
- ¹² '*Pokémon* Gezzu o Getto seyo!' (Let's get the *Pokémon* gaze), *Dime Magazine*, September 2, 1999, p 11.
- ¹³ Kinto Shotarō, 'Bei no *Pokémon* Genshō' (The Phenomenon of *Pokémon* in America), *Asahi Shimbun*, November 29, 1999, p 4.
- ¹⁴ Yasuki Hamano, '*Pokémon* Haken no Imi' (The Meaning of *Pokémon*'s Supremacy), *Mainichi Shimbun*, November 2, 1999, p 4.
- ¹⁵ Personal interview.
- ¹⁶ Masakazu Kubo, 'Why *Pokémon* Was Successful in America', *Japan Echo*, April, 2000, pp 59–62.
- ¹⁷ Personal interview with Norman Grossfeld.
- ¹⁸ Dentsū (Dentsū Kyarakutaa Bizinesu Kenkyūkai), *Kyarakutaa Bizinesu* (Character Business), Tōkyō: Dentsū, 1999 (1994).
- ¹⁹ John Whittier Treat, 'Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: The Shōjo in Japanese Popular Culture', in *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*, ed. John Whittier Treat, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996, pp 275–308; Sharon Kinsella, 'Cuties in Japan', in *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan*, ed. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran, Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1995, pp 220–254; Eiji Ōtsuka, *Shōjo Minzokugaku* (Young girl ethnology), Tōkyō: Kōbunsha, 1991.
- ²⁰ Hakuōdō, *Hakuōdō Sōgō Kenkyūkō* (Special Report on Youth by Hakuōdō Institute of Learning and Living), Tōkyō: Hakuōdō, 1997.
- ²¹ Yukio Fujimi, 'Doraemon wa Dareka?' (Who is Doraemon?), *Hato*, January, 1998, p 20.
- ²² Personal interview.
- ²³ Tōhō Studios, *Gojira 2000 Mireniamu* (Godzilla 2000 Millennium), 1999. Publicity distributed at the showing of the film in Japan. December.
- ²⁴ Kobayashi Reiji, *Omocha Sangyō Daihitto no Himitsu* (The secrets of the big hits of the toy industry), Tōkyō: E-ru Shuppansha, 1998.
- ²⁵ Misako Morishita, *Omocha Kakumei* (The toy revolution), Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1999.
- ²⁶ Fujimi, 1998.
- ²⁷ Shin'ichi Nakazawa, *Poketto no Naka no Yasei* (Wildness in the pocket), Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1998.
- ²⁸ Frank Rose, 'Pocket Monster: How DoCoMo's Wireless Internet Service went from Fad to Phenomenon and Turned Japan into the First Post-PC Nation', *Wired*, September, 2001, pp 126–135. Quote: p 129.
- ²⁹ Rose, 2001, p 129.
- ³⁰ Bandai, *Bandai: Today and Tomorrow* (Corporate Statement), Tōkyō: Bandai, 1997.

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