

The Cultural Politics of Pokemon Capitalism

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It is fall 1999 and a jet from Japan has just pulled up to its berth at LAX airport in Los Angeles. Immediately a crowd of kids excitedly gathers by the window to view what appears to be a huge flying Pikachu: the yellowy cute, electrically charged mouse-type pocket monster of what was then the biggest kid's craze of the decade, Pokemon. Even parents recognize this iconic figure, familiar as they are with the basics of the phenomenon. Starting out as a gameboy game in Japan in 1996, it grew quickly to a multi-stranded empire: comic books, cartoon, movies, trading cards, toy figures, video games, tie-in merchandise. And, starting in 1997, *Pokemon* got exported, hitting the U.S. in August 1998. The principle of the game, duplicated in the plotline of the movies, cartoons, and comics, is to become a pokemon master by trying to capture all 151 monsters (expanded to 251 in recent editions) inhabiting the playscapes of Poke-world. In this world, any child can become a master like Satoshi (Ash in English) who, in the story versions, is the 11 year old protagonist traveling the world with his two buddies, Misty (an 11 year old girl) and Brock (a 15 year old teenage boy).

All one needs to do is keep playing: maneuver one's controls to move through this game space, discovering and catching (mainly by fighting) new monsters whom consequently become pocketed as one's own. Hence, the name "pocket monster." Pocketed monsters are trained to fight new monsters therefore becoming both the medium and end of this game. The logic here is acquisition; "gotta catch 'em all" is the catchword of Pokemon. But entwined into this, as Benjamin noted about commodity fetishism at the dawn of modernity, is enchantment. The monsters to be gotten are not only things, possessions, and tools but also enchanting beings akin to spirits, pets, or

friends. Pikachu iconizes this weave of relationality taken, I will argue, to the age of millennial postmodernity. With its electric powers, Pikachu is a tough, therefore prized, pokemon. But, with its smallish, yellow body, Pikachu is also cuddly and cute: features played up on screen where it becomes the best buddy pokemon of the lead character, Ash. This monster is at once property and pal, capital and companion: the key features in a form of intimate or cute capitalism in which Japan has become a leading broker as the producer of new-age entertainment like *Pokemon*. Japan's success here represents a rupture in a global market of heroes, icons, and fantasies long dominated by the cultural industries of the United States. Decentering what has been the eurocentric propensity to global fun trends, Japan makes its mark here in forms different from the archtypical American fare: an Arnold Swarzenegger super-star, for example, or Superman superhero. By contrast, a Japanese play-hit like *Pokemon*, is grounded in interactive gameplay, featuring hosts of non-human monsters and cartoon humans, led by an 11 year old boy more ordinary than super-heroic. With designs like this, Japan is becoming what *Newsweek* magazine called the "new global power" of kids' hits at this millennial cross-over. How it is doing this and what this says about the world of play, children, and money today, and the place of Japan in what I call the cultural politics of pokemon capitalism, is the subject of this talk.

Back to Pikachu riding the body of an ANA (All Nippon Airlines) jetcraft, riding the international airwaves between Japan and the United States one day in 1999. A year earlier ANA had launched its Pokemon campaign, a promotional strategy meant to use the popular brandname Pokemon in luring families to travel on its airlines. For the children at LAX airport, they are drawn to the exterior of the ANA jet, transformed as it's

been by pocket monsters. But for those who become passengers on these planes, the transformation goes much further. Everything aboard—from attendants' dress and food containers to in-flight entertainment, take-home goody bags, and headrests—is stamped in pokemonia. Riding these planes is a full-bodied, multi-houred trip on a flying theme-park. What is new here is not the concept of themepark itself, of course, but the vehicle (literally, a vehicle in this case) housing it. An airlines whose business is usually cast as a use value (travel) sold primarily to adults in serious-minded terms like reliability, safety, comfort, and expense, is refashioned here as kids' pop culture. Indeed, the ANA ads for Pokemon jets, entice kids with the message: It's all pokemon inside the plane. Your happy pokemon friends (*tanoshii pokemon no nakamatachi*) are waiting for you, you know!" Here a commercial plane and its commodity of travel becomes a child's personal friend. In another ad where a tiny ANA plane is flying cutely into a huge Pikachu dominating the image, the message includes the enjoinder "have fun!" In a reference to using ANA planes to travel around Japan, the ad includes the placename Japan: *Nippon o tanoshiku shimasu*—enjoying Japan or making Japan fun. Given the time this came out—7 years after the Bubble crashed in 1991 leashing a debilitating recession—there was also a subtext here about national identity and orientation according to one of my Japanese friends. We need to hang in there and make Japan fun as a means of surviving and rebuilding the economy, is how she read this. In fact, producing fun entertainment for kids has become a leading industry in Japan, one of the few to have actively flourished during these harrowing times of an unremitant recession. And, in this form of play come commodities that not only sell on the domestic marketplace but travel globally, evoking

emotions of intimacy and warmth that translate, in part, to what some call a new cultural power for Japan.

Entertwining intimacy and commodification has been at the center of the play industry in Japan, but also a more general trend in what is called character merchandising or the selling of cuteness. Since the 1970's, but peaking again in the mid 1990's, the latter refers to a fad in marketing cute or character creations: the blue robotic cat, Doraemon; Sanrio's femmy white cat, Hello Kitty; a droopy, cuddly panda named Tarepanda; the yellow electric-charged Pikachu. Many though not all such creatures originate in cartoon or comicbook productions and sell an entire range of goods and services to kids. But their faddishness goes far beyond the domain of children's entertainment, getting appropriated as a brand to promote everything from neighborhood meetings and government campaigns to banks, airlines, and English schools. Further, adding or buying character goods has been a commonplace for many adults. There are Hello Kitty dildoes and automobiles; Doraemon is the favorite design for cell phone straps by adult Japanese men; Pikachu is routinely worn on key chains by *sarariiman* (white collar workers), and Tarepanda is an icon on Xerox machines, bulldozers, and women's t-shirts. In a book put out by Dentsu, Japan's second largest advertising firm, it writes that character branding establishes identity in Japan, whether of companies, organizations, or individuals. According to the magazine, *Tohoku*, cute characters also provide a sense of security, intimacy, or connection for people who, in this post-industrial age, lead busy, stressful lives often detached from the company of family or friends.

"Shadow families" is the term one expert has coined for these virtual attachments noting how commonly they accessorize what has become a staple of everyday life in

millennial Japan: nomadic technology such as cell phones, digital games, palm pilots, and walkman. These are portable machines with flexible utility (used for communication, organization, information, gaming, fashion, music, entertainment). “Wearability” (*mi ni tsukeru*) is one of the keywords in designing these products given that the average Japanese urbanite spends far more time walking, biking, or commuting on trains than in cars (where cell phones, for example, are far more heavily used in the States). Detached from any specific space (home, car, office), these devices become affixed instead to the body. Portability, in other words, makes them prosthetically personal—not just a machine that is used and owned, but an intimate part of the self. Intimacy and mobility converge here with that promoted by the new trends in both cute characters and children’s entertainment. In the case of cell phones, for example, characters like Miffy, Doraemon, and Pikachu are not only popular choices for accessory straps but can be downloaded onto the screen itself in a new character service that started two years ago. As one grown woman told me, surrounding herself with Hello Kittys on everything from her computer at work, refrigerator at home, and the cell phone that goes everywhere suffuses her life with a sense of security, companionship, and fun. This is true too of Japanese technology more generally, according to a recent article in *Wired* magazine on DoCoMo, Japan’s wireless internet service. Saying that Japan is “putting its stamp on the times” by leading the world in consumer electronics, it notes how technology is made to be not only flexible and convenient but also cozy and fun (Rose 2001, Sept: 129). 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. Included here are numerous play services such as adorning one’s screensaver with Hello Kitty which serves, as the article

states, as a stress-reliever. “Gazing at Hello Kitty on their handsets, they’ll relax for a moment as they coo, “Oh, I’m healed” (p. 129).

Marketing consumer goods that are not only high quality but also playful and fun is a new wrinkle in Japan’s efforts to be an economic power in the global arena. Burdened by a legacy of prewar and wartime brutality in East and Southeast Asian markets and orientalist dismissal in Euroamerica, Japan adopted a policy in postwar times of culturally neutering the products it exports overseas. Called “*mukokuseki*” (literally, without nationality or, as Iwabuchi Koichi translates it, deodorizing nationality), this has entailed strategies of taking the Japanese odor out of the name, design, sensibility, and packaging of their products. Since the 1970’s and the stellar rise of its productivity and economic strength, however, Japan has earned a worldwide reputation for the high quality of its consumer technology—VCRs, TVs, automobiles. Referred to as “hard technology,” this differs nonetheless from the “soft technology” of images, idols, stories, or music—the realm more of culture, as it is tallied these days. As noted by its creator, the Sony walkman is a globally popular machine, but few users outside of Japan listen to Japanese music on it. His desire, like many Japanese, is that Japan will become a broker in not only high tech machinery around the world, but also what gets transmitted on these machines in the way of culture. No longer needing to mask its national identity, Japan will become known, in other words, not just for the vehicles of a good lifestyle (an ANA plane), but for the lifestyle as well (the pokemon riding on it).

This is precisely the break-through attributed to the global faddishization of Japanese children’s properties since the late 1980’s (with video games, transformer toys, the T.V. hit *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*), and particularly the one that has out-

peaked them all, pokemonization. *Pokemon* has been a hit from Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan to Mexico, Italy, Spain, Israel, Australia, Columbia, Canada. Its success in the U.S. has seemed particularly important to building capital, as much symbolic as real, back home. When the first *Pokemon* movie debuted in the States in fall 1999, for example, becoming the top ranking movie and outgrossing even *Lion King* for first week sales, it was front page news in Japan. The frenzy of Pokemia here that lasted from 1998 until almost 2000 also led to endless proclamations about how America was “boiling over” with Japanese goods for the first time (*Dime* magazine), how Japanese children’s entertainment might well overtake Disney in the future (*Mainichi Shinbun*), and how, with global characters like *Pokemon*, Japan’s cultural power was, at long last, getting recognized and spread around the world. Explicitly, what is tallied as a rise in Japan’s stock as a cultural producer is based on the sales, and popularity, of particular commodities in the global marketplace. As a reporter for the *Asahi Shinbun* wrote, products (*shohin*) are the currency by which Japanese culture enters the world adding that it gives him tremendous pride to see American kids buying Pikachu and *Pokemon* cards in U.S. supermarkets. Critical here is not the mere sale of commodities, of course, but the type of commodity involved and the emotions generated in the hearts, fantasies, and imaginations of, in this case, American kids.

Speaking of more than just *Pokemon* but of Japanese entertainment goods more generally, the cultural critic, Miyadai Shinji, traces products like the virtual pet, tamagotchi, to a culture of “enjoying life now” rather than anything in Japanese traditions. This is “super fun” and what Japan is so successfully exporting today. Others refer to this as “cuteness,” thought possibly to be Japan’s key to working foreign capital in the 21st

century. It is the richness of storytelling and characterization, according to others, that contribute to the success Japan has been having in the three arenas of gaming, *anime* (animation), and *manga* (comicbooks), the market for which has surpassed that of the car industry in Japan over the last 10 years. According to yet someone else, the anthropologist Nakazawa Shinichi, the secret of *Pokemon*'s far reaching appeal, true of other children's properties, is its retention of what he calls the "primitive unconscious," borrowing on Levi-Strauss. Playfulness here is magical, constructing an imaginary world that piques childrens' fantasies because it is both rooted in, and goes beyond, the so-called real world. Ambiguous creatures that bleed naturalism into the artifice of make-believe, the pokemon borrow on what has been a long tradition in Japan of otherworldly beings—monsters, ghosts, demons, spirits. Even through its transition into modernity, the Japanese popular imaginary was haunted by these beings. And today, into the postmodernity of millennial mass culture, the popular marketplace is fed by nomadic, new-age otherworldiness in the shape of virtual, digital, cute characters like the pokemon. Such creatures soothe and comfort consumers all the while they generate huge profits in the form they also, and promiscuously, assume as commodities. This may seem paradoxical, writes Nakazawa, but it is precisely this paradox which "encapsulates the direction in which capitalism is headed today."

This capitalism—a cuteness of capital and commodification of intimacy—is the very logic of the Pokemon gameworld. One plays to "get" (*getto suru*), but what is gotten is both a possession and a friend, private property and personal pet. As the kids stand at LAX airport, this too is how they are "getting" Pokemon, and—if the cultural critics are right about this toy empire translating into a sign of Japan's new cultural power—this is

also how they are “getting” Japan. Japan is not deodorized out of this soft technology (versus hard technology) traveling the global circuits of children’s mass/pop culture so popularly today. Virtually all the kids in the U.S. I have spoken to know very well that *Pokemon* originated in Japan, for example. This contrasts with an earlier Japanese import: *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* that was launched here in 1993, became a sensational hit, and was packaged as an American show, the Japanese origins of which few Americans are aware. With *Pokemon*, everyone knows it came from Japan. But what cachet this holds for them comes down to a consumer good: a much-loved, interactive, cute play-thing. Not a Hollywood superhero, rock idol, or movie star with whom fans fantasize an identity, but rather, a pokemon (and 251 of them) that kids want to cuddle, acquire, and accumulate. With this, there is a different kind of bonding no less intimate or powerful than the former. But how Japan registers in all this is as a place that has become as de-territorialized as the marketplace within which its intimate, virtual goods are selling so well. As one of my interviewees, a ten-year-old boy, told me, “Japan is cool because it is the producer of cool things for American kids: Nintendo games, Sony Walkman, and *Pokemon*.”