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# NEW PERSPECTIVES ON GAME STUDIES

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THEMATIC SECTION

# Pikachu Goes West: A Cultural Analysis of Pokémon's Western Adaptation

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**ABSTRACT:** This article analyzes the Americanization of Pokémon games, examining how they were transformed from Japanese video games into a worldwide cultural phenomenon by engaging with scholarly discussions, including Koichi Iwabuchi's idea of "culturally odorless" exports and Anne Allison's concept of "enchanted commodities". The analysis concludes that Pokémon's success in the U.S. stems from meticulous, strategic cultural adjustments that created a hybrid identity for its characters. Although certain Japanese and Eastern elements, such as *kawaii* aesthetics, *kaiju* influences, and *otaku* collecting practices, were retained, Nintendo of America deliberately adapted the franchise for local audiences. These adjustments include the recurring censorship of Eastern religious symbols, the comprehensive renaming of characters, and an emphasis on masculine ideals of competition, mastery, and conquest.

**RESUMO:** O presente artigo analisa a Americanização dos videojogos *Pokémon*, debruçando-se sobre o modo como os jogos digitais mencionados se transmutaram num fenómeno cultural global. Para tal, o trabalho que aqui se apresenta dialoga com conceitos como a noção de exportações "culturally odorless", proposta por Koichi Iwabuchi, e o termo "enchanted commodities", cunhado por Anne Allison. De um modo geral, esta análise conclui que o sucesso de *Pokémon* nos Estados Unidos da América decorre de um processo meticuloso e estratégico de sucessivas adaptações culturais, que visam criar uma identidade híbrida para as personagens dos videojogos. Embora certos elementos japoneses e de teor oriental, como a estética *kawaii*, a influência *kaiju* e as práticas de coleção *otaku* tenham sido preservados, a Nintendo of America adaptou deliberadamente os seus artefactos culturais de modo a satisfazer os

42 Moreover, the paper emphasizes the importance of paratexts, such as promotional materials, the anime series, movies, and the trading card game, as central to shaping the Western consumer's engagement. Lastly, this article explores the role of the Pokémon World Championships and their influence on the games' narrative, while critically evaluating the current state of the competitive scene, concluding that Nintendo of America's portrayal of Pokémon as a global character is largely limited to wealthy Western nations, which impedes true universal accessibility to the game.

**KEYWORDS:** Pokémon, Paratexts, Localization analysis, Americanization, Masculinity.

desejos de públicos locais. De entre as alterações exploradas ao longo do presente artigo, destacam-se a recorrente censura de figuras religiosas orientais, alteração dos nomes das personagens e a representação de um ideal masculino conectado a concepções patriarcais de competição, mestria e conquista. O trabalho enfatiza, ainda, a importância de paratextos, nomeadamente materiais promocionais, a série *anime*, filmes e o jogo de cartas colecionáveis, centrais para atrair o consumidor ocidental. Por fim, a análise incide sobre o papel desempenhado pelo Pokémon World Championship na narrativa dos jogos digitais, ao mesmo tempo que avalia criticamente o atual estado da paisagem competitiva, concluindo que o retrato de *Pokémon* como uma figura global, concebida pela Nintendo of America, está limitado a nações ocidentais enriquecidas, impedindo, assim, um verdadeiro acesso universal aos videojogos.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Pokémon, Paratextos, Análise de localização, Americanização, Masculinidade.

In 2024, nearly thirty years after its Japan debut, *TIME* magazine reported that Pokémon had become the world's most valuable media franchise, worth nearly \$100 billion (Erickson 2024, 53), overtaking Hello Kitty and Mickey Mouse. A remarkable achievement for a video game that, according to creator Satoshi Tajiri, felt like “a baseball player (sliding) into second base even though you know you're going to be out” during development (“The Ultimate Game Freak” 2024, 25). In fact, his doubts were understandable: the Game Boy's popularity was declining and, when the game was first launched in Japan in 1996, Nintendo did not believe it would be successful. Additionally, Nintendo of America was not keen on importing the project from overseas, making Pokémon set up to fail from the outset.

Despite Nintendo's executives' understanding of the video game's risk of failure, they continued to invest heavily in marketing and planned to turn it into a franchise. For example, in August 1998, just a few months before the North American release, a “poké-themed celebration” (Intreglia 2024, 10) was held in Topeka, Kansas. That day, Kansas's capital was renamed “Topikachu” and decorated with Pikachu-shaped Volkswagen Beetles covered in stickers with the slogan “POKÉMON: GOTTA CATCH 'EM ALL!”. Courtney Mifsud Intreglia notes that a local newspaper called the event a success, stating, “They came, they saw, they sold” (*idem*, 12). Despite early worries, Pokémon was expected to be a success in the United States when it was launched on September 28, 1998.

Still, not everyone was enthusiastic, especially *TIME* magazine, which published an article in November 1999 criticizing the franchise. One year into “Poké-mania”, the magazine staff wrote that the franchise had incited “criminal” and “delinquent” behavior because of its trading card game, claiming that the game's “problem” was encouraging “acquisitiveness” and questioning “Is Pokémon payback for our get-rich-quick era?” (Chua-Eoan and Larimer 2024, 27). However, *TIME* magazine seems to have changed its view of Pokémon, as shown by its February 2024 special edition featuring 10 collectable covers of 10 different monsters.

Regardless of these criticisms, from the moment the copies of *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Blue* appeared on the shelves of game and toy stores in the U.S., it was clear that the creatures were there to stay. However, for Pokémon, crossing the Pacific was not simply about crossing a translation boundary, but also about entering a new culture and

the offices of Nintendo of America, where project managers were primed to redefine what the franchise was, how it should be understood, and who it was for.

This research focuses on the adaptation of Pokémon for Western audiences, particularly in the United States, applying a framework that concerns media studies as well as cultural anthropology, more specifically, Koichi Iwabuchi's concept of Japan's "culturally odorless" exports, Anne Allison's theory of "enchanted commodities", and Jonathan Gray's theory of "paratexts". To a lesser extent, the article also hinges on George Ritzer's concepts of globalization, glocalization, and cultural imperialism, as well as on Pramod K. Nayar's critique of the raced digital divide.

Koichi Iwabuchi's book *Recentring Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (2002) considers Pokémon as a classic example of Japan's "culturally odorless" exports, which are successful because they do not demand everyday Japanese characteristics during consumption. Thus, the scholar distinguishes this process from Americanization by arguing that Pokémon games do not seek to export a Japanese lifestyle, since their success stems from being products devoid of national characteristics, allowing them to become global without seeming "foreign".

Equally useful for this paper is Anne Allison's *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (2006), where the author argues that these exports are not empty but "enchanted", mixing cuteness with power and intimacy with acquisition: "this is a business of enchanted commodities. Play creatures like Pokémon are packaged to feed a consumer fetishism" (Allison 2006, 16), thus making "the object one 'gets' both thingified (valued economically) and personalized (cute monsters inspiring affection, attachment and love)" (*idem*, 197-199).

Lastly, it is argued that Pokémon's success in the United States relied on a dual strategy of cultural adaptation and immersive world-building. On one level, the franchise utilized paratexts, such as promotional materials, anime, movies, and the trading card game, to build a universe that exceeded explicit Eastern or Western identities. Nevertheless, for this world-building to appeal to a Western audience, substantial cultural reworking of the game was necessary. Accordingly, this paper outlines how Nintendo of America methodically changed themes concerning religion and views of masculinity to safeguard the game's malleability, thereby allowing the franchise's global "world" to settle in the U.S. market.

This paper is organized into three main sections. First, the section “Kawaii, kaiju, and otaku: understanding the cultural foundations of Pokémon” demonstrates that, despite Western localization, fundamental elements remain in the narrative through analyzing the franchise’s core Japanese cultural structures, including *kawaii* aesthetics, *kaiju* influences, and *otaku* practices. Next, “Neither Japanese nor American: Pokémon as global characters” assesses Nintendo of America’s cultural adaptations, such as the censorship of Eastern religious motifs and the role of paratexts in guiding consumer engagement. The section “What is a Pokémon master to do after finishing the game: Pokémon’s competitive landscape” thoroughly examines the official competitive landscape organized by Play! Pokémon. Lastly, the section “The Pokéworld after the World Championships” examines the geographic evolution of the in-game universe, tracing the transition from older, Japan-inspired Pokémon regions to modern, Western-inspired ones.

## 2. KAWAII, KAIJU, AND OTAKU: UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF POKÉMON

The narrative structure of a Pokémon game is highly conventional. The developers have maintained the same formula throughout all nine generations of the game: the main objective of Pokémon games is always to become the best Pokémon trainer in the region. Each game begins with the protagonist waking up in their youth bedroom and greeting their mother (most games do not show the father), who tells them that the local Pokémon expert is waiting for them at their lab just a few steps away. Then, the gamer picks one of three rare Pokémon, battles his or her rival (who was also invited to choose a Pokémon), and starts the adventure. In all main games, the goal is to catch as many Pokémon as possible and to defeat all eight Gym Leaders, who get tougher each time. Then the gamer must challenge the Elite Four and defeat the Champion. At the same time, the gamer must stop a criminal organization, known as the “evil team”, and face the rival’s challenges. After finishing the main story, access to restricted areas is granted because the gamer is now “strong enough”. These areas allow to complete the Pokédex, an encyclopedia with entries for all the Pokémon available for capture in the region. After completing it, the gamer is awarded a printable diploma, confirming his or her status as a Pokémon master.

This narrative remains a product of its time, a phenomenon that Allison explores in her essay “Pocket Capitalism and Visual Intimacy: Pokémon as a symptom of post-industrial youth culture”. The scholar argues that, because of the 1991 burst of the Japanese Bubble Economy, the country’s youth “are seen to symbolize the collapse of Japan’s collective culture and the excess of materialist hedonism”, defining this crisis as the coming of a speculative, consumer “millennial capitalism”:

(It is) symptomatic of the global mapping of neo-liberalism . . . and migratory movements that mark the twenty-first century, what I call ‘millennial capitalism’. In an economy that has shifted from prioritizing labor to one centered on consumption, a speculative and presentist logic has replaced the modernist belief in progress organized by hard work and savings. Fortunes and futures are now pinned down on . . . get-rich schemes, lotteries, gambling, magic. (Allison 2013, 199)

The author argues that Pokémon “mimics contemporary times”, acting as a “playspace that both reflects and reimagines contemporary conditions of speculation, fragmentation and digitalization” (*idem*, 200). Fundamentally, the scholar claims the game works as preparation for contemporary capitalism: by managing digital monsters as hypothetical possessions within a complex media landscape, young children stop playing a videogame and begin learning precise habits essential to inhabit a consumer-driven society.

Moreover, Allison draws attention to the inspiration behind the game, since Tajiri was an insect collector, growing up in a town that was yet to be overtaken by industrialization, whose activities involved spending “long hours studying, raising, and collecting bugs”, as well as “adventure, discovery, mastery” and “trading and sharing with others” (*idem*, 202). Tajiri created a “post-modern insect collecting . . . a medium that conforms to children’s mobile, industrial lifestyle” (*idem*, 203).

However, Tajiri had another passion, which was video games, and was an avid gamer, or *otaku*. In his essay “Notes on SuperFlat and Its Expression in Videogames”, writer and artist David Surman notes that an *otaku* is obsessed with collecting and fandoms, especially characters, “the fetish object of the *otaku*” (2008, 2). Additionally, the phenomenon “has been instrumental in distributing the aesthetic and cultural values of Japan and so offers an imaginary different from hegemonic America” (*idem*, 4). Here, Surman conveys the idea that the *otaku* challenges the dominant Western predilection for

realism and linear narrative by focusing on the “database”. Essentially, the *otaku* prefers categorizing and obsessing over characters, which disturbs the typical American model of entertainment that focuses on a journey. To understand this disturbance, it is important to analyze Hiroki Azuma’s construction of the “database model” of postmodernist consumption (*idem*, 32). In his book *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animal*, published in English in 2009, the author argues that in Japanese subcultures, modern consumers have abandoned the “Grand Narratives” (Azuma 2009, 29) in favor of non-linear data units. In Pokémon’s case, on the surface, Western audiences are given a linear coming-of-age story. However, the true engine of the videogame and franchise is completely database-driven: the player peruses the Pokédex not as a narrative tome but as a referential database, where enjoyment comes from collecting digital species. By focusing on the growth of character data over a linear narrative, Pokémon essentially reorganizes the traditional Western “Grand Narrative” by substituting it with the “database model”.

In addition to *otaku*, the authors introduce the concepts of *kaiju*<sup>1</sup> and *kawaii*<sup>2</sup>. Allison explains that Pokémon belongs to a character culture that combines both postwar imaginaries, such as *kaiju* movies, and *kawaii* (Allison 2006, 199). Furthermore, the author notes that entertainment produced in Japan is significantly different from American entertainment. While shows such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) reflected the country’s domestic stability and post-war pride, Japanese audiences watched movies like *Godzilla* (1954), which represented the anxieties of the time (Allison 2008, 12). The scholar suggests that *kaiju* films like *Godzilla* reflect the fears of those traumatized by atomic bombings and war destruction, symbolized through towering monsters.

On the other hand, as explained by Allison, Japan is also capable of producing products belonging to an aesthetic the author classified as “techno-animism: animating contemporary technology with spirits and commodities with spirits and recuperating cultural traditions”, essentially an “intermixture of the old (spirituality) with the new (digital/virtual media)” (Allison 2006, 21). Pokémon inherits the world of *kawaii*, *otaku*, and techno-animism, operating as a textbook for collecting, transforming, and developing affective attachment.

Cuteness in the Pokémon world is not only an aesthetic but also a form of power. For example, one of the most powerful Pokémon in the first generation is Mew, a small,

48 cat-like creature with a light pink body, large blue eyes, and a long, thin tail with an ovoid tip. Additionally, the developers created a mutated version of Mew called Mewtwo, a powerful legendary Pokémon that serves as the main antagonist in the first Pokémon movie. Even in the first-generation games, Mewtwo is already seen as a threatening, disturbing creature that has isolated itself in a remote cave, accessible only to true Pokémon masters.



Figure 1. Image of Mew (left) and Mewtwo (right). Official artwork by Ken Sugimori for Pokémon FireRed and LeafGreen. Image retrieved from *Bulbapedia: The Original Pokémon Community*.

I argue that Mew and Mewtwo's story in the video games reflects classic Japanese entertainment, such as Godzilla, by mixing elements of *kawaii* and *kaiju*. In the first generation of the game, players are tasked with locating a hidden key inside the ruins of a building called Pokémon Mansion. They must press a series of switches to locate the key. Near the switches are various journals, each containing an entry that tells the story of Mew and Mewtwo. According to a journal found in the Pokémon Mansion ruins, Mewtwo becomes a vicious Pokémon that originates from Mew and kills the scientists behind the experiment. The mansion, inhabited by hideous entities, such as Poison-type Pokémon, is invaded by burglars and mad scientists. Although Mewtwo's strength is more prominent, Mew ends up being the most powerful Pokémon, displaying the ability to give life to other creatures. This story demonstrates how *kawaii* and "soft" creatures demonstrate their power in the Pokémon world.

Mewtwo's Godzilla-like arc, depicting themes of man-made creation and unexpected consequences, inserts a distinct Japanese cultural "odor" into the story. This

depiction showcases a soft-power approach in which conventional Japanese motifs subtly influence the franchise's global appeal while maintaining its cultural core. Additionally, the story of Mew and Mewtwo differs between the American and Japanese versions. In the Japanese version, the scientists close the Pokémon Mansion diary with "I cannot control it", emphasizing an inner struggle and moral regret. Conversely, in the American version, they close with "It has vicious tendencies", simplifying the conflict into a straightforward battle between humans and monsters, removing the nuanced internal moral conflict present in the Japanese version.

Another example of how *kaiju* movies influence Pokémon is Tyranitar, which has a Godzilla-like *kaiju* design. The monster's original Pokédex entry states that it is "[e]xtremely strong, it can change the landscape. It has an insolent nature that makes it not care about others". A name such as Tyranitar evokes the word "tyrant", a cruel, absolute leader, associating the creature with the archetype of despotic, ancient malice. Additionally, it was one of the first Dark-type Pokémon, giving off a threatening presence. This type originates from the "Aku", which translates to "evil" in English. The attacks of this Pokémon are intended to reflect its malicious nature; thus, they are called "Beat Up", "Thief", "Fake Tears", or "Sucker Punch".



Figure 2. Image of Tyranitar. Official art by Ken Sugimori, released in Pokémon HeartGold and SoulSilver.

Image retrieved from *Bulbapedia – The Original Pokémon Community*.

This analysis is consistent with Allison's argument that Pokémon's greatest strengths lie in figures like the franchise's mascot, Pikachu, exemplifying a "cute yet powerful" polymorphism (Allison 2006, 16). Additionally, Pokémon's cuteness is a literal form of soft power. *Kawaii* figures, such as Pokémon, helped solidify the concept of "Japanese Cool", a term that has endured well into the 21st century. The term "Japanese

50      “Cool” was coined by journalist Douglas McGray in his article “Japan’s Gross National Cool” for *Foreign Policy*, where he stated that

(...) instead of collapsing beneath its widely reported political and economic misfortunes, Japan’s global cultural influence has only grown. In fact, from pop music to consumer electronics, architecture to fashion, and food to art, Japan has far greater cultural influence now than it did in the 1980s, when it was an economic superpower. (2002, 45)

The positive outcome of the Pokémon franchise is exemplified by McGray as one of the most important examples of Japan’s expertise in transmitting mass culture globally across mediums like video games, anime, and merchandise since it was broadcast in 65 countries and made the cover of *TIME* magazine in 1999. For example, in 2015, *Business Insider* reporter Hunter Walker wrote that President Barack Obama, during his visit to Japan, used the opportunity to thank the Japanese for all their “cool” inventions, such as “karate, karaoke. Manga and anime. And, of course, emojis” (Walker 2015)

Thus Iwabuchi’s claim that Pokémon is entirely a “culturally odorless” Japanese export, because the product does not evoke a Japanese lifestyle when consumed. However, I argue that Pokémon incorporated qualities that could not be erased once it was exported to the United States, specifically the influence of *kaiju* films, *kawaii* characters, and the ethos of character collection among *otaku*. Furthermore, elements of Pokémon had to be entirely reworked by Nintendo of America. Thus, despite the franchise not being originally “culturally odorless”, this article argues that the game had to be forcefully revised to fit the American setting. The necessity of this adaptation demonstrates that the original material contained diverse cultural markers that had to be removed to ensure its global success.

### 3. NEITHER JAPANESE NOR AMERICAN: POKÉMON AS GLOBAL CHARACTERS

While not explicitly based on a religious framework, the first Japanese Pokémon releases included various elements with spiritual overtones that were later removed in the Western releases. In the first generation, numerous Buddhist statues and spiritual figures were replaced by Diglett, mole-like Pokémon. This process is more clearly visible in the second-

generation Pokémon games, such as Gold, Silver and Crystal, as illustrated in Figure 3. The Japanese sprites for the “Sage” and “Medium” trainer classes<sup>3</sup> depict them with hands clasped in prayer and holding traditional prayer beads, respectively. However, the international localization altered their sprites entirely, effectively removing the Japanese “cultural odor” and championing Western generic imagery.

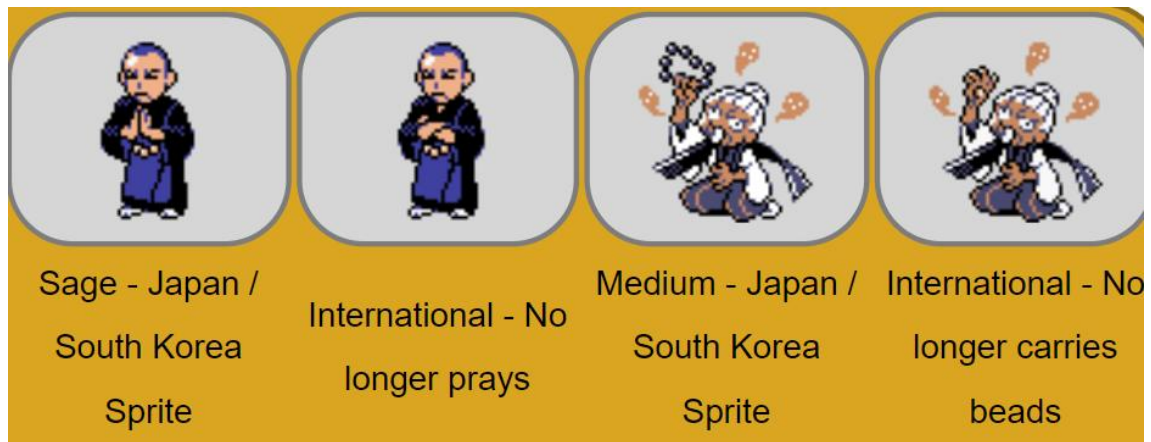


Figure 3. Image of Sage and Medium in the second generation of Pokémon, Pokémon Crystal Version.

Image retrieved from *Bulbapedia: The Original Pokémon Community*.

These changes can be traced back to Gail Tilden (who was the Pokémon project coordinator at Nintendo of America) and her comments about how the game would be presented in the United States, which already asserted the necessity of adapting Pokémon for a Western audience: “To the best of our abilities, we have tried to prevent kids from feeling that these characters come from Japan . . . because we want to promote the impression that Pokémon are global characters” (Allison 2006, 234).

This corporate goal flawlessly elucidates what George Ritzer identifies as the tension between “globalization” and “glocalization”. For Ritzer, globalization aims to maximize profits, standing for imperialistic aspirations of transnational corporations to force their standardized products over various global markets, while glocalization proposes to customize these global goods to harmonize fluently with the subtleties of local culture (2011, 174). Moreover, Ritzer argues that a “global-glocal” struggle is quite common, because globalization is “the flow of ‘nothing’ (as opposed to ‘something’), involving the spread of non-places, non-things, non-people” (*idem*, 175). Thus, Tilden’s approach exposes this paradox: if Nintendo is to pursue its “global” aspirations, then a “glocal”

52 outlook is needed in order to customize it for an American ecosystem, before becoming a universal commodity.

Further, other decisions suggest Nintendo of America wanted to link Pokémon with the U.S., with the most obvious example being the names of the first games: in Japan, children played Pokémon Red and Green, while American children played Red and Blue, referencing the colors of the country's flag. Another example was renaming almost every Pokémon or changing the characters' original names: Professor Okido became Professor Oak, the default name of the main character changed from Satoshi to Red, and the anime's protagonist Satoshi was renamed Ash as well.

Masculinity was also an important issue for Nintendo of America. Interestingly, Tajiri said in an interview that American children understood Pokémon better than the Japanese because they focused more on the masculine character, the trainer, rather than the creatures ("The Ultimate Game Freak" 2024, 23). Still, the project coordinators recognized that gender would be a key factor in its success. For example, Pikachu was chosen as the franchise mascot to attract "younger and female viewers as well as their mothers" (Iwabuchi 2004, 63). However, the emphasis on *kawaii* characters eventually cost the company some influence over the male players, as Samuel Tobin argues. Speaking about his experience as a teacher, he states the following about Pokémon:

For the older boys in the school where I taught, an interest in Pokémon, which had been compatible with masculinity in the fall semester of the year, became increasingly problematic in the spring, when many of the boys began to display their masculinity by demonstrating that they had outgrown Pokémon. (Tobin 2004, 242)

Tobin's remarks illustrate a cultural discrepancy in how "cuteness" in Pokémon is consumed by its audiences. Whereas in Japan, consuming *kawaii* is normalized for various ages and genders, Western paradigms of masculinity oblige adolescent boys to remove themselves from contexts that will make them seem "soft" or "domestic". As products that validate masculinity, Pokémon games are limited. The strategic repositioning of the games demanded a comprehensive deletion of what scholars Syke Jones and Lex Lancaster term the "revolutionary aesthetics of vulnerability" inherent to *kawaii* culture, presented in their paper "Kawaii Revolution: Understanding the Japanese Aesthetics of 'Cuteness' through Lolita and Madoka Magica" (2021, 48). They claim that *kawaii* characters are designed to

suggest “a particular interactive stance”, where the object “must be cared for or treated gently” (*idem*, 49). However, in adapting the games for Western audiences, Nintendo of America realized they needed to rewrite this tension between the *kawaii* character and the player.

Moreover, from the beginning, Nintendo of America stressed the presence of human characters, especially male ones. An official game guide features the human characters Ash, Professor Oak, and the villainous leader of Team Rocket, Giovanni. The player is confronted with the differences between Oak and Giovanni: Oak captures Pokémon to improve society, while Giovanni aims to capture them to dominate the world. The player must emulate Oak and defeat Team Rocket. Meanwhile, the player is regularly challenged by a rival named Gary, as the guide explains. In a setting where all the main characters are men, the player must rise above them all, becoming a sort of alpha male by catching and controlling these creatures to beat opponents in battle. In a scenario ruled by male figures, the narrative burdens the player with the task of beating them all, even his mentor Professor Oak, who uses Pokémon for the betterment of society. This depiction of dominance strengthens particularly American ideals of hegemonic masculinity, where manhood is accomplished through contest, takeover, and order. It opposes a depiction of shared harmony, and the Americanized guide structures the journey as a mission for control, conquering nature, establishing superiority, and overpowering other men.

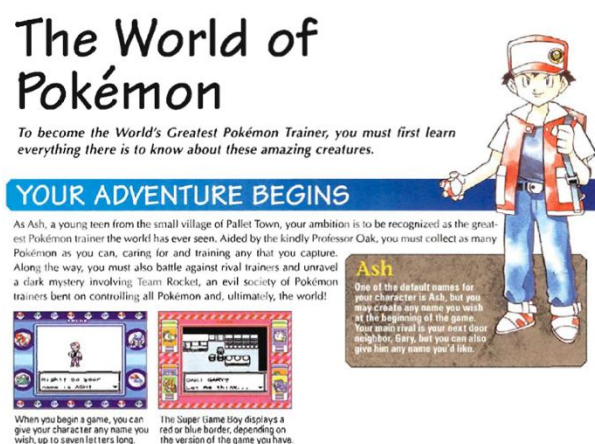


Figure 4. Excerpt from *Pokémon Red and Blue Player's Guide*, published by Nintendo in 1998.

This analysis of Pokémon supports the previously stated view about *otaku* culture. In his book *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan*, Patrick W. Galbraith argues that the *otaku* culture from which Pokémon and its creator emerged was mainly shaped by men who were “reluctant insiders of the hegemony of masculinity seeking alternatives” (2019, 10). Instead of aiming for social dominance and the “reproductive maturity” of the Japanese salaryman, these men sought “alternative social worlds” centered on affection (*idem*, 8). As this paper notes, Nintendo of America reversed this.

Continuing with the analysis of the guide, the book encourages players to catch as many Pokémon as possible. It is reasonable to assume the game connects owning Pokémon with mastering them. In the U.S., these ideas were combined with marketing campaigns emphasizing “more color and dynamism” and “bigger and louder” than its Japanese counterpart (Allison 2006, 244). The now iconic slogan “Gotta Catch ‘Em All”, created by Hasbro, was nearly censored by the FCC because it was seen as too blunt about consumerism (*idem*, 245).

Pokémon’s true Americanization occurred with the introduction of paratexts, which were vital for the franchise’s success. This includes entryway and *in media res* paratexts, as defined by Jonathan Gray in *Show Sold Separately* (2010). Gray describes entryway paratexts as trailers and TV promos because these “take the first steps in filling a text with meaning” (2010, 48). In Pokémon’s case, these paratexts include the anthem-like slogan “Gotta Catch ‘em All” and the promotional videos sent to American households explaining how Pokémon worked. These videos were produced in the context of the anime but additionally served as an introduction to the games. Along with the slogan, these entryway paratexts framed the game as a competitive, cumulative quest, with Ash as a moral guide and role model. Furthermore, *in media res* paratexts are also influential, such as the “Who is That Pokémon?” recap and strategy guides, designed to teach players how to evaluate a Pokémon’s rarity and skill, ideas that can be applied both in schoolyard conversations and retail aisles (2010, 177). Eventually, these resources transformed the act of playing the game into a form of data mastery, guaranteeing that Pokémon worked as a rigorous universe. These traits of competition and accumulation differ from the unpretentious consumption of “cute” creatures: by measuring Pokémon through statistics and rarity, young boys could relate to the game without having to negotiate their masculinity.

#### 4. WHAT IS A POKÉMON MASTER TO DO AFTER FINISHING THE GAME: POKÉMON'S COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE

55

While the official competitive program Play! Pokémon was created by the Pokémon Company International, the first competitive Pokémon tournaments began in Japan, called Nintendo Cups, which were the primary format for competitive Pokémon, as well as the official one, until 2004, when the format changed and the events started being hosted in the United States.

##### 4.1. Considerations about competitive Pokémon

Considering Pokémon's narrative, competitive Pokémon can be viewed differently from other esports, since it is not merely an addition but an indispensable effort to support the Americanized narrative of control. Since the Western localization of the franchise purposely altered the game away from the Japanese notions of symbiotic companionship and redirected it towards Americanized individualistic conquest, the narrative requires an infinite field for performing dominance. The main goal of Pokémon is to become a Pokémon master, which is only achievable after collecting all the available monsters in the game. In the United States, this was reinforced through paratexts, as previously noted. After completing this goal, players feel empty because there is no visible change in the game. Once they receive the diploma, they are left alone with their achievements and no other rivals to challenge. The desire to collect every single character can only motivate players so much; for the game to continue thriving, there needs to be something beyond that. Thus, competitive play reframes the “Master” from a static title into a dynamic position that must be continually affirmed through battle.



Figure 5. Image of Pokémon diploma from the game Pokémon Red Version. Image retrieved from *Bulbapedia: The Original Pokémon Community*.

Competitive Pokémon represented that “something”, an argument comparable to the analysis by Marc Steinberg in his book *Anime’s Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (2012). When discussing characters, worlds, and consumption, Steinberg cites an example from Otsuka Eiji’s *A Theory of Narrative Consumption* (1989), in which the author examines the popularity of collectable characters associated with each bar of Bikkuriman Chocolate. Although there was no particular narrative connecting the characters, the children who collected them started creating their own stories. Thus, Steinberg writes that child consumers were attracted by this grand narrative and sought further access to it through continued purchases of the chocolate, leading Otsuka to conclude that the focus was neither the chocolate nor the sticker, but rather the “‘grand narrative’ itself” (Steinberg 2012, 178).

Once players reach Pokémon master status, they build their own story by competing against others. Training Pokémon remains a key activity in the game, primarily to qualify for competitive events that ultimately crown them as Pokémon masters. However, after becoming a “master” in the game, the new objective is to defend the title against other players who have also received the same honor, maintaining it in the social sphere. Although training and battles occur within the game environment, competitive Pokémon serves as an extension to the main storyline, created by players and organized under the supervision of Pokémon Company International. As Steinberg notes regarding chocolates, “the reader as a consumer must continue to pursue the next narrative fragment” (*idem*, 181). The Pokémon Company International provides the platform and characters, leaving players to develop the metagame and associated elements, guaranteeing the narrative of “mastery” never ends.

At first, Azuma’s arguments about “database consumption” being favored over “grand narratives” seem inadequate in Pokémon’s case. The game, then, presents a paradoxical attitude. On the one hand, the competitive metagame validates Azuma’s arguments, since players need to strip the digital creatures of their places in the game and transfer them to databases to evaluate their battle potential. On the other hand, this battle potential is channeled through meaningful community lore, validating Otsuka’s “grand narrative” argument as well. For instance, Jun Park’s famous Pachirisu, a seemingly useless Pokémon, was instrumental in helping the player win the 2014 World Championships.

Ultimately, it is the consumers' abiding want for narrative that sustains competitive Pokémon. 57

#### 4.2. How accessible is competitive Pokémon

Competitive Pokémon is played in double battles, a format available since the third generation of the game. It is a standard battle format, so it is familiar to competitive players. Moreover, beyond the in-game story, players can engage in online practice and battle others. This way, they will understand the metagame, which will help them build teams and train Pokémon.

After this, the player can start exploring ways to get an invitation to the Pokémon World Championships, where top players from around the world gather to determine who is the greatest Pokémon master, including Asian players who operate outside the Play! Pokémon system. To receive an invitation to Worlds, players must earn Championship Points. To earn significant Championship Points, players need to participate in Championship Series Events. According to the official website, there are currently 10 events scheduled for the 2026 season in Europe and Latin America, 2 in Oceania, and 7 in North America. Although the Championship is meant for an international audience, there will be no events in Africa. Essentially, aside from North American players, participating in these events will require extensive travel.

Pramod K. Nayar highlights the geographic exclusion of Africa as part of the “raced digital divide”, pointing out institutional inequalities. He states that cultural influences in technological systems are mainly shaped by “First World” countries or the Global North, where media is closely linked to global financial flows (2008, 2). By omitting Africa from tournaments, companies like Nintendo and Play! Pokémon reinforce what Nayar calls the “elite construction and appropriation of the public sphere”, essentially creating a form of digital apartheid that excludes the “undesirables” (*idem*, 3). This barrier hampers players from the Global South, as participation requires considerable capital. Travel expenses, such as airfare and lodging in major North American cities, can make participation difficult for lower-income regions. Additionally, except in 2022 and 2023, the World Championships have always been held in the United States, which favors local players. Since the competitive circuit extends the gameplay experience, the U.S. maintains a dominant position in this ecosystem.

This firm determination to host the World Championships in the United States is consistent with Ritzer's definition of "globalization", which is the "imperialistic ambitions of nation-states, corporations, and organizations, and their imposition throughout the world" (*idem*, 173). In the case of Pokémon, an asymmetry emerges once again. Even though the franchise originated in Japan, its competitive circuit is dominated by Western influence. This influence grants American players an advantage that subtly imposes an American narrative onto the Pokémon. Interpreted through Rizer's definition of "cultural imperialism", by which cultures "impose themselves, more or less consciously, on other cultures" (*idem*, 163), the decision made by Nintendo and Play! Pokémon ensures that the otherwise borderless digital journey of the player is fundamentally validated within the United States' territory.

#### 4.3. The Pokéworld after the World Championships

As previously noted, the United States maintains a dominant presence within the Pokémon competitive scene. In fact, the West has definitely exerted its influence in the Pokéworld since 2009, when the United States took over the series' competitive format.

Until the fourth generation of the game, *Pokémon Diamond and Pearl*, released in 2006, Pokémon was always set in Japan. The first generation takes place in the Kanto region, which shares its name, while the second generation, Johto, was based on the Kansai region. Similarly, the third generation's region, Hoenn, was based on the island of Kyushu, and the fourth generation's Sinnoh, as well as its prequel's Hisui, was based on Hokkaido.

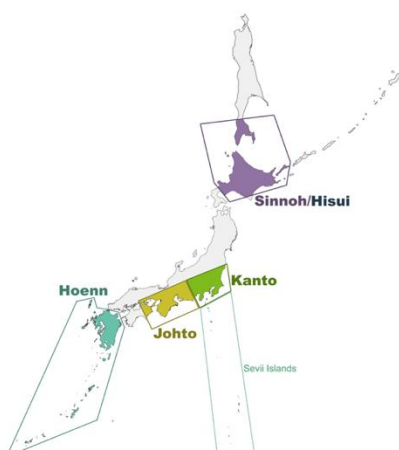


Figure 6. Image of Pokémon regions juxtaposed with their Japanese counterparts. Image retrieved from *Bulbapedia: The Original Pokémon Community*.

Starting with the fifth generation, *Pokémon Black and White*, the games are now set in Western-inspired countries. As of the latest ninth generation, more Pokémon games are set in Western-inspired regions than in Japan. The fifth generation takes place in Unova, inspired by New York City, and the seventh in Alola, inspired by the Hawaiian Islands. Meanwhile, France inspired Kalos, in the sixth generation; England and Scotland inspired Galar and the Crown Tundra Isle of Armor, respectively, in the eighth; and Portugal and Spain inspired Paldea in the ninth.

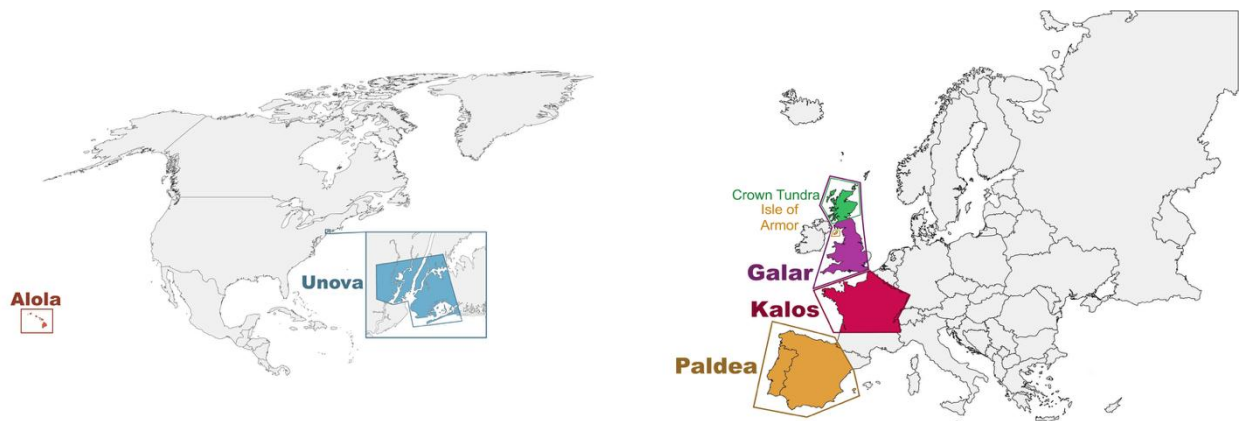


Figure 7. Image of Pokémon regions juxtaposed with their Western counterparts. Image retrieved from *Bulbapedia: The Original Pokémon Community*.

It appears that Gail Tilden’s mission to transform Pokémon into global icons has been successful. While the first four generations of the game benefited from a shared cultural and geographic framework, later entries reflected Pokémon’s fragmented approach, with the transition to Europe-inspired settings such as Kalos (France), Galar (United Kingdom), and Paldea (Spain and Portugal). For instance, unlike Johto’s Ecruteak City, which offers a culturally authentic representation of Kyoto, Kalos’s Lumiose City functions as an artificial collage of Paris’s iconic landmarks, such as La Défense, prioritizing visual spectacle over environmental credibility. As a result, the visual identity of later regions in the Pokémon games often leans into “kitsch”, creating a discrepancy between

60 the environment and the creatures designed to inhabit it, and operating as Ritzer's "globalization of nothing" (2011, 171). Ritzer defines "nothing" as "social forms largely devoid of distinctive content", as opposed to "something: largely fully social forms; those rich in distinctive content" with localized meaning (*idem*, 172). When Pokémon games reduce European landscapes to sanitized tourist tropes, the franchise prioritizes exportable, empty products over genuine ones, creating a disconnect between the environment and the creatures designed to inhabit it.

This change is related to the global spread of competitive Pokémon from the United States to other parts of the world. In fact, it could be argued that the Pokémon Company International is trying to "capture" more players from Europe by representing their countries, then drawing them into the competitive scene. After hosting competitions in the United States, it only makes sense for the games to be set in the West as well. Then, Play! Pokémon would have one more reason to host more tournaments in Europe, since the games are also set there. This strategy operates through the dynamics of "globalization" and can be seen as an example of cultural imperialism: by means of a "nothing" representation of European spaces, new audiences are drawn to the game. Furthermore, this justifies expanding its physical tournament infrastructure across the continent and actively exporting an Americanized competition onto a global stage. Thus, what once began as a Japanese product is redefined by Western values and circulated as a global export, where mastery becomes the universal language of the game.

Lastly, Gail Tilden's mission to make Pokémon more global is still ongoing. If Nintendo of America truly wanted Pokémon to be accessible worldwide and set everywhere, then they would also include the African continent or Latin America. However, Nintendo of America is well aware that this would not meet their needs. This is best understood by recalling Iwabuchi's arguments: "While Pokémon might be perceived as 'ours' in many parts of the world, there are still many people living in poverty who cannot afford to consume Pokémon and for whom Pokémon therefore might carry the despairing sense of belonging to others (Iwabuchi 2004, 73).

Given the current format of competitive play and the direction the games are taking, it is clear that Pokémon and the West are connected, and it is unlikely the series will return to Asia. Instead, the series appears to continue to adhere to a model of selective globalization, emphasizing the Global North and presenting this as its "global" reach.

Throughout this article, it was argued that Pokémon's success in the United States was due not only to good translation but also to a significant cultural reworking of the original content. What started as a single video game expanded into a full-fledged franchise, encompassing an anime series, a trading card game, toys, merchandise, and several films. This franchise can be seen as a paratext, as it taught American children how to engage with the game. In this way, the so-called "Americanization" process happened both inside and outside the game cartridge.

Nevertheless, the source text is not entirely devoid of cultural significance. As a game, Pokémon retains signs of Japanese culture, such as *kawaii* aesthetics, *otaku* collecting habits, and *kaiju* influences. However, at the same time, Nintendo of America censored certain parts of the game, such as religious references, renamed characters and monsters, altered the colors in the original games' titles, and the marketing campaign was more aggressive.

Furthermore, it is argued that masculinity was an important aspect for Nintendo of America. Pikachu's "cute yet powerful" rhetoric was welcome, but the official guides repackage the message with mastery through rivalry and victory over evil teams. Thus, given the trajectory of recent titles and the existing structure of competitive play, Pokémon seems to be undergoing a stable cultural repositioning toward the West. However, the franchise appears assured to pursue a strategy of prioritizing the markets and aesthetics of the Global North.

The competitive scene then extends this narrative after the end credits roll. With the Play! Pokémon circuit, it gives players a new task, ensuring they keep playing until a new title is released while continuing the collect-and-master storyline. The metagame is how the game takes on new meaning, shifting the focus from emotional affection to *kawaii* creatures to calculated optimization: the player is no longer a child collecting cute monsters, but an intelligent tactician mastering an intricate system to claim superiority over others, reorganizing a relaxing, domestic hobby into a highly competitive one.

Where does all this leave Pokémon?

The franchise now exists in a state of cultural hybridity, functioning as a product that is neither fully Japanese nor American. However, to become a truly universal brand, it

62 must move beyond its current focus on the Global North. By limiting its narrative mainly to wealthy Western economies, Pokémon risks confining its cultural reach to a specific socioeconomic group rather than achieving a genuinely worldwide influence.

Ultimately, there is significant potential for further academic research into the Pokémon export phenomenon. It would be valuable to examine how the game was distributed to additional markets, including Europe and Latin America. Since most games were translated into German and French, it would be relevant to analyze the changes these versions underwent and their subsequent effect on the local audience reception.

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<sup>1</sup> *Kaiju* is a genre-specific term that refers to the gigantic Japanese cinematic monster films such as *Godzilla*. Scholar Chon Noriega argues these narratives “reveal a self-conscious attempt to deal with nuclear history and its effects on Japanese society” (2006, 41), as they are rooted in post-World War II cultural and political anxieties.

<sup>2</sup> According to scholar Sharon Kinsella, *kawaii* “essentially means childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak” (1995, 220). Furthermore, the author describes the typical *kawaii* character as “small, soft, infantile, mammalian, round . . . non-sexual” (*idem*, 226). Pokémon’s mascots, such as Pikachu and Eevee, are stylized mammals, a mouse and a fox, respectively, whose physical proportions are round, infantile and non-sexual.

<sup>3</sup> Trainer classes in Pokémon are a recurring archetype assigned to Non-Playable Characters (NPCs) in every generation of the game. Each class serves as a thematic category that defines their visual appearance (sprite) and the types of Pokémon they use. Since every NPC within a certain class shares the exact same sprite, the censorship of the “Sage” and the “Medium” effectively deletes their cultural representation from the entire universe of the game.

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