Pokémon, Yo-Kai Watch, Yuru Kyara:
Economies of Friendship and Ethnography at Play

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Abstract

Since the release of Pokémon Go (2016), new attention has been given to the increasing overlap of real and virtual worlds, where new media ecologies of collectable creatures have been superimposed on walkable terrain. The interaction of players and monsters in real space raises questions about the nature of monstrous accumulation and harks back to earlier explorations of Pokémon and capital. This paper challenges the novelty of Pokémon Go by identifying earlier trends of media ecologies in the franchises of Pokémon and Yo-Kai Watch. Through close readings of the central games of these franchises, it argues that ethnographic rather than capitalist accumulation defines the processes of collection, trade, and knowledge-making that comprise these worlds. Moreover, by focusing on play-ethnography, this paper sheds light on how monsters mediate the relationship between players and the countryside, and how these media ecologies reinforce existing conceptions of national and regional character.

Introduction

Pokémon, short for 'pocket monsters,' was released in 1996 to critical acclaim and began one of the most lucrative media franchises to date. In this role-playing game, players navigate a vast world to do battle with and capture the monsters known as Pokémon, which they also employ in trade and battle with other players and NPCs (non-player characters.) There are two primary objectives: (1) to defeat other trainers, advance the narrative and become the world's greatest Pokémon master; and (2) to capture all varieties of Pokémon so that their data is recorded in your pocket encyclopedia, the Pokédex.

In her monograph, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*, Anne Allison writes that " 'getting' is the very logic of the Pokémon game," and that "metaphorically… catching stands for the player's relationship to the play world, which Pokémon itself mimics in play(ing) capitalism." [1] Allison is but one of many critics who have engaged with the relationship of

Pokémon and capitalism; Christine R. Yano describes Pokémon as "nothing more than capitalism running at its smoothest." [2] Observations like these have been frequently made on the Pokémon franchise in its entirety – the media mix [3] – that is composed of the Pokémon video games and their spinoffs, trading cards, toys , apparel and other merchandise, a long-running animated series and numerous films. While this media empire is emblematic of consumer capitalism in its endless proliferation and consumption of Pokémon goods, it is questionable how much the Pokémon video game series embodies capitalist logic. In this first section, this paper examines how these elements, friendship and capital, exist within the narrative and ludos of the Pokémon series, and how they are managed in productive tension; moreover, the second and third sections examine Yo-Kai Watch and yuru kyara to explore the relationship of accumulation with Japanese native ethnography that transforms knowledge-making practices into sites of play and new media ecologies.

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[1] Anne Allison, Millenial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination (Berkeley: California UP, 2006), 47.

[2] Christine R. Yano, "Panic Attacks: Anti-Pokémon Voices in Global Markets," Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon, ed. Joseph Tobin (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 133.

[3] For more on the media mix see Marc Steinberg, Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2012)

1. Economies of Friendship

As a capitalist[4] economic system, the in-game world of Pokémon faces significant challenges. The foremost problem is the lack of a useful, tradable currency between players. While there are Pokédollars, the in-game currency which players earn primarily by defeating other NPC trainers, they may only be used to purchase items and supplements in the local game and are non-transferable. Players are constrained by what they can trade with other players: the only commodities they may exchange are the Pokémon themselves. Allison argues that Pokéballs – the containers of monsters – operate as a kind of currency because they "can be quantified, and in this sense resemble money." [5] While an interesting observation, though Pokéballs resemble money they do not function at all like it. Pokémon rewards players for capturing one specimen of each monster. Duplicate Pokéballs containing the same monsters are of greatly diminished value. Generally speaking, the Pokéball is at its highest value if it contains a monster which the player does not already possess. Consequently, the Pokémon series does not have a player-to-player economy facilitated by a common currency.

Moreover, there is no in-game marketplace nor auction house for players to buy or sell Pokémon, nor even a system for establishing player-to-player trades. With no currency or market, Pokémon is severely limited in its capacity, if not completely unable, to foster a capitalist system. The question, then, is what kind of system do the game mechanics facilitate? Despite the significant barriers to a capitalist economy, trade within the series is highly encouraged. In order to promote trade, Pokémon have been released in sets of two parallel versions, each with a partially incomplete set of collectable creatures. To collect the full set, players are forced to trade with each other. Interestingly, this interaction does not play out in a fashion resembling a capitalist economy. With a few notable exceptions, there is no scarcity of Pokémon within the game world. For example, if Pikachu were exclusive to the Green version, a player with access to Pikachu could give any number of them away to Red version players. This transaction would cost very little – a small matter of time – for this generous Green version player. In other words, players may, at little to no personal cost, help other players.

Newer versions of the series come equipped with other possibilities for charitable interaction, and it is perhaps no surprise that the Pokémon series facilitates charity over commerce. It was, after all, the desire of Tajiri Satoshi to create a game that would allow children to develop inter-personal relationships. Versions X and Y[6] boasted the Wonder Trade and Friend Safari systems. Wonder Trade is a system of random Pokémon exchange that connects two – often geographically distant – players and exchanges pre-selected Pokémon, allowing players to trade away Pokémon they do not need in hope of receiving one that they do. It also allows players to send their own specially bred Pokémon into the world as gifts. As a system, Wonder Trade prevents players from bargaining at all. It does, however, introduce two players to each other, which may allow them to play together in the future and is designed to be a means for making friends around the world.

Friend Safari, on the other hand, rewards players simply for making friends. By registering another player's friend code with the gaming system, a new area, or 'safari' is unlocked for the player, wherein they may find not only previously unavailable Pokémon but Pokémon of uncommon calibre and strength. Interestingly, while there exist very few internet communities for players bargaining for Pokémon trades, there are many designed to allow players to easily trade their friend codes. Since its inception, all versions of Pokémon have had trade mechanics designed for social interaction, friendship, and charitable acts. What then, is it about the game that critics have labelled 'capitalism?'

It remains true that 'getting' is at the core of the Pokémon games. Capturing all Pokémon is one of the primary goals of the game, and "gotta catch 'em all" is the slogan. There is no mistake that accumulation is central to the Pokémon experience, and a desire for endless accumulation of consumer goods is crucial for sustaining capitalism. It is also possible that the drive to acquire Pokémon within the game is reproduced in the real world with other Pokémon merchandise. However, accumulation alone is not synonymous with capitalism and the insatiable appetite for Pokémon can be fed just as easily by mechanics of charitable interaction as by the market.

The narrative of the series provides a sharp counterpoint to the objective of sheer accumulation. In their journey through the world, the player character is

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4 In Allison's and others assessment, the mode of capitalism in Pokémon is often ambiguous.

5 Allison, Millenial Monsters, 220.

6 Game Freak, Pokemon X and Y, 2013.

frequently reminded by NPCs that friendship with Pokémon is of utmost importance. Good relationships make for happy trainers and happy Pokémon; moreover, increases in a Pokémon's happiness directly affects their teamwork and fighting strength. As negative examples, villainous teams of trainers, such as Team Rocket, intrude upon the player's quest to demonstrate the importance of this relationship. Exploiters of Pokémon, who treat them not as friends but tools, these villains represent the potential dangers of obsession with accumulation and power. They provide the player with a model of poor relationships and disrupt the player's journey with their schemes. Ultimately, the player must deal with their threat before they can continue their mission of acquisition; and, in the end, the evil team's defeat is credited to the incredible bond between the player and their Pokémon.

Themes of friendship are equally prevalent in the movies and animated series. Satoshi, or Ash in the English versions, demonstrates the importance of friendship with his constant companion, Pikachu. Satoshi has even on some occasions rejected accumulation by releasing his Pokémon when they desire freedom, such as in the fittingly named episode, "Bye Bye Butterfree."[7] In this episode, Satoshi finds himself trapped between the quest to accumulate Pokémon and the principle of friendship: he must either release his Pokémon to ensure its happiness or keep it against its will. Friendship and accumulation are set up as diametrically opposed forces which the player must navigate. Accumulation at its most extreme is mass enslavement, typified by Team Rocket. On the other hand, complete friendship with Pokémon would entail an equal relationship, disrupting the hierarchy between trainer and Pokémon, master and subject, and would dismantle the game itself.

The tension between accumulation and friendship is typical of what Clint Hocking, in his critique of BioShock, referred to as ludonarrative dissonance.[8] For Hocking, the greatest problem of BioShock was the aesthetic distance between game and narrative. Hocking describes how the ludos of BioShock – to acquire power without regard for the well-being of others – conflicts with the narrative that

immediately demands an act of altruism. In the Pokémon series, the ludos of the game – the accumulation of Pokémon and power – is at odds with a narrative that stresses the importance of mutual respect and friendship. The tension between narrative and accumulation provides the player with difficult choices as they progress through the narrative. Players are only allowed to carry six Pokémon at a time to battle, and with each new Pokémon captured, which may be stronger, higher level, or more exotic, the player must decide whether or not they will replace an older, reliable Pokémon with which the player has already bonded. The way that a player navigates the demands of gameplay and narrative is also reflective of their experiences with the entire Pokémon franchise.

Exposure to patterns of consumer capitalism in the acquisition of Pokémon merchandise may influence the way players treat their own Pokémon in game. The Pokémon trading card game is perhaps the most overtly capitalist transformation of the franchise, which, unlike the video games, has scarcity, a market, and an objective value in real-world currency. Players of the card game may be more likely to seek accumulation over friendship. Likewise, players with an outside attachment to particular monsters, what Allison refers to as "pocket intimacy,"[9] may favor friendship. Julian Sefton-Green describes the intensity of relationship that a boy forms with his Pokémon and how this relationship is indebted to the media mix: "Sam's emotional investment in the game…was demonstrated by the way he enacted his playing with shouted comments such as 'Blastoise, you never let me down.' Sam also drew on dramatic structures from the TV program."[10] Thus, the conflict of narrative and ludos within the game may not necessarily breach the suspension of disbelief if the tension is present in the franchise or real world.

A closer examination of the villainous teams sheds further light on the ludonarrative problem. In recent iterations, villains have shifted away from merely being exploiters of Pokémon bent on acquisition such as the mafia-esque Team Rocket. They have developed radical ideologies: Teams Magma and Aqua[11], for example, seek to terraform the world by drying up the sea or drowning the

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[7] Pocket Monsters, dir. Yuyama Kunihiko (1998).

[8] Clint Hocking, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in BioShock: The Problem of What the Game is About," Well Played 1.0: Video Games, Value, and Meaning, ed. Drew Davidson (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2009), 255-262.

[9] Anne Allison, "Portable Monsters and Commodity Cuteness: Pokémon as Japan's New Global Power," Postcolonial Studies 6.3 (2003), 382-395.

[10] Julian Sefton-Green, "Initiation Rites: A Small Boy in a Poké-World," Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon, ed. Joseph Tobin (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 158-159.

[11] Game Freak, Pokémon Ruby and Sapphire, 2002 (Japanese release.)

land. Team Galactic[12] seeks a world devoid of human spirit; Team Flare[13] are aesthetes that would have the world destroyed to prevent the decline of beauty. However, it is the actions of Team Plasma[14] that are most telling. They desire a world where Pokémon are no longer captured – completely free. The symbolism of the conflict is spelled out for the player in plain terms: the player, wielding a legendary Pokémon symbolizing "Truth," must do battle with team Plasma's leader, N, who wields a legendary Pokémon symbolizing "Ideals."[15] Through this conflict, 'ideals', representing friendship and the narrative of the series, is juxtaposed to 'truth', representing accumulation and the ludos of the game. Unlike other versions, the conflict between N and the player ends in reconciliation with the realization that the ideal of friendship is necessary to prevent the exploitation of Pokémon, and yet accumulation of Pokémon is necessary to stop those who would exploit them. The ability to reconcile and reach a middle ground is precisely what the other villainous teams have always lacked.

The need to strike a balance has always been an element present in the design of the Pokémon series. In gameplay, players select well-balanced teams that include a variety of elemental 'types' to prepare themselves for any combatant, in contrast to the foolish gym leaders which use only a single type and are easily defeated. Additionally, trios of legendary Pokémon represent the danger of conflict and the need to find peaceful reconciliation or else face calamity. Pokémon Tornadus and Thundurus (modelled on Fūjin and Raijin) fight amongst each to create powerful storms, yet Landorus ends their conflict and returns the land to harmony. Similarly, Groudon and Kyogre battle to terraform the world, only to have their conflict quelled by Rayquaza from the skies. Like the legendary Pokémon depicted, it is the player who establishes a middle ground between friendship and accumulation.

Pokémon Black and White demonstrate that the tension between friendship and acquisition, ideals and reality, narrative and ludos, is never meant to be completely resolved; it is this tension that the player must navigate for themselves. These dissonant elements allow for the mapping of real, conflicting interests onto the fantasy world of Pokémon. Even though the Pokémon series is lacking the

necessary components of a capitalist system, capitalist logic encountered through the media mix may influence the way players experience their game, just as how player's pre-existing relationships with and affections for iconic characters will change the relationship between themselves and their Pokémon. It is the conflicting narrative of friendship and the ludos of accumulation that opens up different avenues of play, allowing players to set their own goals that define their own play. Michael Dylan Foster writes in Pandemonium and Parade of "cognitive resonance," referring to Japanese monsters simultaneously being objects of fear and pleasure, and arguing that these seemingly dissonant elements are nonetheless able to reinforce each other, a relationship that will become crucial in the later discussion of yōkai.[16] In the case of Pokémon, then, is it possible to conceive of a ludonarrative resonance? – friendship and accumulation deliberately opposed in the gameplay that does not cause a breach in the suspension of disbelief, such as in Hocking's complaint on BioShock, but rather reflects a more complicated worldview. Ultimately, it is the player who decides how the game will be played, and whether Pokémon will be means or ends, tools or friends.

2. Playing Ethnography

If the fundamental tension in the Pokémon series is between friendship and collection, does the process of collecting operate under a different system? What are the motivations for collection, and how do they relate to the in-game encyclopedia, the Pokédex, that records a player's interactions with monsters and catalogues their vital statistics as players capture their bodies?

From the early yōkai catalogues of Toriyama Sekien, Japanese monsters have been repeatedly drawn and described, collected and categorized. In the rapid modernization of the late Meiji era, minzokugaku scholars – or "Japanese native ethnographers" to use Alan Christy's term[17] – sought out yōkai as the indigenous yet endangered creatures that would provide the key to rural life and the

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[12] Game Freak, Pokémon Diamond and Pearl, 2006 (Japanese release.)

[13] Game Freak, Game Freak, Pokemon X and Y, 2013.

[14] Game Freak, Pokémon Black and White, 2010 (Japanese release.)

[15] Ibid.

[16] Michael Dylan Foster, Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai (Berkeley: California UP, 2009.)

[17] Alan Christy, A Discipline on Foot: Inventing Japanese Native Ethnography (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012.)

"folk heart."[18] Utilizing the newly formed discourse of folklore in search of an encyclopedic knowledge of monsters, the power to describe and preserve yōkai was the very same power to tame and defang them. This section examines re-imaginings of yōkai and the discipline of minzokugaku and its practitioners within the media franchises of Pokémon and Yo-Kai Watch. It includes: (1) an analysis of Pokémon and Yo-Kai Watch as re-tellings of minzokugaku narratives – the imagined solitary journeys of ethnographers and their acquisition of knowledge and power over the supernatural; (2) the translation of minzokugaku into ludic elements of the games and the divisions between play, narrative, and encyclopedia; (3) and the commodification and collection of knowledge and monsters that condition players to be yōkai researchers both in and outside the games. Pokémon and Yo-Kai Watch provide players with the opportunity to play at minzokugaku and explore new ecological frameworks of Japanese monsters. In their investigation of monstrous ecologies, player-ethnographers uncover the relationships between horror and play, friendship and collection, narrative and ludos.

Japanese Native Ethnographers such as Yanagita Kunio were concerned with the loss of Japanese tradition in the face of rapid modernization and societal change. Consequently, these scholars sought out the idealized Japanese folk heart or native Japanese spirit in the mountainous countryside that was believed to be untouched by the changes of modernity. They studied the lives and customs of rural villages, the peculiarities of their language and linguistic differences, and – notably – tales of Japanese monsters. It was thought the true Japanese heart could be extracted from the bodies of the monsters that haunted the countryside. Though most Japanese native ethnographers practiced varying methods and had different objectives, the discipline, in its aspirations to be regarded as a science employed an encyclopedic organization of knowledge. Michael Dylan Foster argues:

For Yanagita and his followers, the collecting of yōkai represented a recognition of their value as cultural commodities evocative of an idealized past. Classifying yōkai may have been a way to demarcate an "authentic" Japan, but it also converted them into lifeless historical relics, fossilized specimens from another time. In a sense, yōkai were shorn of their living mystery, remaining only as weird premodern forms stored in the folkloric archives of the modern nation.[19]

Foster draws attention to the loss of mystery that knowledge of monsters entails, and the separation of the realm of everyday life into the ontological category of folklore. Stefan Tanaka expands on this point; he states: "In a sense, the reconstitution of these stories into texts was an act of preservation, but in that act [minzokugaku scholars] killed them in a different way by categorizing them and fixing them as discrete objects from the past. In other words, they were dead because they happened and are no longer relevant to the present."[20] In other words, complete knowledge of monsters, their mysteries and meanings, diminishes their ability to haunt the everyday. Yōkai could no longer lurk in the shadows of everyday life when they had been explained away by the science of minzokugaku and undergone a 'museumification' that left them preserved for posterity but entirely lifeless.

Players of Pokémon gain knowledge of monsters through both sight and capture that is immediately recorded into the in-game encyclopedia or Pocket Dexter – Pokédex for short. It inventories a Pokémon's name, elemental type, weaknesses, weight, height, sex, category, abilities, battle statistics, and lore. The demystifying knowledge of yōkai employed by minzokugaku scholars like Inoue Enryo that relegated them to the category of folklore and excised them from modern life finds a curious parallel in the operations of the Pokédex: the knowledge of monsters grants players power over them in battle, and the relegation of frightening lore to the encyclopedia manages and conceals in-game horror.

Foster once again informs us of some of the similarities between Pokémon and the encyclopedic knowledge formation employed in minzokugaku; he writes:

The Pokémon world shares critical structural affinities with yōkai culture – particularly the collusion of ludic and encyclopedia modes. The original version, for example, includes some 150 monsters, each with a distinct name, habitat, and set of characteristics. Success in the game is predicated on mastery of the facts about all the beasts in the pantheon. Handbooks and catalogs list, illustrate, organize, and describe these creatures in classic hakubutsugaku-

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[18] I borrow this turn of phrase from Gerald Figal's Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan (Durham: Duke UP, 1999.)

[19] Foster, Pandemonium and Parade, 10.

[20] Stefan Tanaka, New Times in Modern Japan (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton UP, 2004), 76.

style: 'Pokémon of the prairies,' 'Pokémon of the mountains,' 'Pokémon of the forests,' and the like. As if to further bolster the authority of this discourse, the 'Pokémon world' is endowed with its own history and even an academic discipline reminiscent of yōkaigaku, appropriately called 'Pokémon-gaku,' or Pokémon-ology.[21]

Foster draws attention to the Pokédex and the fictive discipline of Pokémonology. The study of Pokémon mirrors the study of yōkai and is a central element of the narrative. It is, after all, always the Pokémon professor who grants the player their first monster. The Pokédex is critically important in clarifying the player's quest of accumulation and differentiates the accumulation of knowledge from the accumulation of capital. The quest to 'catch them all' is completed not by having all the monsters captured in the player's bank but by having every entry of the Pokédex complete. In other words, the logic of accumulation that is in productive resonance with the ideal of friendship is not the logic of capitalist accumulation but the accumulation of knowledge via ethnography.

Like the tales of Japanese native ethnographers themselves, who like Yanagita oft presented themselves as lonely wanderers,[22] travelling on foot across a vast and mysterious land seeking to discover the secrets of the monsters therein, player-ethnographers in Pokémon travel through the game world and simultaneously acquire the knowledge of and power over monsters. The formation of encyclopedic knowledge and the control of Pokémon are closely linked by the Pokédex gameplay mechanic – battle and catch monsters to know and control them.

It is an interesting aside to note that even the cries of Pokémon are included in the Pokédex. The cries of most Pokémon are derived from the monster's name. According to Foster, "Yanagita informally surveyed children at play, asking them, 'What sound does an obake make?' and suggesting that the voice of the yōkai becomes the name of the yōkai."[23] In the context of Pokémon and largely in Yo-Kai Watch as well, the monsters are only able to express themselves through emphatic repetition of their own names. Pikachu is only able to vocalize 'pika pika,' 'chu~,' or 'pikachu' and it seems this may harken back to this particular idea about the sounds of yōkai.

Though knowledge formation and control of monsters are linked in Pokémon, the logic of this relationship is reversed. When the objective of minzokugaku – knowledge formation – is translated into the ludos of the game – capturing and fighting monsters – knowledge formation no longer leads directly to the control of monsters. Research would, after all, make for a rather unexciting game on its own. Instead, control of monsters through their capture leads directly to knowledge formation, facilitated through the mechanic of the Pokédex. Thus, the task of performing minzokugaku research, of finding meaning, is completed by an in-game mechanic achieved through battle, and what was previously the consequence of knowledge formation – binding and control – has become the means of achieving knowledge. Encyclopedic knowledge formation and power over monsters operates cyclically: players dominate unknown monsters to gain knowledge of them and use this newfound knowledge to facilitate future domination.

There is an unusual relationship between horror and play within Japanese monster culture, and yōkai lend themselves to ghastly tales just as readily as they do to playful ones, such as in the Japanese parlour game of hyakumonogatari, where storytellers would take turns telling one hundred tales over the course of an evening, extinguishing a candle at the end of each and hoping to encounter the supernatural with the snuffing out of the final candle.[24] What has happened to the horror of monsters in Pokémon? It has not been entirely removed; however, it has been relegated to the encyclopedia of the game. Though players may consider the encyclopedia as part of the narrative, at least in opposition to the ludos, it is worth making a distinction between the knowledge contained in the Pokédex and the regular narrative of the series. Outside of the primary narrative, Pokémon horror stories occupy the place of lore. They are additional material outside of the scope of the story that serves to build the larger universe.

The contents of these ghost stories are often significantly darker than the tone of the game. For example, Drifloon, the ghost-balloon Pokémon, is accompanied by the following entry: "Stories go that it grabs the hands of small children and drags them away to the afterlife. It dislikes heavy children."[25] Or, the entry for Shedinja, a Pokémon resembling the discarded shell of a cicada, reads: "Shedinja's hard body doesn't move – not even twitch. In

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[21] Foster, Pandemonium and Parade, 214.

[22] Christy, A Discipline on Foot, 80.

[23] Foster, Pandemonium and Parade, 156

[24] Ibid, 9.

[25] Game Freak, Pokémon Sun, 2016.

fact, its body appears to be merely a hollow shell. It is believed that this Pokémon will steal the spirit of anyone peering into its hollow body from its back." [26] The instability of monsters as creatures poised between horror and play is the subject of Foster's book, Pandemonium and Parade, and provides an ample metaphor for the different presentations of Pokémon between the game proper and the Pokédex encyclopedia. The re-emergence of horror in Pokémon would be worthy of an article in itself, for there is practically a genre of Pokémon ghost stories circulating online, the most famous of which asserts that the spooky music of Pokémon Red and Green's in-game cemetery village, Lavender Town, produces a unique combination of notes that drives children to suicide. This rumour had achieved so much purchase that developers altered the music between the Japanese and North American releases.

Japanese Native Ethnography, or minzokugaku, functions in Pokémon as a model for accumulation beyond capitalism. It operates by wedding encyclopedic knowledge formation in the Pokédex with the ludos of battling and capturing monsters. Player sojourns through the virtual world uncover the symbiotic relationships of people and Pokémon. Like minzokugaku scholars searching for the essence of Japan in yōkai, this play ethnography uncovers the human-monster relationships that define the lifeways of the Pokémon universe.

Players are caught between dissonant (or resonant) elements of the game: a narrative promoting friendship and the development of meaningful relationships with their tamed monsters, and a ludos that drives players to accumulate knowledge and capture creatures. Shifting the focus of accumulation from a capitalist to an ethnographic mode may seem to dissolve some of this tension. After all, how are players who accumulate on the behalf of knowledge at risk of becoming as villainous as the evil Teams that steal Pokémon and exploit them for profit?

A recent iteration in the series, Pokémon Sun & Moon (2016), provides an interesting variation to the narrative formula. Team Skull is not the chief antagonist but is instead clandestinely supported by the Aether Foundation, an organization for the preservation of Pokémon. At the game's conclusion, players discover the Aether Foundation to be the real villains. While the Aether Foundation claims that their research seeks to unravel the mysteries of Pokémon and preserve them for posterity, these objectives

are horrifically materialized in large storage tanks, in which Pokémon are incapacitated in suspended animation.

The comparison between player and villain is clarified when the Aether Foundation's director chastises the player: "Terrible? Me? How am I different from any Pokémon trainer, like your little 'friend' there? What do you do with a Pokémon you can't use? You remove it from your party, as you please."[27] The perverse manifestation of the Aether Foundation's goals cautions players against their own accumulation, even if that accumulation is for the sake of knowledge or preservation. In this sense, like minzokugaku scholars, player-ethnographers pursuit of their object is premised on its death, like a moth wriggling on a pin. The accumulation of knowledge, like capital, is not without its dangers and must be tempered with friendship.

3. Yo-Kai Watch, Yuru Kyara, and New Media Ecologies

Yo-Kai Watch (2015) functions as a self-aware successor-parody of the Pokémon franchise and it is characterized by the same ludonarrative tensions between friendship and accumulation, though they are often radically undermined. Whereas in Pokémon, the game is serious in tone and its protagonist is always learning life lessons from their experiences, Yo-Kai Watch disavows any pretensions of learning or seriousness, and Keita, the game's boy-hero is made to never learn. For example, in one episode Keita notices that his friend and school crush has put on some weight, and he, believing it to be the work of a yōkai, tells her so. As expected, she becomes visibly upset by his hurtful remarks and Keita's guide and ghost butler, Whisper, scolds him for his blunt and uncaring approach, telling him that not everything is about yōkai and that if he ever wants to have success with his crush, he is going to need to be more sensitive.[28] If this were Pokémon, this would be the teachable moment to take away from the episode; however, it turns out that she is, in fact, possessed by a yōkai that's caused her to overeat. Keita is vindicated in his previous behaviour and the episode ends without him learning anything at all.

In place of a Pokédex, Keita is equipped with the Great Yōkai Encyclopedia, in which he stores his yōkai coins – the equivalent of Pokéballs – and it provides a compendium of knowledge of the yōkai contained within. Nevertheless,

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[26] Game Freak, Pokémon Omega Ruby, 2014.

[27] Game Freak, Pokémon Sun and Moon, 2016.

[28] Level-5, Yo-Kai Watch, 2015 (Japanese release.)

the importance of encyclopedic knowledge formation is continually undercut by Whispers use of Yōkaipedia – a Wikipedia parody that Whisper accesses via his Yōkaipad. In the world of Yo-Kai Watch, not only is the gathering of knowledge already complete but it is easily accessible and publicly available to anyone who requires it: it does not have to be teased out from encounters with monsters. Moreover, Keita does not embark on any journey in the manner of a Japanese native ethnographer; he stays in his neighbourhood.

Yōkai coins, or medallions, are Yo-Kai Watch's alternative to Pokéballs. Instead of capturing Pokémon, Yo-Kai Watch demands that players befriend them. This is part of a larger move to reconfigure the relationship between players and monsters. Yōkai as coins simultaneously reinforces both notions of friendship and capital: friendship because the monsters are not forcibly contained and have freedom, but capital in the way that the friendships are quantified as literal coinage. It could be argued that this is the commodification of friendship rather than monsters. These coins conveniently fill slots in the Great Yōkai Dictionary, an item that exists both in game and as real, purchasable merchandise. The use of collectable coins would seem to demonstrate a greater level of commodification than in Pokémon. On the other hand, however, the symbolic exchange of coins in pre-modern Japan was used to form relationships with the dead. Thus, Yo-Kai Watch utilizes its coin mechanic to simultaneously achieve both a greater level of commodification and an emphasis on friendship, while harkening back to Japanese tradition.

Another significant departure from the Pokémon formula is that Yo-Kai Watch's monsters are designed to evoke tradition or resemble traditional monsters. [29] Utagawa Kuniyoshi's famous depiction of the gashadokuro giant skeleton is re-imagined via wordplay as holding a gashapon, or capsule toy machine. Most of Yo-Kai Watch's monsters are created through some sort of wordplay that mirrors Yanagita Kunio's own interest in the relationship of language and monsters. If they are not re-imaginings of monsters already entrenched in Japanese tradition, they are new creations meant to embody problems of modern life. The ubiquitous Jibanyan, for instance, is the consequence of losing pets to traffic accidents, and Koma-san is a

country yōkai forced into an urban existence by the destruction of his shrine. Just as Yanagita sought to uncover the nature of folk life through local monsters, the monsters of Yo-Kai Watch are designed to reveal the problems of everyday life in contemporary Japan.

The most significant difference between the monsters of Yo-Kai Watch and Pokémon is the willingness of developers to allow yōkai to have geographical and historical affiliations with different regions of Japan that build towards a larger media ecology. Pokémon, on the contrary, insists upon its creatures' ties to a strictly fantasy world. In Yo-Kai Watch, some monsters have been designed to represent regions insofar as they embody ideas of Japanese tradition, ideas of place, and local customs and products, such as the kind of domestic tourism discussed by Marilyn Ivy.[30] This is not to say that Pokémon has not played with the idea of travel: the immensely popular mobile game, Pokémon Go, encouraged players to collect monsters through the exploration of real space, often directing player to local parks and landmarks, and occasionally even offering rare or legendary Pokémon at special events. Furthermore, the idea of the necessity of travel to collect monsters synchronizes with the understanding of minzokugaku as a discipline on foot; according to Alan Christy, "Yanagita was describing travel as a specific kind of practice – not just a simple movement through space – that was performed by a subject who came to know of himself or herself through encounters with the unfamiliar."[31] As play-ethnographers, players must travel both in and outside of their games to acquire monsters and knowledge.

Places such as the Osaka Pokémon Center allow players to play at the game and ethnography in real space. First, the location acts as a nexus between the game and real world: players must play the game in the Pokémon Center in order to receive in-game rewards. Second, the Pokémon Center itself is a model of the in-game location, complete with the iconic red and white counters. Here, too, players accumulate Pokémon, but they do so by purchase rather than catching them in-game. Consumer capitalism is the way the game is played in the real world, reinforcing some of the arguments made by Allison. For players, however, the cost of acquisition is more than the price paid at the counter: it is the experience and temporal cost of the

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[29] Michael Dylan Foster coins the term 'folkloresque' to describe this phenomenon in The Book of Yōkai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore (Oakland: California UP, 2015.)

[30] Marilyn Ivy, Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1995.)

[31] Christy 47

journey itself. Pokémon Centers are not ubiquitous. They advertise to players across Japan and reward them for visiting with the experience of discovery. The experience of minzokugaku – the 'discipline on foot' is the real commodity.

What makes the regional monsters of Yo-Kai Watch different from Pokémon is that the locations to which they encourage players to travel are reinforced by the peculiar nature of the yōkai themselves. For example, the yōkai Sumodon (すもうどん) is a combination of udon noodles and the sport, sumo. Sumodon is only obtainable by visiting the island of Shikoku, which itself is famous for the sanuki udon dish and for festivals where bulls are dressed to perform sumo. The journey of the player to obtain the monster reinforces the experience of travel to Shikoku and the festivals and culinary habits of the region. The regional monsters of Yo-Kai Watch simultaneously promote domestic tourism while encouraging players to engage with regional difference. Domestic tourism and minzokugaku are not cross-purpose. Christy indicates the relationship of travel and power: "The arrival of the native ethnologists, therefore, while meeting with some suspicion, also represented an influx of cash."[32] In other words, domestic tourism, and Japanese native ethnography may have always been susceptible to some degree of entanglement. The difference is that the play-ethnography of the Yo-Kai Watch games is directly connected to consumption.

The relationship of regional Yōkai, domestic tourism and accumulation is a recapitulation of an already ubiquitous facet of Japanese domestic tourism – the mascot characters known as yuru kyara. Yuru kyara, such as Kumamoto's Kumamon or Yubari's Melon Bear, are regional mascots designed to represent local culture, commodities, and produce, and to promote local tourism. Sometimes, though not always, these characters are modeled after traditional yōkai. The yuru kyara boom began in the early 2000s but the first characters existed several years earlier. The most successful yuru kyara overshadow the region they were designed to promote. Kumamon merchandise sporting his image has vastly overtaken any specific products of Kumamoto. In the case of characters like Kumamon, it may be that the desire for travel and regional discovery that was intended to be promoted has been subsumed by affective relationships

with the character. Here, too, like the operations of Pokémon or Yo-Kai Watch is an operative tension between an affective relationship with the character – friendship – and accumulation, both capitalist and ethnographic. In consumer terms, loyalty to a character's brand is at odds with a desire to 'collect them all.' In the case of yuru kyara it may be that the productive tension, or ludonarrative resonance that is at the heart of player experience in Pokémon and Yo-Kai Watch is neither reproducible nor productive in the real world.

Yuru kyara are not the same as Pokémon or Yo-Kai Watch characters, or even necessarily yōkai themselves; the development of domestic tourism in Japan and its reliance on character culture has its own history. However, the distinctions between these categories are becoming increasingly muddled. While cities have largely adopted the yuru kyara model to foster local tourism, many are also relying on pre-existing characters, such as in the Pokémon Local Acts program, a collaborative endeavour between prefectural governments and Nintendo to bolster regional tourism through video game monsters. According to their website, the Pokémon Local Acts mission "aims to promote Japan's various localities by highlighting their well-known and not so well-known charms," and to "involve help from 'Ambassadorial Pokémon,' whose characteristics match those of their respective localities."[33] Local Acts has so far produced events and themed merchandise for Kagawa, Iwate, Fukushima, Hokkaido, Miyagi, and Tottori prefectures. For instance, Sandshrew themed merchandise has been paired with Tottori's famous sand dunes. A wider selection of regions is also host to decorative manhole covers which function as access points for players of Pokémon GO.

Figure 1. Photograph by author

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[32] Ibid, 60.

[33] Pokémon Local Acts, Nintendo, accessed January 5, 2021, https://local.pokemon.jp/en/.

While Local Acts focuses on less-traveled areas, tourist hotspots such as Nara city have also capitalized on the interplay of game characters and yuru kyara. Figure 1, depicts two characters designed by Nishida Atsuko, renowned as the creator of the Pokémon Pikachu. On the left is Haru-chan, a stylized rendering of the yōkai Amabie, which was re-popularized in the COVID-19 era for its disease-fighting characteristics. Haru-chan takes their name from the character for spring, borrowed from the nearby Kasuga Shrine. To the right, is the yuru kyara Haku-chan, a white deer connected to a local traffic accident and the foundation legends of local temples. Haku-chan is intended to revitalize the Sanjo-dori shopping street. In sum, the image is a yōkai and a yuru kyara depicted in a Pokémon style by the creator of Pikachu. Together, they encourage travel, knowledge acquisition, and consumer capitalism through affection for mascot characters and tie-ins to the Pokémon franchise.

Conclusion

Virtual worlds continue to expand and impinge on the real, and the commodification of the ethnographic impulse and the affective power of characters is opening new avenues for consumer capitalism and regional tourism. Although Pokémon and Yo-Kai Watch may not reproduce capitalism in-game, the creation of new media geographies through the space of travel and tourism is ultimately in service to broader patterns of capitalist consumption. The ludonarrative tension between befriending and collecting monsters plays out in real space as players travel across Japan to collect digital monsters and consumer goods. Moreover, the knowledge of monsters that is critical to success in these games, and the concomitant pleasure of reading the encyclopedia, is instrumental in understanding the space of modern Japan. Minzokugaku sought out the Japanese folk heart in its explorations of the countryside for the purpose of fostering a kind of cultural nationalism. Tracing the origins of Japanese culture made it possible to define the nation. Similarly, the media geographies of Pokémon and Yo-Kai Watch produce an encyclopedia of knowledge that overlays the space of real Japan and reinforces the hyper-regionalized folkloric, cultural, and culinary specificities that define the state of domestic tourism today. Knowledge of monsters and relationships with them, either through friendship or consumption, is a means for navigating space. Friendship, knowledge-making, and consumption are the new keys to this monstrous frontier.

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