

Pokémon: The Games Behind the Phenomenon and Phenomenon Behind the Games
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Pokémon. Perhaps the most widely recognized word in the industrialized world in the late 1990's and early 2000's. For some people, hearing that word reminds them of a worldwide phenomenon that they love. For others, it engenders a feeling of extreme dislike. But regardless of how people feel about it, one thing is for certain, almost everybody has heard about it.

What is Pokémon? It's hard to say. It's a phenomenon. It's a card game, a stuffed toy line, a fruit snack, a collector's card set, a monthly comic book, a candy, a role-playing game, a bunch of plastic figures, a collection of posters on the wall, a cartoon, and a newspaper comic strip. It's also the best thing to ever happen and the worst thing to ever happen, a way to educate children and a distraction in schools, and a demonic game for heathens and a game blessed by the Pope. Pokémon is many things, but at its heart, it's just a good, solid video game.

The basic premise of Pokémon (as delineated in the video games for Nintendo's Game Boy: Pokémon Red, Pokémon Blue, Pokémon Yellow, Pokémon Silver, and Pokémon Gold) is that the world is full of Pokémon (note that Pokémon is both the singular and plural form), or "Pocket Monsters," that each has special skills. The world is also full of Pokémon trainers that go around capturing and then training the Pokémon for various reasons: ranging anywhere from personal gain to love of Pokémon. To train them, trainers have their Pokémon battle other trainers' Pokémon. The first set of video games (Pokémon Red/Blue/Yellow) sets the player up as a beginning trainer named Ash (Satoshi in the Japanese version). In Pokémon Red and Pokémon Blue, Ash gets to choose one Pokémon to start with: Bulbasaur (a dinosaurish Pokémon with a bulb-like plant growing out of its back), Charmander (another dinosaurish Pokémon with a flaming tail), or Squirtle (a water Pokémon that resembles a turtle). In Pokémon Yellow, Ash starts off with the ever-popular Pikachu (an electric mouse). From there, he travels the continent searching for more Pokémon and trying to become a Pokémon Master. As he trains the Pokémon, they grow stronger and sometimes evolve into new Pokémon. In his quest to become a full-fledged Pokémon Master, he has to deal with opposition from several sources such as his archrival Gary (Shigeru in Japanese) and a group known as Team Rocket. To further his collection, the player can trade Pokémon with other players by using the link cable that enables two Game Boys to connect.

Although it seems that the story of Pokémon began when it burst onto the public scene in the latter half of the 1990's, it actually goes back much further to the 1970's. It was then that Pokémon creator Satoshi Tajiri (whom the main character in Pokémon is named after) spent his childhood years in a suburb of Tokyo. He spent much of his time roaming through the fields and forests collecting tiny animals and insects. However, as time went on, the natural habitats where he had previously gone to hunt for these specimens were slowly destroyed by the arrival of urbanization and the highways, shopping centers, and buildings that it brings. Although he lost some of his old stomping grounds with the new buildings, he gained a new one: the arcade. Tajiri spent long hours there playing video games such as "Space Invaders" and grew to love these games. This led him and some friends to start a gaming magazine called "Game Freak" in 1982. Game Freak then slowly evolved into a video game developer. In 1991, Tajiri saw for the first time the Game Boy and its link cable. In these two items, he saw a way to bring the activity he loved as a child (bug and animal collecting) through a medium he adored (video games) to all the children who no longer had the opportunity to partake in that activity because of urbanization. That way was Pokémon (Chua-Eoan 84).

Tajiri pitched his idea to Nintendo. Although they were confused by the idea, Nintendo signed a contract with Tajiri anyway because they had liked his previous programming efforts. What followed in the next six years was the classic tale of a person (and his company) always teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, but so dedicated to his ideas and so full of belief in himself and his companions that he would not give up. Several people left Game Freak because of the financial situation. However, some people did stay, including Ken Sugimori, the artist who eventually drew all the Pokémon (Chua-Eoan 85-86). Tajiri and his people at Game Freak took the basic ideas he had set up for Pokémon and ironed them out into a full-fledged game, developing a smorgasbord of Pokémon (“ABC”). Along the way, a few important people came along. Shigeru Miyamoto, famed creator of the Mario and Zelda series, mentored Tajiri throughout the development process. (Note how Tajiri ended up paying homage to his mentor: by naming Ash’s archrival after Miyamoto.) (Chua-Eoan 86) Tsunekazu Ishihara, president of Creatures, Inc., who initially was charged with supporting development of the game and is now in charge of all Pokémon merchandising, also met Tajiri during this time (“Pokémon’s”).

When Tajiri and Game Freak finally finished programming Pokémon in 1996, the Game Boy had already become somewhat obsolete. Given the probable lack of interest by the public, Tajiri believed that Nintendo would reject the game. But to his surprise, they picked it up anyway (Chua-Eoan 86) and Takashi Kawaguchi, a manager in Nintendo’s advertising department, joined Tajiri’s team to head up marketing (“ABC”). Masakazu Kubo, executive producer of Shogakukan Inc., had faith in Pokémon and signed on to print a line of Pokémon comic books and trading cards (Chua-Eoan 86). Nintendo published Pokémon Red and Pokémon Green in Japan in February of 1996 (PokeAbode) with its 150 official Pokémon (Chua-Eoan 86). Without flashy graphics or a high-powered console to run on, not much was expected of Pokémon. But Pokémon’s saving grace was that it was relatively affordable compared to those more high-powered games (Chua-Eoan 86). The first weeks of sales were not that great, but sales picked up a bit after that and by the end of March, 350,000 units had been sold (Kangaskhan). This was not a good sign because in the Japanese video game market, a video game title almost always has most of its sales within the first two months (Ocampo). However, surprisingly in the next quarter, 320,000 more units sold. In the third quarter, 380,000 units sold and in the fourth quarter, a whopping 780,000 copies sold. So in under a year, Pokémon had sold 1.84 million copies (Kangaskhan).

Around this time, word got out that there was actually a secret 151st Pokémon named Mew that was supposedly only available through a comic book contest or through heavy trading. This caused sales to pick up even more (Kangaskhan). Additionally, Kubo pitched an idea for a Pokémon cartoon series (“Japan’s”) that would star the cute Pokémon named Pikachu (who by most accounts is now the most popular mouse in the world, trumping even Mickey) (Del Castillo). When the cartoon began airing in April of 1997, 500,000 copies of Pokémon sold that month. Then in the fall of 1997, the Pokémon collectible card game was released (designed by Kubo and with art by Sugimori), further boosting sales of the video game and becoming a sales juggernaut in its own right. Despite selling over 4.7 million units in 1997, the Pokémon phenomenon ended the year on a bad note (PokeAbode). On December 18, about 700 Japanese children had seizures while watching the cartoon when a quickly alternating series of red and white lights flashed on the screen. The show was subsequently pulled from air for four months and many Americans heard about Pokémon for the first time (Chua-Eoan 86).

Despite the setback, Nintendo and Game Freak continued to go forward. They released Pokémon Yellow, which was similar to Red and Green, except that Ash started the game off with

Pikachu and the storyline was tweaked to more closely match that of the cartoon (Davis). Kubo had also been working on a Pokémon movie “Mewtwo Strikes Back” that was released in Japanese theaters in 1998 (PokeAbode). With each Pokémon event, sales spiked more and more. In 1998, a combined total of 8.0 million copies of the three Pokémon games were sold in Japan (Kangaskhan).

Around this time, Tajiri’s Game Freak and the Kubo’s Shogakukan Inc. were negotiating with Nintendo America to bring Pokémon to North America. Despite some hesitation, Nintendo America’s Gail Tilden, vice president of product acquisition and development, decided to publish the product in America (Chua-Eoan 86). Nintendo pulled out all the stops by hiring top toy experts such as Al Kahn (developer of the Cabbage Patch doll) to help with merchandising and rolled out a full force effort to market the games in the US (Chua-Eoan 93). Pokémon Red and Pokémon Blue (different from Green) were released for the Game Boy in the US on September 28, 1998 (“Search”), and the cartoon began airing on the WB Kids’ Network as well (Chua-Eoan 91).

Pokémon’s popularity soared and game after game with the Pokémon name was published in the US (as well as in Japan and elsewhere). A unique fighting game called “Super Smash Bros.” was released for the N64 on April 27, 1999. Although not strictly a Pokémon game, Super Smash Bros. includes Pikachu as one of its main characters. “Pokémon Pinball” (Game Boy Color), released on June 1, 1999, is exactly what it sounds like: a pinball game with Pokémon in it (as usual, the player tries to collect all the Pokémon as he flips the ball all over the pinball table). “Pokémon Snap” (N64) was released on July 26, 1999. In this game, the main character is a photographer trying to capture all the Pokémon, but this time on film. Pokémon Yellow was released for the Game Boy Color on October 18, 1999 and is basically the same as the one that was released in Japan (“Search”). In October of 1999, the top five games across all gaming consoles in terms of sales figures were all Pokémon titles. In 1999, the five Pokémon games released in the US made up 10.5 percent of all console game sales and accounted for at least thirty percent of revenues for Nintendo (“News”).

Nintendo released “Pokémon Stadium” (developed by HAL Laboratory) for the N64 on March 6, 2000. This game enhances the battle aspect of the original games by placing the Pokémon in a battle stadium where they duke it out. An added bonus is the ability to transfer the Pokémon that the player has trained in Pokémon Red/Blue/Yellow into this game. “Pokémon Trading Card Game” (Game Boy Color, April 15, 2000) is essentially the Pokémon collectible card game converted into a Game Boy game. “Pokémon Puzzle League” for the N64 was released on September 25, 2000. It’s a stimulating puzzle game based on the classic “Tetris Attack” with some Pokémon thrown in for good measure (“Search”).

“Pokémon Silver” and “Pokémon Gold,” the true sequels to Pokémon Red and Pokémon Blue and once again developed by Game Freak, were released for the Game Boy Color on October 11, 2000. These games build upon all the strengths of the original games while adding 100 new Pokémon to be collected. “Hey You, Pikachu!” was released for the N64 on November 6, 2000. This game makes use of Nintendo’s microphone peripheral that allows the player to speak to the on-screen Pikachu and command it to do things. “Pokémon Puzzle Challenge” (Game Boy Color, December 4, 2000) is similar to Pokémon Puzzle League. “Pokémon Crystal,” a version of Pokémon Gold/Silver specially designed to work with cell phones, was released for the Game Boy Color in Japan only on December 14, 2000. “Pokémon Stadium 2” (N64, March 26, 2001) is similar to the original Pokémon Stadium but is updated to work with Pokémon Gold/Silver (“Search”). (Unless specified otherwise, these games were all published

and developed by Nintendo.) These games cover a wide range of game types, but the one major thing that they all have in common, with a couple exceptions, is that they have received stellar reviews as solid games from both professional critics and normal players alike.

In addition to the aforementioned games, many other Pokémon-related items have been released. One example is the Pikachu virtual pet. Modeled after the once red-hot Tamagotchi's, the virtual pet has the owner accrue "watts" from Pikachu by walking around while carrying it. A Pokémon (non-video game) role-playing game has also been released. Additionally, the Pokémon collectible card game from Japan was released in the US by Wizards of the Coast and has subsequently become one of the most lucrative collectible card games in the country ("Search"). The two Pokémon movies released in the US have done very well at the box offices. In 2000, sales of Pokémon-related merchandise increased 220% over the already impressive sales of 1999 (Trueman).

Currently, Nintendo has several plans for the future of Pokémon. The most definite plan appears to be a "Pokémon Advance" game for the soon-to-be-released Game Boy Advance ("Search"). Another plan calls for a Pokémon theme park to be built somewhere in Japan (Kangaskhan). Nintendo plans to release a new Pokémon movie in US theaters this summer named "Lord of the Unknown Tower." Also, Nintendo is considering implementing an online site where kids could play Pokémon with each other through the internet ("Pokemon").

Why has Pokémon become such a large phenomenon? The answer to this question can be traced back to the game design of the original games (Pokémon Red/Green/Blue). In the design process of Pokémon, (perhaps inadvertently) much attention was given to picking out and combining not only just the elements that the average child wants in a game, but also the elements of a game that will cause a player to become addicted. But given that the game is based on what its creator loved to do as a child, it's not hard to believe that Pokémon was designed with so many child-oriented traits packed in. One of the more obvious design decisions geared toward attracting children is that many of the Pokémon are very cute: for example, Charmander, Squirtle, Pikachu, Clefairy, JigglyPuff, Eevee and many more. And even those that aren't necessarily cute are still very likable: for example, Psyduck, Slowpoke, and Gengar, amongst other. Other Pokémon resemble other things children, especially boys, like, such as dragons and dinosaurs. Such cute and enjoyable Pokémon most certainly help to attract children, and many adults, to the game (Plotz).

Another element is fighting. Despite their external cuteness, the main purpose of the Pokémon is to battle each other. Somewhat unfortunately, children are very attracted to fighting (Plotz). For evidence, just take a look at the three most popular children's shows in the past two decades: Transformers, a show about big robots shooting each other, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, a show about human-sized turtles using martial arts to combat assorted enemies, and Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers, a show where people in costumes fight strange monsters and also where robots fight giant monsters.

A third, and perhaps most important, example of the attention given to ways to hook kids is the collectibility aspect of Pokémon. Simply put, people, especially kids, want everything. Children instinctively collect things (Plotz). Toward this element of collectibility, Game Freak dedicated much of its efforts when designing the game. With 150 official Pokémon in the initial set, people get hooked after collecting a few Pokémon and then obsess over getting the rest of them. (Players were also encouraged to do this by the slogan "Gotta catch 'em all!") The designers made it so that only certain Pokémon were available in each of the two original cartridges. So in order to collect every single Pokémon it would be necessary to trade from one

cartridge to another. Thus, players would have to encourage friends to purchase the complementary Pokémon cartridge so that they can trade for all the missing Pokémon. Then their friends would get hooked and encourage other people to get the game and so on and so forth. To further encourage this trading and collecting, Game Freak stuck in a secret 151st Pokémon named Mew (PokeAbode). The only way for players to obtain this Pokémon in the American versions is to have gotten one when Nintendo handed them out, to use a cheating device such as Game Genie or Game Shark, or to have traded with somebody who got one through the other two methods (Vu).

A fourth design decision was making social interaction and communication between players very prominent. Unlike most video games, Pokémon was designed for children who want to play with each other. By looking at a school playground during recess, it's fairly easy to deduce that children like to play with each other. As mentioned above, the only way to obtain all the Pokémon is to trade with other people. The only way to collect all the Pokémon is to trade with other people. Additionally, the designers made it so that Pokémon that have been traded are better than those that have not. By making trading such a prominent aspect of the game, Game Freak made it so Pokémon became a social game, making it all the more successful ("Pokemon").

Taking the reaction to Pokémon Red/Green/Blue and all the media surrounding the games, Game Freak made a few design tweaks for Pokémon Yellow. Kids had shown that Pikachu was, without a doubt, the most popular Pokémon (Del Castillo). As such, the player started the game out with Pikachu instead of the usual Bulbasaur, Charmander, or Squirtle and Pikachu's role in the game became much larger. Seeing as how the Pokémon cartoon had become so popular, the game's storyline was changed to more closely match that of the cartoon (Davis).

Having had a few more years to digest the public's response, designers at Game Freak made some more design changes for Pokémon Gold/Silver. The collectibility component of the previous games was working very well. Thus, they added 100 new Pokémon to the mix, bringing the total to 251, and made it so that some of the old Pokémon were not available in either of the new games so that people who bought them would still have to trade with the people with the old games. This kept the old games from becoming obsolete. Also, since many players seemed to become very attached to their Pokémon, the concept of gender and breeding was introduced into the world of Pokémon. Players could breed new baby Pokémon by mating two existing ones. This increased the sense of attachment to the Pokémon because the players would have raised several of them from birth (Provo).

As mentioned before, several other games that are not in the main Pokémon series have been released with the Pokémon name. These other games cover a wide range of game types, ranging from pinball to gladiatorial combat; but despite being so varied, all the games still incorporate various combinations of the above design decisions. (All the games include at least the cuteness component of the main Pokémon games.)

Pokémon's design is highly influenced by cultural factors. All of the design decisions mentioned above were made with the culture and psychology of children in mind. It takes a decent understanding of child culture to realize that children enjoy cuteness, fighting, playing with each other, and collecting sets. By containing all these factors, Pokémon achieved an eagerly welcome reception from game players, especially children, that has rarely been paralleled in the history of video games (Plotz). The success of Pokémon internationally just

goes to show that despite differences in national cultures, child culture is similar everywhere (“Japan’s”).

When the design choices are taken together, another important cultural factor emerges: peer pressure. The social aspect of Pokémon magnifies its collectibility. For children, those in possession of popular collectible items are always much “cooler” than those not in possession of such items. And the children having the item tend to flaunt it to those that do not have it. This causes incredible peer pressure on the children that don’t have the item to go out and obtain it. So peer pressure is yet another cultural factor that has caused Pokémon to become such a success.

Unlike culture, technology did not play a large factor in the design of Pokémon. The only uses of technology that are worth noting are the fact that the Game Boy is portable and the utilization of the Game Boy’s link cable to allow for trading between players, which enables the social aspect of the game (Larimer). Outside of this, Pokémon actually does not utilize any sophisticated technology in its design. In fact, Pokémon actually uses somewhat outdated technology in its design. Interestingly, when Pokémon was first released in 1996, the Game Boy was actually a dying technology that was rapidly losing the interest of media and players alike (Chua-Eoan 86). The appearance of Pokémon reinvigorated the Game Boy and quite possibly single-handedly saved it.

Providing a stark contrast to technology, business knowledge played a large role in the Pokémon phenomenon. In fact, never in the history of video games in America have business factors been so crucial to the popularity of a game. With the export of Pokémon from Japan, came a unique video game business technique involving a multi-media strategy (“Pokemon”). In the US when most video games are released, magazine, radio, and television advertisements are the extent of the marketing for that game. Pokémon’s marketing was a completely different animal. Pokémon hit the consumer from all different directions. A trading card game was released. Stuffed animals and other toys were sold in toy stores. A website was put up. (Pokemon.com is actually the single most popular website amongst children under 12 (Chua-Eoan 93).) All sorts of promotional product tie-ins were done, ranging from conventional tie-ins such as Pokémon toys in cereal boxes to strange ones such as putting Pokémon on the labels of ketchup bottles and designing cars that look like Pokémon as contest prizes. A children’s cartoon show was put on air. In the cartoon, the only thing that most of the Pokémon could say was their own name, thus ingraining them into children’s minds through constant repetition. The name of the hero was Ash “Ketchum” to go along with the slogan “Gotta catch ‘em all!” (Del Castillo) (With all this marketing, it’s interesting to note that many people actually do not know that Pokémon originated as a video game.)

Some of the design decisions about the game itself were influenced by business factors. The main Pokémon games encourage players to buy all sorts of real-life items. The games allow players to take in-game snapshots of their Pokémon that can then be printed out on the Game Boy printer, which must be purchased separately. In Pokémon Gold/Silver, players can receive special in-game gifts by interfacing the Pikachu virtual pet with the Game Boy. Designers left out certain Pokémon from each of the cartridges so players must purchase all the games themselves or encourage others to purchase them in order to collect all the Pokémon (Provo). The main problem with getting players to buy these items is that most of the players are too young to purchase these themselves so they must get their parents to buy them. However, the designers solved this by making sure that all the games have relatively kid-safe ESRB ratings of E or K-A and making the Pokémon cute (and thereby obscuring any violence in the game) so

that parents are more apt to think that it's harmless to purchase these items for their children (Plotz).

Perhaps the lesson that can be learned from all this is that technology really isn't all that important to good video game design. All a designer truly needs to make a good video game is a strong understanding of the culture of the target audience. And if the designer wants to make money off of it, he just needs to get some business sense.

Pokémon has a lot of glitz and glamour around it but beneath all of that marketing, the Pokémon games are very solid. The core Pokémon games are strong RPG's that utilize cute creatures, fighting, collectibility, and communication. This success in game design stems for a good understanding of the culture of children. The overall success of Pokémon as a financial enterprise is a result of Nintendo's excellent business sense. Most fads and cartoons seem to die out after a few years (for example, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Transformers, Power Rangers, Furby, and Tickle-Me-Elmo), but Pokémon is differentiated by the fact that it has a strong video game series at the heart of it. At the risk of sounding short-sighted to anybody who reads this many years from now, Pokémon's origin as a strong video game gives it a much better chance of being more than just a fad and surviving beyond just the next couple years.

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