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Pokémemory: Time-images, Transmedia, and Memory

Abstract

The 2016 launch of *Pokémon Go*, *Pokémon Sun*, and *Pokémon Moon* – video games that shattered sales records and expectations – show that the Pokémon brand continues to capture the hearts (and wallets) of people all across the world. Sidestepping questions of whether Pokémon’s influence is the direct result of conscious player choice, corporate control, or political power plays, this paper investigates the inflammatory lines between power and play. This paper argues that Pokémon products, as a branded transmedia franchise, have the ability to spark moments of nostalgic recall for consumers through the use of memory mechanics called “gestures” that link Pokémon products both to one another and to a player’s embodied history of play. Drawing from Laura Marks’ work on “radioactive memory fossils” and Deleuze’s “time-images”, this essay investigates a few Pokémon gestures that operate both intra-platform (within the same type of platform, such as between the animated film and the animated series) and inter-platform (between different types of digital media platforms, such as between the animated series and the video game). By investigating these gestures, we expose ways in which the Pokémon brand can inspire the recollection of memories in ways the player and producer can influence but not entirely control. Pokémon’s presence as a branded transmedia experience embedded in individual biographies of players opens avenues of resistance to traditional lines of influence in the media industry by reframing power not just as the ability to control, but also as the ability to surprise.

Key Words: memory, transmedia, Pokémon, branding, time-images

Introduction

In the late 1990's, there was a sudden and seemingly never-ending influx of strangely cute monsters making their way into the United States. The children were in love. The adults? A little confused. The monsters were Pokémon¹ and they were the most recent pop culture craze from Japan. Their almost over-night popularity with youth in the United States was so surprising that the phrase “pokémania” was coined to describe what appeared to be an irrational obsession for these pocket-sized toys.

Twenty years later, Pokémon remains a transmedia heavyweight. In 2016, Pokémon proved, with the release of *Pokémon Go*², that Pokémon as a brand was still powerful enough to break the internet. An article in Rolling Stone Magazine reported that *Pokémon Go*, an augmented-reality game that utilized Pokémon imagery, developed by Niantic and released to iOS and Android, experienced such unexpected high demand that the developer's overloaded servers crashed within two days of the game's initial release.³ Pokémon's continued popularity is not limited to smartphones either. The 2016 hand-held console video games, *Pokémon Sun*⁴ and *Pokémon Moon*⁵, became Nintendo's fastest-selling titles *ever* in the Americas by selling 3.7 million copies across the American regions within the first few weeks of sale.⁶

The popularity of this twenty-year-old brand has sparked conversations about *why* these toys garner such intense affection and *what that means* for players and society. Some viewed Pokémon's success in terms of global politics, with the brand's popularity seen as evidence of Japan's burgeoning ability to counteract the hegemonic media industry

¹ Because the single word “Pokémon” is used to describe and name a cornucopia of media objects and things, I utilized a specific key to help readers recognize references more easily. Throughout this paper I use the term “Pokémon” to discuss the creatures, or objects of capture, that inherit the Pokémon universe; I use the italicized “*Pokémon*” to discuss specific products (i.e. cartoons, movies, card games, video games, etc.); and I use the underlined “Pokémon” to discuss both the franchise and brand itself, as well as the universe in which Pokémon and *Pokémon* discussions are situated in or centred around.

² *Pokémon Go* on iOS and Android (2016, Niantic).

³ John Davison, “How Pokemania Broke ‘Pokemon Go’”, *Rolling Stone Magazine* <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/pokemon-go-how-pokemania-broke-mobile-gaming-app-20160712>, date accessed 14 January 2017 (2016).

⁴ *Pokémon Sun* (2016, The Pokémon Company, Nintendo 3DS).

⁵ *Pokémon Moon* (2016, The Pokémon Company, Nintendo 3DS).

⁶ Allegra Frank, “Pokémon Sun and Moon set big new sales record for Nintendo”, *Polygon* <http://www.polygon.com/2016/11/30/13797626/pokemon-sun-and-moon-sales-record>, date accessed 14 January 2017 (2016).

of the United States.⁷ Others focused on smaller-scale and individual responses and uses of Pokémon products.⁸ Researchers and journalists wanted to understand how and why Pokémon had burrowed its way into the youthful hearts of U.S. children and who ultimately was the one responsible for its popularity. Was the Pokémon takeover planned from the top down as the result of corporate ingenuity, or did Pokémon gain its influence from the bottom up due to player autonomy?

This essay posits that Pokémon itself, outside of purely corporate or consumer control, can move meaning and value through memory. Looking at the various ways in which Pokémon products create their own affective and nostalgic value, I argue that Pokémon products can spark involuntary moments of recall for consumers using mnemonic “gestures” that link Pokémon products both to one another and to embodied histories of play encapsulated within the memory of the consumer. This makes the vested popular interest in Pokémon lie somewhere within an assemblage vast enough to include a multitude of various components: corporate goals, political power struggles, consumer agency, as well as meaningful memories not always controlled by either consumer or creator.

Noticing the ways Pokémon can move meaning independently of conscious thought is not to say that power inequalities, whether between producer and consumer or between nation-states, are non-existent or unimportant. It instead provides an increased awareness of tools that open the potential for media to swerve within the configured lines that typically shape the movement and flow of entertainment and information. This swerving is based on Amit Rai’s conceptualization of *clinamedia*, “the intensive process of becoming” that he believes is the new order of media assemblage. The ability for media to swerve like “the clinamen of Lucretius”,⁹ deviating from the straight lines of cause and effect dictated by outside forces, opens up the possibility for a type of political tweaking, offering additional methods of resisting the enforced methods of control. Gestures, when seen as a type of swerve, are not ways to avoid acknowledging power differences, but instead are sources of hope that hegemonies and power structures do not always have the final say on meaning. There are ways to move outside of power imbalances, and the playful gestures found in toy objects are just one of many.

⁷ Douglas McGray, “Japan’s Gross National Cool”, *Foreign Policy* <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/11/japans-gross-national-cool/>, date accessed 27 November 2014 (2002).

⁸ *Pikachu’s Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon*, ed. Joseph Tobin (Durham and London: Duke University Press) (2004).

⁹ Amit S. Rai, *Untimely Bollywood: Globalization and India’s New Media Assemblage*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press) (2009), p. 218-219.

Gestures and Memory Mechanics

Pokémon's current success in part deals with the brand's existence as a nostalgic entity. Nostalgia, a "yearning for something that tends to have been within living memory rather than distant historical memory", is a key component in the construction and marketing of video games today.¹⁰ As video games, including the Pokémon franchise, age as a medium, nostalgia and memory have made appearances in the research behind why certain games become cultural and financial hotbeds of activity. Nintendo is especially known for this, with academic volumes on gaming and nostalgia, such as *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*, referencing the success of Nintendo's franchises as proof that memory and video games are significantly intertwined.¹¹ But how are people encouraged to remember previous Pokémon experiences, and who controls those memorable moments?

In Laura Marks' *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, memory is described as something that is stored bodily, as well as something that is not always called upon consciously. Marks identifies that media can be a hotbed of triggers that uproot a previous flow of experience (i.e. a memory) involuntarily on the part of the rememberer/viewer, making memory a minefield of potentiality that opens up a person to multiple flows of time simultaneously.¹² Images or objects, which she terms radioactive memory fossils, inspire this jump to the past and disrupt the time and coherence of the present plane. This launches the viewer outward into other planes of both time and experience,¹³ revealing that "the past [the image] represents is not over"¹⁴ and that it continues to live on and influence the present moment, with the present moment also reaching backwards to inexplicably influence our past experience.

Marks' writing works in part from Deleuze's theory of "time-image". Time-images, as compared to movement-images, do not follow the chronological order and

¹⁰ Anna Reading and Colin Harvey, "Remembrance of Things Past: Conceptualizing Nostalgia-Play in the Battlestar Galactica Video Game", in *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*, ed. Laurie N. Taylor and Zach Whalen (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), p. 164-179.

¹¹ Laurie N. Taylor and Zach Whalen, "Playing the Past: An Introduction", in *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*, ed. Laurie N. Taylor and Zach Whalen (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), p. 1.

¹² Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press) (2000), p. 65.

¹³ Laura U. Marks, pp. 77.

¹⁴ Laura U. Marks, pp. 81.

representation of narrative actions and reactions. While past, present, and future are all clearly differentiated from each other in movement-images, time-images flatten that temporal plane, making past, future, and present indistinguishable.¹⁵ Pokémon achieves a similar effect through use of “gestures” which, like Deleuzian style time-images, are movements, actions, or images that disrupt the development of linear narrative by pointing towards other memories and media products within the transmedia franchise. This creates a wider system of moments that extend beyond the specific medium and moment at hand. These gestures are not “gestures” in the sense of a physical movement by an actor within the story, but rather a “pointing towards” another aspect of Pokémon through the mirroring of a familiar image, phrase, character, game mechanic, or environment. The presence of a gesture involves movement from the present moment to a previous one and has the feel of a verb – a moment that moves you – versus a noun, a moment one has.

As we learn from Marks, memories are not always purposeful, and these gestures towards the remembered past do not necessarily imply *voluntary* action on the part of the viewer. Rather than being a recollection in the form of purposeful nostalgia, the gestures can point to the past regardless of whether the player intended to imagine it or not. The viewer cannot choose to remember or not remember and is instead *moved* to memory by the gesture itself. It is an excavation of the past not by the methodical digging of a shovel-wielding archaeologist, but by an unexpected and explosive tripwire. These types of gestures disrupt the place and time of the present experience when they surface. When a gesture moves you while you are playing the newest Pokémon game, you are pushed into a moment where your memory of playing Pokémon previously exists simultaneously with your current experience of playing, *all in the very same moment*. Due to the player’s embodied, tactile memory of having interacted with other Pokémon products, these gestures do not simply disrupt via the rational plane, but also via the affective one. Playing is an action, a very bodily one, and memories of play are also memories of movement and body.

The word gesture also in part draws from Bergson’s discussions on the explosive nature of repetitive, unconscious, and “disruptive comic gestures”, which he says contrast with intentional or conscious actions.¹⁶ In the case of Pokémon, these gestures disrupt the narrative using mimic-able images, actions, game mechanics, and phrases that are associated with other temporalities, like Marks’ radioactive memory fossils. They both

¹⁵ Giles Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The movement-image*, (London: The Athlone Press) (1986).

¹⁶ Henri Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, (Los Angeles: Green Integer Books) (1999), p. 130.

“condense time within themselves”¹⁷ and expand time outwards upon the viewing or “excavation”. Using the word “gesture” instead of “fossil” is appropriate for a transmedia franchise that originates with a game, a media form that more obviously relies on physical movements of the player for a story to unfold. Using the word gesture more easily brings to mind movement, which helps us to remember the interactive (and therefore action-oriented) nature of games. This is not to say gestures are more powerful than other types of references, like music or visual imagery, just that gestures are well-suited to transmedia franchises that involve games. All forms of transmedia storytelling use a variety of different narrative-making techniques, but the narrative found in games is intertwined with game mechanics – system-based feedback mechanisms that affect how a narrative is experienced. Using action-based ideas versus noun-based ideas helps not only pay homage to what is unique about video games, but also expands our conception of transmedia memory-making beyond what an audience member remembers *seeing*, but also what an audience member remembers *doing*.

Brands and Memory-Making

Transmedia, in addition to being multiple kinds of interrelated stories based on the same fictional universe produced on multiple types of media platforms, is also a type of brand. When someone says a media product is part of a transmedia franchise, like *Star Wars*, the label brings with it certain expectations about what an experience with that product will be like based on previous experiences with products made under that same umbrella. Branding relies heavily on affect and past experiences, and corporations have been harnessing the power of memory to create effective branding for quite a while. In Robert J. Foster’s book, *Coca-Globalization: Following Soft Drinks from New York to New Guinea*,¹⁸ Foster studies how soft drink brands such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi become more than mere commodities as they spread globally from place to place. For Foster, the qualifying of the meaning and value of Coca-Cola lies beyond production or simple commodity consumption, but in the affective work that consumers do through their association of past experiences and feelings with the Coca-Cola brand.

This affective significance comes as a result of Coca-Cola embedding itself into the everyday lives of consumers to such a degree that it becomes part of people’s individual biographies, “a prop for the particular narratives through which individual consumers

¹⁷ Laura U. Marks, pp. 77.

¹⁸ Robert J. Foster, *Coca-Globalization: Following Soft Drinks from New York to New Guinea*, (New York, New York: Palgrave MacMillan) (2008).

actively produce their own pasts”.¹⁹ Coca-Cola’s value and meaning is essentially produced by creating a time machine, a type of time travel only possible to consumers with previous, embodied connections with the Coca-Cola brand in physically salient ways. An example being the bodily experience of drinking a Coca-Cola during a particularly memorable summer spent at summer camp. When you see an ad for Coca-Cola, you not only rationally recognize and read the message, but also remember the emotional and physical feelings of drinking from that cold glass bottle on a warm pier. The value of a brand such as Coca-Cola comes from two interlinked sources: one from the actual consumption of a commodity marked by brand image, and the other of the *memory* of that consumption upon viewing the brand image later. Each product must be able to stand alone as a complete experience, but also gain in value, depth, and meaning when it becomes a node in the network of memories and experiences that make up a consumer’s experience with that brand.

Framing Pokémon as a brand like Coca-Cola makes for easy connections. Brands are created when consumers (or players, in this case) form emotional relationships with the franchise through a brand’s ability to connect products to remembered individual biographies. While brands like Coca-Cola do this through advertisements in relationship to a single experience – that of drinking Coca-Cola – Pokémon is a brand that stimulates similar time-traveling tendencies not for one product, but for a large collection of media products. Each encounter with a Pokémon product can connect various aspects of the consumers’ individual biography and identity, linking together different times and experiences of the player’s life into the continually expanding Pokémon universe.

Colin B. Harvey in *Fantastic Transmedia: Narrative, Play and Memory Across Science Fiction and Fantasy Storyworlds*, identifies memory and nostalgia as key mechanisms through which transmedia products are created and spread.²⁰ For Harvey, “the role of memory can be understood as central to transmedia storytelling, in which the invocation of ideas, characters, plot points or audio-visual imagery between elements of a franchise are central to that project’s success.”²¹ This makes sense. It would be difficult to link different forms of media together (linking stories together being the basis of transmedia storytelling all together) if an audience member could not remember any of the previous stories.

When discussing the significance of memory when it comes to creating canon, Harvey examines “the multiple ways in which creators, fans and other commentators seek to

¹⁹ Robert J. Foster, pp. 85.

²⁰ Colin B. Harvey, *Fantastic Transmedia: Narrative, Play and Memory Across Science Fiction and Fantasy Storyworlds*, (King’s College London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan) (2015).

²¹ Colin B. Harvey, pp. 34.

control and *negotiate* the tensions between subjective and collective remembering of a storyworld's diegesis" [my emphasis].²² The emphasis on control and negotiation implies that memory is something that can be controlled through agency of either consumer or creator. This is seen again in the final chapter, where Harvey explains that,

the degree of control exercised by the IP holder in each instance in relation to how memory is controlled directly affects the particular narrative being told and the wider storyworld. Equally the lack of control experienced by those outside of such legal arrangements determines how memories can be articulated, and the extent to which they can be subverted.²³

Control of memory, collective memory especially, is important when it comes to transmedia storytelling. While memory can be affected, encouraged, and subverted by both authorial intent and consumer choice, there are also additional ways to subvert power that are not as tied into conceptions of control. Memory, as Harvey says, can be "an unruly beast"²⁴, and memory's ability to continually surprise us provides an alternative way to think about the way media moves us.

Producers, Players, and Play Objects

From the beginning, concerns about power, both why Pokémon held such a powerful position in the imaginations of players, as well as who controlled that power, were at the forefront of conversations surrounding these pocket-sized monsters. Alternatively called "Cool Japan" or "Japan's Gross National Cool",²⁵ the success of Japanese media products like Tamagotchi, Hello Kitty, and Pokémon in markets outside of Japan, especially the United States, could be interchangeably seen as either a symbol or a symptom of Japan's rise in "soft power". Japan was viewed as a blossoming media powerhouse, and more eyes on Japanese media meant Japan was increasingly able to affect culture, values, and politics through the appeal and attraction of their nation and their nation's media products.²⁶

This assessment of Japan's growing persuasive capacities in globalized media networks

²² Colin B. Harvey, pp. 92.

²³ Colin B. Harvey, pp. 200.

²⁴ Colin B. Harvey, pp. 183.

²⁵ Douglas McGray.

²⁶ Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, (New York: Basic Books) (1990).

was problematized by Iwabuchi Koichi, whose analyses of the extensive localization practices of Pokémon showed that all visual cues that marked Japanese media as being a specifically “Japanese product” were effectively removed. These localization processes revolve around the intention of making these products culturally neutral, something Iwabuchi terms “culturally odorless”.²⁷ In that case, it means the popularity of products like Pokémon cannot easily be interpreted as consumers appreciating or yearning for anything that, in Iwabuchi’s language, is “distinctively Japanese”. For Iwabuchi, the success of Pokémon stems not from Japan’s rise as a cultural superpower, but rather from the successful removal of all specifically Japanese references so that the world of Pokémon is familiar and comfortable for American audiences.

One of the primary limitations to research like Iwabuchi’s and McGray’s is that, as macro-level and global political commentaries, they do not consider how individual players interact with and emotionally relate to Pokémon products. It is hard to tell what consumers of media products think without researching their actual opinions, and the media itself can tell a narrative or story that moves the meaning beyond just international power struggles. Both Iwabuchi and McGray reduce Pokémon and its consumers to symbolic static straw men for clashing sovereign powers in a way that turns the individuals engaged with the media, as well as the media itself, into somewhat passive mirrors of larger, external political vying for international power. That is a meaningful conversation to be had, to be sure, but not the only one.

Anne Allison in her book *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* offers up a different reading of Pokémon. By interviewing young Pokémon fans and examining the crossover media traffic between Japan and the United States, Allison argues that Japanese entertainment goods such as Pokémon are not static objects, but instead examples of the interlocking relationships between things like Japan and the US, or fantasy and reality, effectively becoming mutable assemblages that attract youths through their ability to move, shift, and transform.²⁸ While children admit to the importance of these products coming from Japan in terms of authenticity, Allison argues that the popularity of international Japanese media goods instead derives from a “Japan” that operates as a brand signifier for a certain type of fantasy-ware, rather than a marker of specific geographic or national origin.²⁹ In some ways, this type of scholarship fills in the gaps left over from a heavy emphasis on structural powers or national intentions. Rather than players being totally under the influence of sovereign

²⁷ Koichi Iwabuchi, “How “Japanese” Is Pokemon?”, in *Pikachu’s Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon*, ed. Joseph Tobin (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 53-79.

²⁸ Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press) (2006), p. 34.

²⁹ Anne Allison, pp. 277.

agencies, the individual and multifaceted ways in which children are actively utilizing these toy objects in day-to-day life shows how macro processes and symbolism are not the only ones in control of the media and its meaning.

Other types of Pokémon scholarship have also focused more heavily on the relationships players and fans have formed with Pokémon, flipping the focus from macro to micro to examine the ways children actively interact with and use Pokémon products on an individual or demographically narrow level. The topics covered are highly varied, from being impressed by the information and data gathering of young players,³⁰ to documenting how French children purposefully integrate *Pokémon* cards into more traditional French card games,³¹ to demonstrating how children purposefully use Pokémon to construct new identities for themselves.³² Rather than practices that are entirely reflective of larger social or cultural narratives, this type of research reinforces the agency of young players in their creative play.

In the research mentioned, Pokémon products become inert tools in either the international hands of nations and corporations, or the somewhat smaller hands of children. I seek instead to complicate this hierarchical relationship, placing Pokémon alongside both the player and producer in terms influence and power, rather than strictly below or above. The value players imbue the Pokémon brand with is not entirely a result of top-down decision-making, with The Pokémon Company solely managing the brand and its meaning, nor is it entirely a product of consumers dictating their own emotions and use of Pokémon products. The answer is between all these things, with the producer, the player, and the actual play product itself interacting on a playing field that is not entirely predetermined, hierarchical, or even adversarial.

The Method Behind the Memories

To catalogue all the interconnections within the vast and ever-expanding universe of Pokémon would be a monumental endeavour and beyond the scope and limitations of

³⁰ Julian Sefton-Greene, “Initiation Rites: A Small Boy in a Poke-World”, in *Pikachu’s Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon*, ed. Joseph Tobin (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 141-164.

³¹ Gilles Brougere, “How Much Is a Pokémon Worth? Pokémon in France”, in *Pikachu’s Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon*, ed. Joseph Tobin (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 187-209.

³² Rebekah Willet, “The Multiple Identities of Pokémon Fans”, in *Pikachu’s Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon*, ed. Joseph Tobin (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 226-240.

this essay. Instead this article provides a digestible snapshot of how gestures can be located and understood using only specific parts of the Pokémon franchise. I avoided looking at narrative similarities between media products, which lean towards being “movement-images” that utilize rationality versus emotion and affect as the primary driving force. I concentrated instead on the memories that were playful or action-oriented, elements of the world geared towards memories of doing or playing. These gestures are slight, large enough to jar something loose in the memory banks of someone who has played or experienced other Pokémon products, but small enough to not disrupt the story or seem out of place to someone who did not understand the reference.

I started with two specific iterations of the Pokémon franchise: the 1999 cinematic release, *Pokémon: The First Movie*,³³ and the 2013 video game release, *Pokémon X*. The gestures found in these two iterations flatten time both intra-platform and inter-platform. Intra-platform gestures point across new or older versions of the *same type* of product. (i.e. the newest version of a game pointing towards older versions of the game). Inter-platform gestures point across *different types* of platforms or formats (i.e. an animated television episode pointing towards a video game). This sort of snapshot analysis shows how these gestures are not limited to a specific type or era of Pokémon media, and how gestures can tie together a transmedia brand across multiple products and platforms. The presence of memory gestures across multiple renditions of the franchise, and even across different decades, make this aspect of the media a part of Pokémon’s lasting transmedia brand and emotional legacy.

Intra-Platform Gestures

“Who’s That Pokémon?” is a question-and-answer segment featured in numerous episodes of the Pokémon animated television series.³⁴ During each episode, before a commercial break, the silhouette of a Pokémon is shown with the voice of the narrator asking the audience to guess the name of the Pokémon being shown. To ask the question, the narrator always uses the same phrase: “Who’s that Pokémon?” After the commercial break, a human character from the show shouts the name of the Pokémon as the fully detailed and non-silhouetted image of the Pokémon appears. For instance, in figure 1, the answer is “Pikachu”, the main Pokémon throughout the series. In

³³ *Pokémon: The First Movie: MewTwo Strikes Back!* (1999, Yuyama Kunihiki).

³⁴ “Episode 1: Pokémon, I Choose You!”, *Pokémon* [animated TV program] Cartoon Network, 8 September 1998.

addition to being a playful game to pass commercial time, “Who’s that Pokémon?” is also an intra-media memory gesture, a moment pointed towards by Pokémon’s first full-length film.

Pokémon: The First Movie: MewTwo Strikes Back (*Gekijōban Poketto Monsutā: Myūtsū no Gyakushū*)³⁵ was released in 1998 in Japan before making its way to the United States in 1999. As reported by Anne Allison in her book *Millennial Monsters*, the movie earned opening day profits that at the time exceeded all other films in American film history except for *Star Wars*.³⁶ The film was based primarily on the characters from the syndicated animated television series: Ash, Misty, and Brock (as they are called in the American release). In the film, our human protagonists, plus Pikachu, face Mewtwo, a bioengineered Pokémon made from the cloned DNA of Mew, the legendary Pokémon, and the super-Pokémon clones MewTwo has created. Like any good iteration in a transmedia franchise, it is a stand-alone film, and it is possible to find enjoyment watching it without having played any of the Pokémon video games or having watched any episodes of the animated television series. While previous knowledge and experience with a Pokémon product is unnecessary to understand what is happening, there were special, memory-laden gestures that offered additional depth and meaning for viewers who did have familiarity with other Pokémon products.

During *Pokémon: The First Movie*, the “Who’s that Pokémon?” gesture is referenced during a scene in which two members of Team Rocket, Jessie, and James (a pair of “villains” that often act as comic relief rather than a serious threat), are trapped in the underground laboratory of MewTwo. In the giant stadium above, MewTwo captures the Pokémon of the various trainers he has lured to his island (including Ash, Misty, and Brock) and sends the captured Pokémon down to his lab to be cloned. The cloning machine, while the captured Pokémon go through an assortment of tubes, displays on an overhead screen the silhouette of the Pokémon being cloned. At one point, when James sees a Pokémon’s silhouette on the screen, he mutters aloud “Who’s that Pokémon?” (see fig. 2). While this scene is part of a larger narrative arc revealing how MewTwo is creating his team of super-powered Pokémon, the moment when James asks quizzically about what is being shown on screen, and in fact even the existence of the screen itself, are largely unimportant for continuing the action of the story. But for viewers with previous experience of the animated *Pokémon* series, this gesture could potentially point towards memories of playing this specific guessing game while watching the animated television series on a couch in their living rooms, therefore recalling a past moment and layering it on top of the present to create an experience

³⁵ *Pokémon: The First Movie: MewTwo Strikes Back!*

³⁶ Anne Allison, pp. 237.

that extends backwards through time.



Fig. 1 (left) and Fig. 2 (right). A side-by-side comparison of a screenshot of the “Who’s that Pokémon?” segment from the first *Pokémon* episode, “Pokémon, I Choose You!”, in the United States (Fig. 1) versus a screenshot from *Pokémon: The First Movie: Mewtwo Strikes Back* (Fig. 2).

The Pokémon video games also make use of intra-media gestures. *Pokémon X*, one of two of the first sixth generation games published in 2013, includes instances of gestures that take players out of the present moment by bursting backwards into older video games. For instance, at one Pokémon Center, a type of building that provides healing services within all of the games (its continued existence a type of gesture in and of itself), a non-playable character you speak with makes mention of the changes that have happened to Pokémon Centers within the last ten years (see fig. 3). One change the non-playable character notices is that of building aesthetics.

The Pokémon Centers, while common staples found in most of the main-franchise role-playing games, have gone through several changes in terms of their appearance as the games have developed over the years. The mention of there at one point being two stories is temporally important, as the two-story Pokémon Centers in old games (most notably the original 1998 video games *Pokémon Red*³⁷ and *Pokémon Blue*³⁸) were due to technological specifications of the Game Boy console. The “Pokémon Cable Club”, as the character mentions, used to be housed on the second floor of the Pokémon Center in *Pokémon Red* and *Blue*. It is where players went to trade Pokémon with friends via physical, real-world cables connecting one Game Boy console to another before wireless transfer was made technologically possible.

For players of the original video game, stumbling across this innocuous comment in

³⁷ *Pokémon Red* (1998, The Pokémon Company, Gameboy).

³⁸ *Pokémon Blue* (1998, The Pokémon Company, Gameboy).

*Pokémon X*³⁹ could push the player back in time to a moment where you sat two feet away from your friend, impatiently watching a grey blob travel along tubes on your black-and-white pixilated screen as you waited for a trade to complete. It could also work in reverse. If you first encountered *Pokémon X*, encountering the second story in *Pokémon Red* or *Pokémon Blue* could cause you to “remember the future” of the franchise, adding meaning to the in-game architecture through your previous experiences of future renditions of the Pokémon Center.



Fig. 3. Screenshots of a conversation with a non-playable character in *Pokémon X* while at a Pokémon Center.

The Pokémon themselves are their own intra-media gestures. As time goes on, the Pokémon franchise adds new Pokémon that are available for capture and training in addition to the ones that already exist. Generally, Nintendo only adds more Pokémon to the Pokémon universe, and never takes any away. Even if all the Pokémon are not available for capture within the same game, a player’s digital Pokédex (like an encyclopaedia or a field guide) holds information about every single Pokémon ever created. While the first games, *Pokémon Red* and *Blue*, started with a total of 151 Pokémon, the official online Pokédex compiled by The Pokémon Company on Pokemon.com lists a total of 801 different Pokémon as of 2017.⁴⁰

Since the available Pokémon changes from game to game, recent developments have made it possible to transfer Pokémon from older games to newer games, so players can more fully complete their Pokédex. That means Pokémon from different generations can still be played with inside the game no matter what game you are currently playing.

³⁹ *Pokémon X* (2013, The Pokémon Company, Nintendo 3DS).

⁴⁰ The Pokémon Company, <https://www.pokemon.com/us/pokedex/>, date accessed 14 January 2017.

This has some interesting affective possibilities. If, as a player, you choose to move some of your old Pokémon to your new system, that means when you battle it is not just any Venosaur you're playing with, it's the same one you've owned and trained since 2004, the Venosaur that has seen you through different birthdays, bad romances, and good years. Pokémon you previously formed a relationship with are now available in your present moment, blurring the temporal lines between the battle you are having now and the battle you had ten years ago when you first levelled up the Pokémon on your screen.

Inter-Platform Gestures

The tendency to throw in moments that bring to mind other renditions of the Pokémon franchise is not limited to referencing products within the same type of platform. *Pokémon: The First Movie*, in addition to gesturing towards the animated series, also pointed the viewer towards the original video game, *Pokémon Red*. Upon revealing his powerful Pokémon clones before the final battle, MewTwo describes the very impressive battle trio standing in the frontlines as the “ultimate evolutions of the three Pokémon any trainer can get upon starting their journey”.⁴¹ The Pokémon he is talking about are Charizard, Venosaur, and Blastoise, the final evolutions of Charmander, Bulbasaur, and Squirtle. This might mean nothing to the average viewer, but players of the *Pokémon Red* or *Pokémon Blue* video games would know that Charmander, Bulbasaur, and Squirtle are the first three starter Pokémon you must choose from at the beginning of the first Pokémon games. Hearing MewTwo's speech brings the viewer back to the first time they ever turned on their Game Boy, reminding them of how difficult it was to choose which cute and cuddly battle monster would be their comrade for the remainder of the game.

Pokémon: The First Movie gestures towards more than just one video game. *Pokémon Yellow*⁴² was released in 1999 as an almost a direct copy of *Pokémon Red* and *Blue* with only two big changes: Pikachu is the only available Pokémon to start with (rather than the typical trio of Charmander, Squirtle, and Bulbasaur), and Pikachu follows the player around on the screen rather than being carried in a Pokéball. This is directly gestured towards by the relationship between Ash and Pikachu in the film. It is quickly revealed to the audience that Pikachu is different than other Pokémon, namely because Pikachu refuses to go inside his Pokéball, which is where most Pokémon spend most of their

⁴¹ *Pokémon: The First Movie: MewTwo Strikes Back!*

⁴² *Pokémon Yellow: Special Pikachu Edition on Game Boy* (1999, The Pokemon Company).

time, even when critically injured. Watching that episode can instantly suggest the memory of navigating the game-world in *Pokémon Yellow*, with that tiny pixelated Pikachu you were forced to choose following happily along behind you.

Game mechanics are their own sort of gestures, with most Pokémon games utilizing some variation of in-battle moves relating to attack, defence, switching to another Pokémon, using an item from your in-game inventory/bag, or running away (if you are battling a wild Pokémon). While these game mechanics have stayed similar from game to game, changing little between iterations, they also re-appear across different platforms. “Thundershock” is a move used by Pikachu in *Pokémon X*, but is also seen in the first episode of the animated series.⁴³ It is also available as an attack move on some of the Pikachu playing cards from the *Pokémon Trading Card Game* (see fig. 4).⁴⁴



Fig. 4. A Pikachu card found in *Pokémon Trading Card Game*, listing “Thunder Shock”, a move seen in both the anime, film, and in video games.

Game mechanics like this are unique to transmedia franchises that incorporate or are based out of games. Game mechanics and actions, rather than providing additional narrative depth or filling gaps in a story-line, combine media threads together through

⁴³ “Episode 1: Pokémon, I Choose You!”.

⁴⁴ *Pokémon Trading Card Game* (2014, The Pokémon Company, XY-Furious Fists expansion, “Pikachu”).

memories of repetitive action to create bonds between different kinds of media.

Who is Choosing Who? Purpose vs. Potential of Implanted Gestures

While these examples are just a few among many, they expose the multiplicity of ways that Pokémon could potentially inspire memories on the part of the player. The key point here is that of *potential*. While it is likely the creators purposefully implant some of these gestures throughout the franchise, the order in which the gestures are experienced and the effect they will have (if at all) is not entirely predictable. If your memories of a certain game are entrenched with memories of hiding in your room while soon-to-divorce parents are downstairs screaming, a game unintentionally causing you to go back in time to that moment might be met with frustration and sadness rather than joy and happiness.

Additionally, like all transmedia franchises, not everything will inspire moments of memory, in part because there is no specific chronological order in which to encounter the Pokémon franchise. Creators have little control over the order in which the franchise is experienced. A player can start anywhere, either the card game, anime, a video game, or movie, and still be able to participate in the main narrative arc of each Pokémon variant. Tajiri (the creator) says this himself in an interview with Time Magazine:

TIME: Do you think the TV show now dictates how people play the game?

Tajiri: At first, I was a little concerned. It depends on how people are introduced to Pokémon. If they start with the TV show, or with the cards, or the video game, they approach it differently each time.⁴⁵

Some people start with the newest video game and work their way backwards to the classics, while others have purchased every video game since 1998. Some start in the middle. Some skip a game. Some people participate in all levels of the Pokémon franchise, from the card game to the anime, and still others participate maybe in only

⁴⁵ “The Ultimate Game Freak”, *Time Magazine*

<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2040095,00.html>, date accessed 30 November 2014 (1999).

one or two types of the Pokémon media medley. Unlike a series, in which starting at the wrong point would cause confusion, the Pokémon franchise has many entry points that are constantly expanding outwards. The gestures work regardless of what order they move you, mainly because they have nothing to do with chronological time or narrative sequence. Each entry, each memory, each action, is just another addition to the individual biography, the individual Pokédex, of the player's life which can be collected in any order.

These Pokémon products can exist separately even while being enmeshed in networks that bind them together across various stories, times, and method of engagement. The ability to pick up and engage with the Pokémon franchise at any point, even though these games are laden with references to other parts of the franchise, is possible because these types of gestures are not essential for narrative action. In fact, as a game, the glue that holds much of this transmedia franchise together is not even the narrative arc, but rather types of actions a player or audience member has performed when interacting with this world sometime in the past. These gestures draw the consumer in through the engagement of their individual, and very active, biographies, busting the present moment open to the possibility of pollution by other times and other experiences throughout the player's life.

The possible effects of these radioactive memory gestures embedded within Pokémon products not only hold parts of the branding of this transmedia franchise together, but also provide a way to move meaning in ways not entirely calculable by producer or the player. Catching these movements of memory, or at the very least the moments in which these movements are possible, helps us better understand the ebbs and flows of media and its meaning as it crosses national borders, media platforms, and individual relationships. Catching just the power of the state or the power of individual intent is not enough. Put in the language of the Pokémon universe itself, we “Gotta Catch ‘Em All”.

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