PRODUCING AFFECTION
Affect and Mediated Intimacy in Pokémon

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Johannes Koski

University of Turku

Faculty of Humanities
School of History, Culture and Arts Studies
Digital Culture
Doctoral Programme in History, Culture and Arts Studies (Juno)

Supervised by

Professor Jaakko Suominen
University of Turku

Professor J. Tuomas Harviainen
Tampere University

Reviewed by

Professor Rachael Hutchinson
University of Delaware

Junior Associate Professor
Björn-Ole Kamm
Kyoto University

Opponent

Professor Rachael Hutchinson
University of Delaware

ABSTRACT

Pokémon is a global multimedia franchise formed around a core series of videogames and a variety of characters to collect, learn about, and play with. Throughout its decades of development, Pokémon has grown into a media mix comprising of digital and analog games, animations, comics, toys, and a plethora of branded merchandize, all centering on the Pokémon characters and the audience's relationship with them.

In this thesis, I explore how affection is formed and distributed in Pokémon. I view the relationship with Pokémon characters as a form of mediated intimacy, theorizing it as feelings of affection and closeness expressed through and aimed at technology. Through this, I discuss how technological and fantastical bodies wield agency and actively participate in the formation of everyday affects. By drawing primarily on game studies and affect studies, I develop an interdisciplinary method for playing and reading media texts for their affects and use it to analyze the media mix of Pokémon and the affective relations therein.

I focus primarily on the Pokémon videogames that serve as the core product of the entire media mix. I examine what it means to construct an entire media mix based on videogames and play and suggest this as a key interpretive arrangement for understanding the mediated intimacy of Pokémon.

This study presents the mediated intimacy of Pokémon as the result of the ludic and technological foundations of the Pokémon media mix, at the heart of which is the role-playing form of the original videogames and the way they have positioned audiences as participants and characters in the world of Pokémon. In this playful environment that overlaps fiction and everyday reality, the media mix guides its players to conduct a form of affective labor to access and traverse the textual whole of Pokémon and furthermore aligns this effort with the diegetic theme of caretaking as captured on the transmedia bodies of Pokémon.

Additionally, this work contributes to the theorization and rethinking of intimacies by exploring affection in human and non-human networks as an entanglement of biological and technological actors.

KEYWORDS: Pokémon, affect, mediated intimacy, technological agency, media mix, Japanese videogames, role-playing games, game studies, digital culture, affection for characters

TIIVISTELMÄ

Pokémon on globaali monimediakokonaisuus. Sen keskiössä on joukko videopelejä sekä niiden hahmoja, joita kerätään, joista opitaan ja joiden kanssa leikitään. Pokémonista on vuosikymmenten mittaan kasvanut mediatuotteiden rypäs, media mix: monista tuote- ja julkaisukanavista koostuva kokonaisuus, joka sisältää digitaalisia ja analogisia pelejä, animaatioita, sarjakuvia, leluja ja brändituotteita, joissa kaikissa korostuvat Pokémon-hahmot sekä yleisön suhde niihin.

Väitöskirjassani tarkastelen, miten kiintymystä rakennetaan ja levitetään Pokémonissa. Tutkin Pokémon-hahmoihin muodostettuja suhteita medioidun intiimiyden käsitteen kautta. Tutkimuksessani suhteet näyttäytyvät kiintymyksellisten tunteiden tiivistyminä sekä läheisyytenä, jota ilmaistaan teknologian avulla ja sitä kohtaan. Näin tarkastelen, miten teknologisten sekä fantastisten kehojen toimijuus näkyy arkipäiväisten affektien muodostumisessa. Ammentamalla pelitutkimuksesta ja affektitutkimuksesta kehitän monitieteisen metodin mediatekstien pelaamiseen ja lukemiseen, ja käytän sitä Pokémonin media mixin, sen affektien ja sen piirissä muodostettujen kiintymyssuhteiden analysointiin.

Keskityn erityisesti Pokémon-videopeleihin, jotka toimivat koko media mixin ydintuotteena. Tutkin, miten Pokémonin media mix on rakennettu ensisijaisesti pelilliselle ja leikilliselle pohjalle, ja ehdotan tätä tulkintamallia keskeiseksi Pokémonin medioidun intiimiyden ymmärtämiselle.

Tutkimuksen tuloksena esitän Pokémonin medioidun intiimiyden muodostuvan Pokémonin media mixin leikillisistä ja teknologisista juurista, joiden perustana on alkuperäisten Pokémon-videopelien roolipelillinen rakenne sekä se, miten sen avulla pelaajat on asemoitu hahmoiksi Pokémonin maailmaan. Fiktiota ja todellisuutta sekoittavassa leikillisessä ympäristössä Pokémonin media mix ohjaa pelaajia hoivan ja huolenpidon teemojen kautta tekemään tunnetyötä tuoteperheen mediatekstien parissa ja piirtää tämän työn tulokset Pokémon-hahmojen monimediakehoille.

Lisäksi väitöstutkimukseni osallistuu intiimiyden laajempaan teoretisointiin ja uudelleenmäärittelyyn tarkastelemalla elollisten ja leikillisesti elävien toimijoiden suhteita biologisena ja teknologisena yhteenliittymänä.

ASIASANAT: Pokémon, affekti, medioitu intiimiys, teknologinen toimijuus, media mix, japanilaiset videopelit, roolipelit, pelitutkimus, digitaalinen kulttuuri, kiintymys hahmoihin

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1 Introduction

1.1 Feeling bodies and buddies

Pokémon is a global entertainment franchise of media and play products that started with the 1996 release of the videogames *Pocket Monsters Red* and *Pocket Monsters Green* (Game Freak 1996a) in Japan. It is built upon fictional characters called Pokémon and the acts of collecting, trading, and playing with them. At the heart of the franchise is the affective relationship between players and Pokémon, as well as a business model that profits off of this dynamic.

By playing videogames, I have felt things I would never have felt without them. With *Pokémon,* this has meant, for example, a personal closeness and camaraderie with fantastical monsters and the people that care for them. In videogames, much like in other games and playful media, players enter into an arrangement of connections, connecting their own bodies with that of the game and its interface, oftentimes with the goal of experiencing a change in their psychosomatic state through feelings, memories, and sensations. This combined circuitry of to-and-fro action extends and intensifies the capacities of the players' bodies towards experiences that are at once artificial and corporeally real. Play as an embodied concept thus becomes a bridge between worlds, and feelings in play become a mode of touching between the player and the game.

In 2012, Jenny Sundén established a general call for critical approaches to videogames and their culture that would be positioned "in the intricate borderland between representation and corporeality, meaning and affect, to investigate the significance of how games are felt – through the bodies of (other) players as well as through the body of the player/researcher herself" (2012a, 145–146) and furthermore argued that there is a need for a better understanding and application of the critical potential of affect for games and play (ibid., 157).

Although game studies, or the study of games in general, has yet to have an established turn to affect as so many other fields have, it is clear that these developments have not gone unnoticed and are indeed gaining prominence. Even before Sundén's call, the works of for example Lahti (2003), Shinkle (2005), and Colman (2008) have carried forward the central themes of affect and embodied affective research within the mainstream of game studies. More recently, the works

of Colin Cremin (2016), Aubrey Anable (2018), and Brendan Keogh (2018) have launched off of a longer development of affective and corporeal research in game culture scholarship, and present book-length arguments for the particularities of affects and bodies in videogames and gameplay. In game studies, then, there is more of a steady roll towards affect than the more expressly identified or argued for turns seen in many other fields in the humanities and social sciences.

My dissertation partakes in this cultural continuum, in acknowledgement of the importance and usefulness of affective and embodied forms and objects of research. To that end, I view the *Pokémon* franchise and its conglomeration of human and non-human bodies as an affective playground of media texts and proceed to read it through a framework of play, texts, and affect all enmeshed in the global technocultural networks of the 1980s to 2010s. This reading emphasizes games and play, owing to *Pokémon's* overall ludic emphasis and its origins in videogames – both of which are elemental in the form its experiential ecology take – and offers an argument as to how Pokémon as characters and as a franchise come to produce affection and intimacy.

1.2   Research aims and positioning

In this thesis, I argue that affection, desire, and intimacy are key themes in understanding the transmedia world of *Pokémon*. I maintain that this is true to the degree that one could speak of an aesthetic of affection, or, at the very least, an affective aesthetic: the way the videogames and their media mix – the interconnected network of media and fragmentary narratives through which the *Pokémon* franchise is produced as well as consumed – have been put together, and the way they encourage intimacy in play. This tone of affection, arising originally from the *Pokémon* videogames and becoming part of the media mix that grew around them, offers an interesting basis for a reading that illuminates the procedural and playful structure of the franchise, its characters, the position it establishes for its audience, and the affective encounters its texts build.

In light of earlier research, it is hardly novel to say that *Pokémon* works through desire, affection, and intimacy. As such, this was only my starting point, and the key objective of this thesis is to identify and theorize particular elements in the media mix that produce, uphold, and modulate this affective tone, and to do so from the arguably undertheorized (see 2.5.1) point of view of *Pokémon* videogames and play. Namely, I offer as outcomes of my reading the identification, analysis, and theorization of (1) the role-playing form at the heart of the media mix that positions the player as a participant in the world and its economy, (2) the Pokémon bodies as retaining information and affection on visual, taxonomic, and personal levels (3) the caretaking labor that ascribes affection through (and as) work on the bodies of Pokémon, (4) the social ambience in which the player position, Pokémon characters, and the caretaking labor is shared, and (5) the metaleptic structure that thrusts the ontological status of the world, the players, and the beloved Pokémon into a mix of blended realities. Furthermore, a key contribution of this thesis is the argument that these result in large part from the ludic origins of the media mix. I read *Pokémon* videogames and their surrounding media mix as playable media texts and argue how they have helped establish the basic affective logic of the whole franchise: how the aesthetic of affection evident in the *Pokémon* videogames is one that has spread to other media in the franchise and helped create a global transmedia product based on playful relations with imaginary creatures.

Of course, such work cannot address media franchises without considering the fundamental technological structures that enable these franchises in the first place. In particular, these considerations are vital for understanding *Pokémon's* media mix, given how it was built around – and is still developed through – the ludic core of videogames. In all of this, the produced and commodified forms of intimacy embedded in, and read from, the technological objects that deliver, store, and in many cases co-produce the media texts, form a key thread. Through the concept of mediated intimacy, I theorize the idea that regarding machines and software as

participants in the affects and forms of intimacy of our everyday has significant ramifications for how we understand technology, intimacy and fiction, and that, as demonstrated by *Pokémon*, such views are already commonplace and widespread. Furthermore, in many cases, *Pokémon* being one, these affective relations take place in registers of feeling and modes of interaction that align technology not only with the production and experience of intimacy but with qualities of metaphorical animality; a form and feeling of imagined aliveness that is projected onto inanimate objects and their agency, forming a sense of contact that presents intimacy-mediating technology as playfully alive and challenges to expand intimacy to cover not only human but also non-human actors and relationships.

It is this field of affective make-believe and mediated intimacy, experienced in the often technologically facilitated state of play, that I examine in this thesis when I ask my primary research question: **How is affection formed and distributed in *Pokémon*?** The question leads me to look at affection as a material property – and a property of materials – that forms between bodies of many sorts. Affection, here, is an affect, produced in and as texts, but, vitally, understood as a function of material networks of bodies, acts, and relations. I define it as a way of doing and actualizing intimacy in acts that arise from, and generate feelings of, closeness, love, and even desire.

In search of answers, my research process produced particular vectors of investigation. As my reading of *Pokémon's* videogames and media mix matured, I collected these vectors into a subset of supporting cases that unpack the franchise in different ways, thereby opening it up to adjacent analyses that are necessary to answer the primary research question. As such, the analysis as well as the conclusion of this thesis hinge on exploring a set of ancillary questions: As objects of affection, what are Pokémon? As arbiters of affection, what is the audience's role in the media mix and in relation to Pokémon characters? How does *Pokémon* facilitate social distribution of its fiction and the affective encounters therein? How are the worlds of *Pokémon* structured to overlap with that of the audience's affective everyday?

To answer these research questions, I am compelled to frame *Pokémon* in two very different ways: as a monolithic whole as well as a collection of individual products and experiences. In this work, I simultaneously examine *Pokémon* as a theoretical totality of products, relations, and experiences as well as zoom in on – read – it through unique instances of those elements in various media. As such, the media mix of *Pokémon* is the overall primary source of my work, but it appears here (as, indeed in any contacts with it) through single products and samples reflected against the greater whole, as guided by the process of reading. This produces a reading where I identify general tendencies of the franchise, such as expectations of playful and affective labor, social formation of the franchise's worlds, establishment of the consumer identity of a Trainer, and the playful ontological traversals brought

on by it. However, crucially, though these readings aim at understanding general tendencies, they are always formed from individual concomitant parts: a network of texts, at once monolithic and particular. Indeed, this miscellany of worlds and relations is a challenge – and arguably the titillation – provided by all transmedia products and media mixes that rely on fundamentally fragmentary modes of storytelling and consumption, and as such it is likely not much of a surprise that the writing of this thesis has depended on these traversals between specific and general levels of the text.

1.2.1 On methods: reading games, texts, and affects of Pokémon

In this work, I set out to sketch the affective and playful relationships that *Pokémon's* media texts propose and aimed to understand how its playworlds function. My approach, essentially a reading of digital and material culture that suggests one possible interpretation of the structure of *Pokémon*, is founded on an interdisciplinary mix that combines the methodologies of game studies and affect theory, as well as theories from a number of supporting fields. This affective close reading is a form of textual analysis that aims to produce interpretations of, and vocabularies on, affective phenomena by understanding the appearance, development, and circulation of particular affects in the textual playground of *Pokémon*. In practice, I used a form of play as reading (Dovey and Kennedy 2006) to chart out the procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007) and overall ludic form of the *Pokémon* videogames and media mix (Steinberg 2012; 2015), and interpreted that through a framework of affective reading (Ahmed 2014; Pearce 1997; Ngai 2005). For case-specific analyses, I also drew upon some supporting theories to help open the cases up for reading. This produced an overall reading of *Pokémon's* mediated intimacy as the technocultural and playful mode of affectionate feelings expressed through and towards objects and technology in the franchise's media mix.

This methodological framework stems from the choice of affect as the driver for my reading. I understand affect in this thesis as a capacity between bodies to act and be acted upon. Following Spinoza and Deleuze, I do not situate this capacity in any single body, but rather see it as a polyvalent force of encounters, describing relations and (inter)actions but also attending to feelings stemming from these encounters, all of which together define the capacity of any body (human or non-human) to act on another body (Deleuze 1988). To this end, I focus on what could, in a general sense, be called positive sensations: affects as something that increase the body's capacity to act, i.e. that offer willful susceptibility to intimacy and affection and the

pleasurable sensations that this brings (Ethics III, 11; 12; 9, sch.[1]) as well as its intensification in a mode of sustained feeling and affective accumulation that Ahmed calls affective stickiness (Ahmed 2014, 11, 18, 89).

Practically, affects offered a compromise between choosing either production or reception as objects of reading. Time and again during the research process, my reading settled somewhere in between the two: the media textual object of *Pokémon* and its affects seemed to exist in the points of contact and shared histories between the developers, audiences, and media products. Through affect theory, I could read the affective agency of Pokémon characters and the franchise's media objects on the same level as that of the human producers and consumers of the media mix. In other words, it enabled a holistic reading of humans and non-humans as coaffecting, and theorizing on that basis what their mutual affective network looked like. In such a network of interdependencies, affect theory had the additional benefit of conceptualizing feelings as something personally felt but also socially and culturally formed and circulated (Ahmed 2014, 10, 12). Affects take part in the creation, form, and reception of publicly circulating texts, and as such in these texts and the discourses that shape them, we can trace a mode or manifestation of affect that has been made socioculturally readable on a level beyond the individual. This offered a good foundation for a methodology leaning on reading which, epistemologically, is a subjective form of knowledge production stemming from the reading subject but also reaching, in theorization and argument, beyond the personal.

Understanding the affects of the media mix and its ontologically manifold participants, however, required knowledge of the media mix and its constituent parts. Despite its broad applicability, affect theory seemed inadequate as the sole part of the analytical engine of my interpretation. As affect describes bodies' capacity to act and be acted upon as well as the affective effects this has, before I could analyze affect, I needed to identify the capacities of the *Pokémon* media mix and its audiences to act on each other. Specifically, the ludic origins and gamelike form of the whole media mix as well as the playful affective labor designed into it necessitated theoretical tools and methods of analysis tuned to games, play, and modes of persuasions therein before I could understand how they contributed to the affective circuitry of the media mix. This meant that although the affective unpacking in my methodology comes primarily from affect theory, the practical work of reading and the comparative context for *Pokémon* as, fundamentally, a play product, had to come from game studies and, more broadly, playing as a way to study games and play (Aarseth 2003, 6; Mäyrä 2008, 165; Stenros 2015, 44; Dovey and Kennedy 2006).

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[1]   For Spinoza's *Ethics*, I draw from the 1992 Shirley translation (Spinoza 1992) but use the original reference format, which is applicable across editions.

Insofar as affects can be seen as partaking in all relations and encounters as a sort of ubiquitous force (or, at the very least, a conceptualization of one), my reading required further theorization of technological and playful coaffecting between humans and non-humans in order to single out the form of affecting most relevant to my work. Drawing on, for example, Latour (2009) and McGlotten (2013), I was able to discuss agency and intimacy as properties of technology and frame technological objects as participants in human feelings. To further particularize technologically conveyed and felt intimacy, I suggested a playful form of aliveness as a means of understanding how some technological non-human actors encourage and mediate intimacy. Through the concept of mediated intimacy formed on the aforementioned basis, I was able to anchor my reading to a particular sort of affect – that of performing and fostering acts of affection as a form of *doing* intimacy with and through technology – and, in general, to contribute towards rethinking intimacies with non-human actors and agencies in ways that better suit the contemporary technocultural realities.

On a broader, technocultural level, the notion of digital culture can be identified as the overall academic orientation of my theoretical and methodological framework. Rather than a set of methods or methodologies or even a theoretical canon in itself, digital culture both as an academic identifier and a cultural epoch joins a broad range of research interests, scholars, and approaches around the baseline assumption that technological and cultural developments and discourses have taken identifiable and explorable forms following the intensification of digital media, computational machines, and networked communication throughout the modern and postmodern periods (Suominen 2013; Gere 2008, 18; Trend 2001).[2] It efficiently describes an overall orientation – of mine and of much of my source literature – in which attention and applicability are always retained at least partially on the level of technology, affect and the everyday, as lived in an age of postmodernity and digital culture.

With these methodological alignments in mind, the initial set of sources – the starting point for my work – comprised of the core series of *Pokémon* videogames (at least one game from each generation published in 2013 or earlier: Game Freak 1996a; 1996b; 1999; 2000; 2001a; 2001b; 2003; 2005; 2007; 2009; 2010a; 2011;

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[2] For more on digital culture and postmodernism, see Creeber (2009). For more on postmodernism as a factor in the cultural history of *Pokémon,* see 1.2.3. Crucial for my work is the premise that digital culture is a way to approach postmodernity from the angle of a mediated and technologized everyday. In that sense, both digital culture and postmodernity function as backdrops for this thesis, with postmodernity describing an overall societal state and digital culture a mode of that state as well as a body of research on it. Furthermore, both are ways to identify a somewhat particular "now" that is probably already past postmodernism and beyond digital culture but to which these two descriptions give at least some form.

2012, 2013), the original comic (Anakubo 1996), the first season of the original animated series (Yuyama 1997), the trading card game (Creatures, Inc 1996), key peripherals (Game Freak 2010b; Jupiter Corporation 1998; 1999), and various material paraphernalia such as figurines. I also kept up with fan discourse on forums and wikis as well as visited events such as Pokémon distributions in toy stores and Pokémon Center stores. Through the notion of strategic playfulness (see 2.3.3), I intentionally maintained a curious, iterative, and open attitude towards potential new sources and the paths of (re-)readings. For this reason, the final list of sources grew, by necessity, rather larger than this starting point, incorporating more core series games (Game Freak 2014; 2016; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2022a; 2022b) and spin-off games (Chunsoft 2006; 2008; Ambrella 2011; Tecmo Koei 2012; Spike Chunsoft 2013; Niantic and The Pokémon Company 2016), more animations including later installments of the animated series as well as other animated media (Yuyama 1998; Kawasaki et al. 2016), and peripherals (Nintendo Platform Technology Development 2016; 2018).

Naturally, this is only the main corpus of my sources, meaning that the reading was additionally influenced by exposure to other media and experiences in the media mix (counting towards the "monolithic whole" framing of the media mix mentioned earlier) undertaken to, for example, test the ongoing applicability of my thesis and to keep up with the development of the media mix. The ludic emphasis of my primary sources was a conscious choice to properly capture the playful foundations of the media mix, but this was balanced out by a wide selection of secondary sources such as research literature and cultural contextualization that reached beyond play and play products.

Furthermore, since my approach does not include the collection of quantitative or player-generated data,[3] I drew on the *Pokémon*-related groundwork laid by scholars of anthropological, ethnographical and sociological backgrounds, thereby connecting my work to prior player- and audience-focused research.[4] Methodologically, this is reflected in using these prior works as texts read alongside *Pokémon*, allowing both *Pokémon* and prior research on the topic to influence my own reading. Together, this combination of sources and methodologies allowed me to address my research questions as well as suggest wider theoretical claims about *Pokémon*, affection, and the way we mediate intimacy.

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[3]   I did take part in such work as well (see Hamari et al. 2018), which provided some contextualization for the reading presented in this thesis, even if it does not partake in the methodological apparatus.

[4]   In this, I follow Harviainen (2012, 53). Although my own approach is heavy on theory and personal experiences of play, it is combined with prior empirics-based source literature in a continuous process that emphasizes a wide range of approaches and constant contextual evaluation of reliability.

As a product that is divided across a variety of media and that has a complex phenomenology, *Pokémon* does not easily lend itself to restricted analytical approaches. Understanding it as a collection of playable media texts and reading these texts for affects encourages crossing disciplinary borders: here, this has meant starting from an overall orientation of postmodern digital culture and conducting the research through a methodology organized around game studies and affect theory. That is not to say that narrowly demarcated research and methodologically singular undertakings would be ill-advised, but rather that thoroughly understanding *Pokémon* is always a negotiation between inclusions and exclusions, and requires admitting that any approach will necessarily be lacking in some way. As such, I balance between a singular focus – the overall theme of affect and affection in the playful domain of *Pokémon* – and a wide theoretical and scholarly base to support this goal. To loan a metaphor from Hardt and Negri, this thesis is a relay race where methodological approaches pass the baton forward (2001, 48).

This is a rather standard approach when studying digital culture (Suominen 2010), and, particularly, this is to be expected when studying games, where, optimally, "the strengths and weaknesses of any one approach are usually complemented and smoothed out by combining it with others" (Williams 2005, 458; see also Stenros 2015, 24; Stenros and Kultima 2018). Overall, this methodological potpourri doubtlessly raises questions about eclecticism. They are not only justified but also largely impossible to assuage. Indeed, such eclecticism has intentionally been built into my methodology, as I attempt to embrace heterogeny by looking at the sprawling media and experience ecosystem of *Pokémon* from a wide angle, using a range of tools from affect theory to studies of games and technology, and from textual analysis to Japanese postmodern media criticism to both account for *Pokémon's* ludic origins as well as to acknowledge its eventual transmedial state and the affective forms therein.

Eclecticism or not, it seems more honest to be upfront about one's (inter)disciplinary travels, consciously incorporating them into a critical and reflective archive instead of feigning nonchalance. Furthermore, this straightforwardness is not only a question of honesty about my disciplinary choices, but also a question of an informed positioning of the self and the work in a complex sociocultural world, understanding that I cannot bracket myself out of my work. My contacts with the world – the accumulation of all events and experiences in my life, particularly in academia – have ended up affecting how I see, analyze, and portray the world, and how that is reflected in my work as a reading.

This subjectivity is recognized and addressed by attempting to remain fastidiously reflective and transparent of the research process and the thinking involved, so that the reader has the opportunity to see – and thereby review – how the analysis has been conducted. It is, in essence, an attempt to acknowledge and

access the interdependent nature of the personal and the public in the media texts I read, as well as the negotiations that ultimately end up forming these domains and the experiences circulating in them.

1.2.2   Cultural positioning, Orientalism, and the global local

Related to my personal histories and sociocultural capital, an issue also worth pointing out when studying *Pokémon*, and Japanese games and game culture in general, is that there is a risk of misguided interpretation on the part of a researcher not intimately familiar with Japanese culture. Indeed, as seen in the previous sentence, mystifying exoticism rears its head even – or perhaps especially – when one tries to be wary of it and proceed nonchalantly. Here, suggesting that intimate cultural knowledge is a prerequisite for scholarly work about Japan creates an impenetrable barrier between Japan and the rest of the world, and the possibility of understanding Japan becomes confined along hereditary and national lines, accessible to an "outsider" only through great effort and care. While this is true in many ways, rather than being culturally savvy, the tone of such an argument is patronizing. It mystifies Japan and frames it as an other; an alien land that is contrasted against the normality of a Euro-American cultural hegemony.

This is, of course, *Orientalism* manifesting in the everyday structures of life and academia (Said 2003). I am, along with most of my Nordic peers, the product of a culture that has long built a representational divide between the "West" and the "East", and while I explicitly acknowledge and actively attempt to remedy it, there is no way around the admission that this history still exists and has an effect on, among other things, this work.

More specifically, given that this entire work centers on Japan and technology, there is a risk of *techno*-orientalism: viewing Japan naïvely as somehow culturally disposed towards high technology and human–technology relations, common in popular depictions of Japan ranging from cyberpunk literature to documentaries, and turning that into fuel for racist, xenophobic, or merely ill-informed readings of Japanese (popular) culture (Morley and Robins 2002; see also Marchart 1998). As Morley and Robins note, "High-technology has become associated with Japaneseness. Out of this a new techno-mythology is being spun" (ibid., 168). An important part of this new mythology is the conflation of Japanese culture, identity, and ethnicity with these technologies, and in doing so regarding Japan's standing as a site of high technology as a singularly Japanese quality rather than a result of actor networks, histories, cultural developments, global politics, and happenstance.

It is also important to point out that without a background in Japanese studies and formal training in Japanese beyond intermediate level language courses, I rely mostly on translations of Japanese scholarly works, and my ability to access Japanese

research materials, particularly printed ones without online copies, is limited. For sources in Japanese, I have primarily sought translated versions and, in some cases, (for example Nintendo 2000a; 2000b; 2000c; 2000d) depended on professional translators to verify and adjust my own translations. In some everyday settings, such as when meeting with Japanese fans or staff of Pokémon Center stores, I have relied solely on my own Japanese skills, but I regard these encounters as contextualizing more than anything else. They provided details, context, and clues for my research, but were not considered as primary sources or key research material.

For a researcher, the way to remain sensitive to this is through critical reflexivity aimed at the self, at one's theoretical and methodological apparatus, and the cultural as well as social contexts that affect the work (Högbacka and Aaltonen 2015). For me, it led to using a threefold approach. Firstly, I draw from as wide and deep a well of research on the Japanese media industry as I possibly can and combine that with my personal experiences of life in Japan, Japanese culture, and Japanese media products. Secondly, I counterintuitively try to disregard the problem to a degree. Thinking through the viewpoint of Japanese society is required to some extent, but constructing an essentialist lens that encapsulates a whole culture in one tool would only invite misinterpretations and, most damningly, the very mystification that I set out to avoid (see Lamarre 2009, 89). Thirdly, I attempt to maintain rigorous self-reflexivity throughout the work, so as not to forget a healthy criticism toward prior research, and to keep a firm grip on my own presuppositions and the shortcomings caused by my personal cultural position in relation to the topic.

This threefold approach is informed by David Surman's observation that "fears of exoticism and misinterpretation have stalled the formal scrutiny of Japanese videogames, including Pokémon" (Surman 2009, 160). Surman's comment is made as a reference to a "blind spot" in the research of Japanese video games: the avoidance of topics such as "visual styles, rhythms, animations, forms, material contemporaries and technological antecedents" (ibid.), but I recognize the same fear in my own work as well. With that in mind, I regard good critical command of research literature, careful self-reflexivity about one's work, and intimate knowledge of the topic at hand – as well as its contexts – to be adequate safeguards in forming a cross-referential critical lens that I hope will steer this thesis past the worst of cultural essentialism and the deep roots of Orientalism in academic research.

With all that said, it must also be mentioned that this work *is* written from a European perspective, and as such it inevitably falls into a Eurocentric bias despite my best efforts to mitigate such a risk. The whole of a global context cannot be encompassed in this work, so rather than doing that, I fully acknowledge this shortcoming and hope that readers will remedy it through their own efforts or at least are aware of this inherent cultural slant in the work.

Drawing from research on *Pokémon* and contemporary media franchises conducted around the world, from Japan (Masuyama 2002) to the United States (Allison 2006a), from Egypt (Peterson 2010) to France (Brougère 2004), Israel (Lemish and Bloch 2004), and beyond (Valaskivi 2009), and on the transnational flows of Japanese popular culture (Consalvo 2016; Hutchinson 2019; Iwabuchi 2004) in general, I regard *Pokémon* here as a product hailing from Japan and in its original design echoing the Japanese social, cultural, and political climates of the 1990s and early 2000s, but moreover forming transnational and translocal (see Kraidy 2005) subsets of practices and reception. What is primarily under investigation in this thesis is the textual cycle of production, consumption, and reproduction that stems from Japan, but actualizes globally. Rather than conceptualizing a geological center and periphery for *Pokémon*, I attempt to view it as a nearly endless collection of localities from which – and from the relations of which – the totality and globality of *Pokémon* emerges. Of course, owing to my approach and methodology that attempt to discern an overall aesthetic of mediated intimacy rather than singular manifestations of it, I pay more attention on the analysis of the Japanese origins of *Pokémon* as well as its vaguely general transnational body (the aspects of the franchise I have found to be common between localities). All of this reflects the idea that game cultures are always inevitably transnational and transcultural on the macro level, and increasingly specific as one zooms in (Consalvo 2006). Crucially, however, despite the orientation of my attention, the underlying assumption of the phenomenon as a whole consisting of a network of fractal localities, ranging from the globally shared to the personally intimate, nevertheless remains.

1.2.3   Pokémon as a product of the postmodern

Pokémon comes from a time and a place. It partakes in the development of mass culture and affluent consumerism following Japan's rapid growth and societal changes in the postwar and post-postwar periods, and again in the cultural and economic tumults at the turn of the millennium (Ivy 1993; Harootunian and Yoda 2006). The hallmarks of this development were – and to a degree still are – technological progress, urbanization, the rise of commercial culture industries, and, fundamentally, the intense cultivation of consumer desire led by production and marketing (Ivy 1993).

These developments, their research, and my own positioning of them in relation to *Pokémon* frequently link up with the broader paradigm of the postmodern. To paraphrase McHale (2015, 1), postmodernism can be loosely described as a "dominant cultural tendency" during the second half of the 20th century. It is often seen expressed in the sociocultural hegemony of the West – from within as well as

without the West – but also spread throughout the world as a sort of globalized cultural, social, and historical organization of knowledge and discourses. Following from that, I wish to emphasize that I do not suggest postmodernism as a unified theory or movement, but rather as an identification of broad cultural and economic tendencies and practices. As a notoriously elusive term for a zeitgeist and its aesthetics, the postmodern also goes beyond concrete cultural structures and describes "a mood or attitude" (Sim 2001) typical of its time. Thus, I address the phenomenon of *Pokémon* as well as the wider cultural and theoretical paradigms related to it not only as postmodernist phenomena but also as intensifications of these paradigms into personal, social, and cultural affects. In this way, postmodernism in relation to *Pokémon* functions as a signifier of a felt as much as cogitated ambience of the everyday, from the 1950s to today.

Pokémon is, in many ways, a quintessential postmodern product. The franchise is a globalized collection of fragmentary, intertextual, and ever-circulating media texts that the personal effort and focus of a consumer condenses into unique wholes. These texts and fragments are produced under the logics of a transnational culture industry and circulated in their mass-produced generality globally, but they are also unique as combinations of, and entryways into, the worlds of *Pokémon*, actualizing in globalized fan cultures as well as local, often individual, experiences. Through play with the corpus of media texts within the franchise as well as through the playful ontological status of real and fiction in relation to its storyworld, *Pokémon* operationalizes its collection of media texts into a transontological hybrid; a reality laced with the mediated properties of the *Pokémon* world. Combined with hypercommercial media mix strategies, convergent, participatory, and procedural technologies, and the affects and affective labor present in all of these, I am inclined to view *Pokémon* as intimately aligned with modes of production and theory identified and developed in postmodernism – Japanese postmodernist thought and its intellectual offspring in particular (Yoda 2006, 36; Azuma 2009, ix, 16; Abel and Kono 2009). As a result, it is arguable that the angles of analysis presented in this thesis derive in one way or another from postmodernist leanings or, at the very least, are indebted to them in some way.

On a general level, postmodernist thought offers useful frameworks for positioning the domestic as well as transnational cultural and societal climates of Japan during *Pokémon's* genesis and subsequent evolution. In an influential argument, Karatani Kōjin, one of the prominent critics and scholars of postmodern thought in Japan, has bridged Japan's premodern times – namely the Edo period (1603–1868) – with the country's postmodern sensibilities, arguing that Japan's rapid period of modernization is sandwiched between the cultural milieu of the Edo period and its return or remixing as, and through, postmodernism (Karatani 1989).

Karatani is critical of the concepts of premodern, modern, and, consequently, the postmodern, which he sees as derivatives of Western discourse, ill-suited to the idiosyncratic history of Japan. That is, if Japan lacked the sort of premodernity that western thought dictates as characterizing the 19th century, then perhaps Japan cannot be said to ever have been "premodern" (ibid., 261), and following from that, could never have "modernized". For Karatani, the whole notion of modernities is askew if applied to Japan.

Karatani does, however, seem to acknowledge that although these monikers of modernity are ill-suited for Japan, they nevertheless describe global and local paradigmatic changes that did take place in different ways across the world, and which can be linked – albeit cautiously – to Japanese history as well. Working with these concepts (but remaining critical of their straightforward application to Japan), Karatani sees in postmodern Japan the return of many of its nineteenth-century sensibilities that had been suppressed or sidelined during the period of modernization that, in part, was characterized by the importation of Western models of modernity to Japan (which, it must be noted, many Japanese embraced, see Garon 1994).

Crucially, Karatani posits that much of the cultural milieu in Edo that later returned in postmodernism in the 1980s was formed in association with the advent of a consumer society and its emphases on leisure and pleasure (Karatani 1989, 265, 271). In such a way, Edo-era sensibilities came to inform "contemporary modes of consumption, linguistic play, lightness and superficiality" (Steinberg 2004), imbuing them with an emphasis on, for example, playfulness and gaming (Miyoshi and Harootunian 1989, i). As such, Japan did not necessarily produce its postmodern entertainment industry during the late 20th-century, but rather the sensibilities that led to the global prominence of the Japanese entertainment industry maintained a significant role in society, surviving from pre- to postmodern, shaping the country's course along the way, and gaining new prominence in the re-emergence of a playful consumer culture that *Pokémon* greatly relied on and in turn developed further.[5]

While positioning himself outside of – or more accurately, after – it, Azuma Hiroki discusses the Japanese academic and media preoccupation with postmodernism in the 1980s in similar terms.[6] The intellectual approach to postmodernism at the height of Japan's economic power and growth was to highlight how Japan never really modernized (at least in similar terms as the Western powers

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[5]   As an important contextual note, Daliot-Bul argues that although these somewhat nationalistic arguments from the heyday of Japan's bubble period are viable, this sensibility and history of play might say more about the nature of play and how it meshes with sociocultural and economic conditions (2014, 97–98) than about Japanese culture alone.

[6]   Azuma, however, did not quite see eye to eye with the luminaries of Japanese postmodernism such as Karatani (Abel and Kōno 2009).

typically did) but instead skipped ahead to the postmodern, reaping the economic and cultural rewards that followed its flexible appropriation of the postmodern and postmodernism; as Azuma sums the sentiment of the time, "whereas modernity equals the West, postmodernity equals Japan" (Azuma 2009, 17). Obviously, this is a gross simplification of the intellectual climate of the time, and that climate is, as Azuma points out, a bold simplification of complex historical circumstances (ibid.). Indeed, one cannot point to an ironclad segmentation of temporal and sociocultural periods and influences in, for example, Japanese popular culture, as it is fundamentally the product of historical continuities as well as discontinuities (see, for example, Berndt 2008; Lamarre 2009). Moreover, these evocations of contemporary works and intellectual climates being directly descended from distant as well as romanticized pasts contains not a little measure of nationalistic and essentializing tones, no doubt fuelled in part by the economic and cultural competition against US hegemony as well as the (often successful) efforts to reappropriate occidental techno-orientalist discourses into cultural capital, soft power, and national branding. For many scholars, this linkage to Japan's earlier modernities also functioned as strategic gravitas used to elevate popular culture to the status of historically accepted forms of art and culture, thus helping to justify it as a research topic.

Nevertheless, there seems to be traction to the idea that the Japanese cultural landscape of the 1980s and early 1990s – the setting for *Pokémon's* development – did indeed operate largely on ideas of the postmodern and its long trail of influences. The production of, and participation in, metafiction and fragmentary realities (Tatsumi 2006, 186, 188; Daliot-Bul 2014, 139), the collage-like consumption and creative exploration of fictions (Daliot-Bul 2014, 103), an overall playfulness with form and content (McHale 2004, Hutcheon 2004), and paradigm shifts in production, consumption, and global economic organization (Amin 1995; Harvey 1992; see below) are all tendencies linked with postmodern culture that are also – as I argue in this thesis – at the very center of both the development and multi-decade progress of the *Pokémon* franchise.

Postmodernism, much like *Pokémon*, rose to mainstream popularity from theories and practices established in the 1970s and 1980s (albeit reaching back all the way to early 1900s if not further), was perceived to peak in popularity in the 1990s, and was regarded as something of an ambiguously bygone and nostalgized thing by the 2010s. Much like *Pokémon*, however, postmodernism never went away, other than receding from the limelight of its heyday. Indeed, one of the problems of the post-postmodern period – the early days of which we are quite possibly experiencing right now – is that we do not yet know what to call it. It is clear that postmodernism is no longer entirely sufficient or exact for describing the now, as the concept has already transformed into a sort of *pastmodernism*; an

unshakeable and nostalgic association to 1980s and 1990s cultural theory, replete with textual curiosities, language games, suspicion towards universal constants, and a fascination with all things cyber. Yet, for lack of a more accurate term, I maintain a framing of postmodernism and post-postmodernism throughout this thesis. I regard it as a metatheoretical landscape in which postmodernist theories and ontologies help explain the culture of the last 50 years or so, and where they have also become a broader academic discourse and object of theorization in themselves – postmodernism as a "form of cultural barometer" as well as "an entire climate" (Connor 2004, 4).

Occasionally, I draw on works broadly within the framing of post-Fordism. Generally, post-Fordism can be seen to refer to the economic and commercial changes under postmodernity. Leaning on this, for example, Steinberg, in his exploration of the development of the media mix in 20th and 21st century Japan, eschews postmodernism in favor of post-Fordism. The crucial difference between the terms for Steinberg is the lack of "cultural baggage" of post-Fordism (2012, 211n13) compared to the contested cultural, theoretical, and aesthetic leanings of postmodernism. It is a tempting strategy, but one that necessarily (and no doubt usefully) delimits analysis to only certain facets of society: chiefly to matters of production, consumption, and the organization of economic processes. For *Pokémon*, however, so much of the phenomenon is tied to artistic and cultural practices of the postmodern that a straightforward focus on the economic – and acting as though economy had little to do with art and culture – would be tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Furthermore, as Amin points out, "not only are [postmodernism and post-Fordism] representative of a single overarching transition, they are also inseparable" (1995, 30), arguing that both traditions address the same topic and spring from similar observations, but are only enacted with slightly different emphases. Therefore, I acknowledge the different emphases between postmodernism and post-Fordism, but draw on both traditions in an attempt to understand *Pokémon* and its temporal context through cultural and aesthetic as well as economic, political, and commodity-cultural dimensions.

Postmodern, here, is understood as a pervasive setting instead of a specific theoretical tradition. In this approach, postmodernism is seen as having achieved a total saturation in the everyday; it is a "banal fact of life" (Yoda 2006, 37) that is so common as to be nearly invisible. This work is, in part, a modest attempt to grasp something of this unseen fabric. By taking a conscious look at *Pokémon* and the contemporary quotidian everyday through – but in no way confined to – the postmodern, I hope to show a small part of popular culture as it exists now, at the turn of postmodernity and the future.

1.2.4   A note on language

Throughout this work, "Pokémon" appears in both regular and italicized formatting. This is to differentiate *Pokémon* as a franchise from Pokémon as characters within the franchise. Since Japanese does not have the sort of plurals English does, "Pokémon" denotes both the singular and the plural form. Furthermore, unless otherwise inferable from context, when I write about *Pokémon,* I refer to the whole media mix. Specific parts or products of the media mix are demarcated by writing about, for example, "*Pokémon* videogames".

I follow the Hepburn transliteration system[7] in the romanization of Japanese terms. Exceptions include words that are in regular use in English, such as omitting the macrons in Tokyo (as opposed to Tōkyō). Furthermore, in some cases I also provide the original Japanese term in parentheses to help readers connect the discussion to Japanese sources.

Japanese names are written with the family name first. An exception is made in case of authors who consistently publish and present their name with the family name last.

As has probably been evident, I use a personal voice in this thesis. Although this thesis is not (only) about my feelings or experiences, it is clear that they have inevitably had an impact on how I do research, what I focus on, and what my reading of *Pokémon* is. In this sense, I have written this thesis "from the head and the heart, in response to something felt to be fundamentally important" (Gregg 2006, 18); as a testament of investment and interest that invariably has shown in the research process and subsequently also in this thesis. In following the methods of affect theory and reading for affects, instead of bracketing off my personal voice, I deploy it for transparent ends, as a part of the research process and the self-reflexivity in it.

Finally, I use the gender-neutral singular "they", "them", and "themselves" in many places in this thesis and have attempted to follow preferred pronouns whenever possible. These are pragmatic, political, and ideological choices, aiming towards a more inclusive gender expression in the English language.

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[7]   The Hepburn system is widely used and works well with English writing and pronunciation. For discussion on the histories and merits of different systems of romanization, see Gottlieb (2010).

1.3   Thesis structure

I organize and present this work in two interconnected halves. The first deals with context and theory, and the second continues these vectors but deploys them in readings of *Pokémon* videogames and the affects of the whole franchise. They should not, however, be regarded as separate: the first part contains as much analysis as the latter part does contextualization, and both present a theoretical and practical reading of *Pokémon* as a site of affects and playfulness.

In its structure, this thesis resembles an hourglass. The top half is loaded with background, history, context, theoretical and methodological foundations, and tools for reading, and as the process which began in the top half falls through the hourglass into the lower half, it turns into explorations, readings, analyses, and ultimately, settles into a temporary terminus in answering the research question that set the process in motion to begin with.

Overall, the elements in the upper half are related to each other and as they pass through to the lower half in the act of reading and playing, they turn into another related set of elements. In reality, of course, as I conducted the analysis (lower part of the hourglass), it affected the theoretical framework and methodology (upper part of the hourglass) almost as much as they affected how I conducted the analysis. The two halves, then, portray a general organization of things during the research process as well as the presentation of them in this thesis, and moreover represent an idealized and systematized version of them, with the top half containing the overall theoretical frameworks of this work and the bottom half showing their effect in practice as well as expanded with situational supporting theories and lines of inquiry.

Ultimately, the writing and answers I provide in this thesis are only a temporary conclusion: as is fitting for an hourglass – an object meant to be turned upside down in perpetual reset cycles – the creation and hopefully also the reception of this thesis takes place in cycles and inversions, the textual processes of creation and interpretation guided again and again through the event horizon between research and analysis, with the expectation that the study of texts and affects will never stay quite still nor will ever be exactly "done".

When understood as an object in gradual but repeating motion, the whole hourglass is, essentially, an alternative way to describe a hermeneutic circle or spiral.[8] As such, it is vital to stress that the process of research and the process of reading that research can be seen as a series or cycles or spirals where the different steps feed into each other, always leading to new places as the overall subject matter, methods, primary and secondary sources, analyses, readings, and their distillation

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[8]   For a summary of hermeneutic circles, cycles, and processes as well as their usefulness in understanding videogames and play, see Arjoranta (2015).

into writing all contribute to the re-evaluation and fine-tuning of each other (Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight 2006, 9–10), changing with each turn of the hourglass.

While conceptually the thesis has two halves, structurally it has four main chapters that comprise its introduction, theoretical and methodological frameworks, analysis, and conclusion (see figure below). These chapters are sequential in that one is intended to lead to, and inform, the next, but the individual sections within them are also somewhat dispersed. For example, the backgrounds and developments of media mix and transmedia theories are discussed in Section 2.4, but the theme of – and as such, the discussion about – media mixes and transmedia is present throughout the work. Similarly, each analysis chapter is simultaneously its own sub-study as well as a link in a longer chain of interdependent readings that constitute my overall reading of *Pokémon*. Each analysis chapter can, therefore, be read individually, but they are also all necessary for the overall argument of affect-production and worldbuilding in *Pokémon* that I make in this thesis.

Table 1. Thesis structure by section, chapter, and half

SECTION	CHAPTER	HALF
1.1 Feeling bodies and buddies	1 Introduction	1st half: Context, theory, and methodology
1.2 Research aims and positioning		
1.3 Thesis structure		
2.1 Pokémon essentials	2 Researching *Pokémon:* Theoretical, methodological, and historical frameworks	
2.2 Games and play		
2.3 A playground of texts		
2.4 Media mixes: fragmented worlds of production and consumption		
2.5 Affect and mediated intimacy		
3.1 What are Pokémon made of?	3 Analyzing affection in *Pokémon*	2nd half: Analysis
3.2 Being a trainer: *Pokémon* as a role-playing game		
3.3 The Trainer's toil: Affective labor in *Pokémon*		
3.4 The social and environmental dimensions of affection in *Pokémon*		
3.5 The world here and the world beyond: Crossing ontological borders in *Pokémon*		
4.1 Affect and mediated intimacy in *Pokémon*	4 Conclusion	
4.2 Further study		

In the introduction, which you are currently reading, I have briefly summarized the basic components of my thesis. In sections 1.1 and 1.2, I introduced the aims,

backgrounds, methods, sources, theoretical and methodological frameworks, and expected results of my work as well as reflected upon *Pokémon* as an interdisciplinary, global, and postmodern object of analysis.

In Chapter 2, I begin my approach to *Pokémon* by laying out the components essential in my work for understanding the franchise, affection, and affect in more detail. This process of sketching the fundamentals of the franchise and my approach to it begins in Section 2.1 by first briefly explaining *Pokémon's* commercial, practical, and diegetic basics, and then presenting the history of *Pokémon* in waves of production and popularity.

After introducing *Pokémon*, I establish the fields, traditions, and scholarly ontologies I subscribe to in this work. My argument in this thesis hinges on the observation that the overall form and playful structure – as well as the affects therein – of *Pokémon* stem from the franchise's core series videogames. In order to access the playful elements at the heart of the franchise, I begin sketching out my theoretical framework in Section 2.2 with an introduction to game studies, games, and play.

Section 2.3 centers on texts and textual analysis as well as on how they relate to videogames generally and how I read games specifically. I look at texts as analyzable units of culture – essentially as representations or snippets of life – extracted and demarcated for closer analysis. I argue that a videogame text is often read in play and explore playing as a method analogous to or at least concomitant with reading.

Crucially, however, *Pokémon* is not a collection of texts but a collection of texts organized in a very particular way. I address this in Section 2.4, where I review transmedia and media mix theories and begin to apply them to understanding *Pokémon*. In this section, I explore how transmedia storytelling and media mix production are ways to build stories and fictional worlds that are not limited to any singular media but are formed more in the interaction of individual experiences within a larger system, and particularly through characters.

In Section 2.5, I craft the final piece of my theoretical and methodological framework by connecting the previous sections to affect and affective processes in technoculture. I begin by investigating how the theme of affection is addressed in prior research of *Pokémon*, and from there move to explore the changing forms of intimacy and affection in a culture where the objects of our affections are, and have been for a long time, of non-human origin. In doing so, I establish the broad strokes of what I call mediated intimacy: a feeling of affection and closeness in technoculture, deployed in cooperation with technological means and aimed at humans and non-humans alike. To read instances of mediated intimacy in *Pokémon*, I propose a way in which games, texts, and transmedia works can be read through the tools of affect theory.

This concludes the first half of the thesis that sets up all the necessary background, contextualization, and approaches needed to analyze *Pokémon* as an

affective totality. The latter half consists of analysis and conclusions, and functions essentially as a reading of the *Pokémon* videogames and franchise through the methods and theories introduced in the first half. To get closer to the texts of *Pokémon*, however, during the analysis I also deploy some additional theories and focus areas that act as analytic lenses in my readings. These supplementary approaches include metaleptic ontological border crossing in *Pokémon's* transmedia play, the immaterial affective labor of *Pokémon* players, the underlying mechanics of role-play in the franchise, and the overall social framing of play that the franchise encourages, all of which are linked to the overall methodological framework of affect and mediated intimacy built in the first half of this thesis.

The second half of the thesis begins in Section 3.1 with an introduction to Pokémon characters as the key objects of affection in the franchise. I read the characters through themes of complicated cuteness, circulating character image, pleasures of collection, and the permanence of each individual Pokémon, culminating in seeing them as procedural and metaphorical animals: artificial but playfully alive.

In Section 3.2, I take a step back and examine the role of the player and the audience in relation to the whole media mix. Here, I use role-playing games as an entry to the player position and argue that *Pokémon's* postmodern business model is about selling an identity of a Pokémon Trainer as well as distributing definitional power over the media mix storyworld.

Once the roles of *Pokémon* and Trainers are defined, I turn to what being a Trainer means. Through theorizing affective labor in connection to videogames and *Pokémon*, I suggest that players of *Pokémon* games and consumers in the *Pokémon* media mix conduct affective work as they enact the role-play of being a Trainer. In this way, I position affect not in the players, characters, any singular piece of media or the whole media mix, but instead in between them all, conducted as the activity of a Trainer: the labor of participating in the media mix. This concludes Section 3.3.

In Section 3.4, these readings and analyses are linked to the social setting of *Pokémon*. I argue that not only do affects arise in individual participation in the media mix, but they also come to circulate, intensify, and change in the potential social contacts the franchise encourages and facilitates. The section goes back and forth between exploring *Pokémon* as a collection of social and mobile technologies, the modes of communication they enable, and the subsequent environment of affects they create.

Finally, the analysis chapter ends in Section 3.5, where I draw from the themes of the preceding sections and spell out the key tension present in all of them: the ontologically curious integration of play and everyday, and the worlds therein. I show how the worlds of *Pokémon* are not confined to a singular domain, but rather comprise of a fluid state of world fragments, overlapping with each other and with

the everyday. I identify how the franchise actively erases boundaries between its fantasy and the less mediated quotidian real of its audience and suggest that this is the mechanism through which the affects and bodies of *Pokémon* overlap with affects and bodies outside of it, to a degree where there is little meaningful difference between an "inside" and "outside" in the *Pokémon* media mix.

In the last chapter of the thesis, Chapter 4, I draw together the arguments made in the thesis and present the results and findings of the preceding chapters, as well as my overall synthesis of them; a reading of the mediated intimacy in *Pokémon*. Lastly, I propose some directions for further studies, suggesting paths opened by my work as well as highlighting interesting trails I deliberately left untraveled.

2   Researching Pokémon: Theoretical, Methodological, and Historical Frameworks

2.1   Pokémon essentials

Pokémon is a Japanese franchise of play products that started with videogames – *Pocket Monsters Red* and *Pocket Monsters Green* (Game Freak 1996a) in 1996 – and spread as a global phenomenon through videogames and other media. In *Pokémon* videogames, players assume the role of a Trainer, with the aim of catching and training Pokémon creatures: a variety of sub- to super-sentient non-human animals, spirits, and deities that coexist with humans. Pokémon are collected but also used for battles against other Pokémon that the player encounters. In the case of single-player game sessions, these other Pokémon are computer-controlled wild or domesticated creatures. However, players can also connect their game devices and battle against each other and each other's Pokémon in multiplayer matches. Multiplayer sessions do not have to be antagonistic, however, and players can also trade Pokémon with each other. By catching and developing their Pokémon, players can progress in the game's world and narrative, and gain access to new areas that hold new Pokémon.

The videogames formed the foundation of the franchise, but they were soon accompanied by other games, comics, animated series, movies, toys, and assorted merchandize, all portraying (and expanding on) the original logic of the videogames. Turned into a media mix, *Pokémon* changed from a collection of single products into a fragmented but interconnected storyworld[9] cultivating experiences across multiple media. Developed in Japan, the franchise eventually became a global phenomenon.

Pokémon is produced in "generations", with each new core series videogame heralding a new generation of games and other media. A key aspect of a new generation is the appearance of a new set of Pokémon first in the videogames and

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[9]   The worlds of *Pokémon* have certain shared elements, such as the Pokémon creatures, but they also have differences, for example, in the way catching and battling Pokémon works and what the geography is like. For more on the concept of storyworld, see 2.2.2.

then in the wider media mix. Likewise, a new generation often also brings along new fictional geographies and game mechanics. These changes are subsequently reflected in the wider media mix.

The life of a Trainer is central to the games and the media mix, with players, their characters, the plot of *Pokémon's* media products, and the structuring of agency in all *Pokémon* media wrapped around the notion of Trainers, and of the audience becoming Trainers by taking part in the franchise. In this way, the whole franchise promotes the idea that *Pokémon* does not only offer products but also an identity: a way of being and of bringing the worlds of *Pokémon* to the everyday of the Trainer. That is to say, *Pokémon* is a playful mode of living, not just a fantasy world tapped into every now and again. Players are Trainers that live with Pokémon creatures in fiction as well as in their everyday, syncing their in-game and off-game existences in the storyworld, connecting bodies and affects of the real and the fantastic.

2.1.1 Waves of production and popularity: A brief history of Pokémon

The following brief history is organized into waves according to identifiable boundary events. This organization of the franchise's development makes it easier to understand the continuous process of *Pokémon's* conception, distribution, and maturation. However, it does not mean that these waves would be anything but one way to categorize the history of *Pokémon*. The reader is thus encouraged to observe the waves but to understand them as merely the surface of deeper, more complex developments.

2.1.1.1 First wave (1996–1997): The birth of Pokémon

The genesis of *Pokémon* can be dated to the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the interest its original designer Tajiri Satoshi, along with Sugimori Ken, Masuda Junichi, and the staff of their newly founded game development company Game Freak, took in the then recently released Nintendo Game Boy. In particular, Tajiri has emphasized that he was fascinated by the unrestricted mobility of the console, as well as the communicative aspects offered by the Game Boy's Link Cable, based on which the team set out to create a game that emphasized trading and communication instead of combat and competition (Larimer 1999; Nintendo 2000a; Nakazawa 2019, 82–83).

The first *Pokémon* videogames and the subsequently unfolding franchise were developed during a period in the history of Japan that was socially and economically tumultuous, especially for the nation's youth (Harootunian and Yoda 2006; Hirayama and Ronald 2008; Cassegård 2014, 27), and they took part in the rise of

media and products that were motivated by alleviating the heavy mood of a country in recession (Roquet 2016, 152). With the benefit of over 20 years of hindsight, this setting of affectively gentle media combined with 1990s video game technology and conventions of console role-playing games can be seen as an important foundation for the whole franchise – one that is still visible in its media mix.

Drawing from his childhood experiences with nature (Nintendo 2000b; Allison 2006a, 201; Nakazawa 2019, 10–14), Tajiri shaped *Pokémon* into a game at the intersection of biology and environmental issues (Bainbridge 2014). In his design, the respite and rejuvenation granted by digital commodified experiences of nature and the technologies of communication were linked with the mobility of the Game Boy that allowed players to access the worlds and social networks of *Pokémon* during commutes and moments of spare time in between the mandatory activities of their day. In this way, *Pokémon* was Tajiri's attempt to help children connect with nature and overcome the travails of the urban postindustrial society (Allison 2006a, 201).[10]

In 1996, the first *Pokémon* game was published, with 151 Pokémon spread between two nearly identical titles *Pocket Monsters Red* and *Pocket Monsters Green* that differed only by a few version-exclusive Pokémon to encourage trading between players. The games were released for the already aging Nintendo Game Boy. However, in the autumn of its product cycle, the Game Boy was widely adopted (Sheff 1994) and players were accustomed to its concept of simple and relatively cheap mobile gaming (Donovan 2010, 155). Moreover, late into the system's lifespan, *Pokémon* faced relatively little competition from other handheld games. Although not framed as a big title nor billed as a runaway hit from the moment of publication,[11] it soon demonstrated enough popularity for Nintendo to begin expanding the property.

Shortly after the release of *Pocket Monsters Red* and *Green*, a standalone first chapter of what would in a few months become a monthly serialized comic (Anakubo 1996) was published in *CoroCoro Comic.* Aside from being the first tie-in product of a franchise that would soon encompass a vast variety of merchandizing, the comic

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[10]　How much any of these motivations voiced by Tajiri and his colleagues were present during the development and how much they are the product of narratives created afterwards remains an open question. However, the socioeconomic and cultural climate of the time, as well as the way these developers later frame them, no doubt had at least some impact on the development of the franchise throughout the years and, as such, are part of my reading of the text of *Pokémon* regardless of authorial intent, or lack thereof.

[11]　Nintendo's director of communications Minagawa Yasuhiro stated that Nintendo initially shipped around 200,000 copies of the game (Kent 2001, 566), and fully expected *Pokémon* to be a one-time product. Also, the game was not expected to garner interest beyond its target demographic of young boys (Allison 2006a, 224).

also served as a platform for transmedia worldbuilding and marketing by portraying new sides of the storyworld and providing readers the opportunity to obtain rare Pokémon such as the then-elusive Mew for the videogames (Nintendo 2010; Nintendo 2000c). The comic also served as a launch pad for the reimagining of the original videogames, as *Pocket Monsters Blue* (Game Freak 1996b) became available for readers via mail order.

Along with the release of the first installment of the *Pokémon* trading card game in October, by the end of 1996, *Pokémon* had transformed from a moderately popular videogame on an aging system into a steadily growing transmedia phenomenon throughout Japan. These first steps were followed by intense expansion. In April 1997, a little over a year from the debut of *Pocket Monsters Red* and *Green,* the animated *Pokémon* television series (Yuyama 1997) aired its first episode. During 1997, the production of character goods and tie-in products dramatically picked up pace, in part leveraging Pikachu as the franchise's new mascot, popularized by the animated series. Alongside increased merchandizing, *Pokémon* was also starting to get involved in co-promotional campaigns, such as the yearly Japan Railways "stamp rally" with fans traveling from train station to train station in search of Pokémon. It deployed the central themes of *Pokémon* play by presenting a playful, social and desire-driven activity structured around the logic of collecting (stamps of) Pokémon and obtaining rare rewards through dedication and work, all wrapped in a mix of worlds both mundane and fantastic.

2.1.1.2   Second wave (1998): From Japan to the United States

For *Pokémon,* the year 1998 began with the release of *Pocket Pikachu* (Jupiter Corporation 1998), a *Tamagotchi*-like device with a pedometer housing the series mascot Pikachu. *Pocket Pikachu* was the first in a line of ancillary devices and products that took the franchise's overall focus on a playful mode of being and everyday enchantment, and amped it up with the use of mediating technology that integrates into the everyday, even beyond what the Game Boy could afford.

This playful investigation of the connections between the everyday world and the worlds of *Pokémon* continued in April 1998 when the first Pokémon Center opened in central Tokyo. In the videogames, Pokémon Centers function as central hubs, offering necessary gameplay-related services to the player and providing a gathering spot for Trainers in the diegesis. The real-world Pokémon Centers utilize this same concept, acting as retail stores for *Pokémon* merchandize and offering space for social play. Like the *Pocket Pikachu*, Pokémon Centers are extensions – all but metonymical stand-ins – of the fictional world., and rely on playful investment in the franchise, emphasizing the presence of fictional elements in the real world, accessible through commercial and playful means.

July 2018 marked the release of the first *Pokémon* movie (Yuyama 1998), which made use of the same mystery of the 151ˢᵗ Pokémon Mew that helped draw attention to *Pokémon* the previous year. By 1998, the animated series and movie had gained so much prominence that they reflected back to the videogames as well. This took the form of *Pocket Monsters Pikachu,* commonly referred to as *Pokémon Yellow* (Game Freak 2000/1998), published in Japan for the Game Boy in fall 1998. Like *Pokémon Blue,* it was an incremental improvement over the first games, retaining most of the original content while adding some extra elements and polishing. However, instead of being an overall update, *Yellow* focused on bringing the game's events and graphics closer to the animated series.

In 1998, with a wide and popular portfolio of videogames, animations, comics, a trading card game, and a wide variety of character merchandize, Nintendo, Game Freak, Creatures and Shogakukan – the companies producing *Pokémon* at the time – moved forward with exporting the franchise to the United States. The relative stability and breadth of the nascent media mix allowed them to abandon the production model of piece by piece expansion used in Japan and instead aim for a coordinated hypermarketing campaign right from the start with the US debut (Iwabuchi 2004, 64).[12] The animated series began airing in the United States in early September 1998, shortly before the launch of the videogames *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Blue* (Game Freak 1999/1998)[13] later that month. Overall, the launch campaign included extensive transmedia coordination between the animated series, character toys, comics, and the trading card game, as well as over 30 million dollars in promotions and marketing (Nintendo of America 1998).

Reception in the United States was much akin to what had been seen in Japan, only at an accelerated pace: rather than a slow uptake leading to phenomenal success, *Pokémon* became a runaway hit right after the release. Nintendo of America's press release, dated a year after the US launch, boasts of *Pokémon* having become a "$5 billion dollar industry worldwide, almost as much as the total U.S. video game industry in 1998" (Nintendo of America 1999).

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[12]   It is worth noting that the exportation of *Pokémon* did not happen entirely by the producers of the franchise, but its spread was also supported by grassroots activity (Tobin 2004b, 269), as is – or at least was – typical for the globalization of Japanese popular culture more generally (Lamarre 2006, 358).

[13]   When referring to the *Pokémon* videogames published outside Japan, I generally refer to the version I have played. Usually this means the European version, which, before the releases became globally synchronous, were released somewhat later than the Japanese and US versions. Where the original year of publication is relevant, such as here, I have added it to the in-text citations. Also, *Pokémon Red* and *Blue* are unique in that they are not straightforward localizations of *Pocket Monsters Red* and *Green,* but rather an idiosyncratic combination of *Pocket Monsters Red*, *Green*, and *Blue*. As such, in terms of citations, their original version is the 1998 US release.

2.1.1.3   Third wave (1999–2003): Global Pokémon

As is often the case in global flows of Japanese popular culture, the first high-profile step in *Pokémon* going global was exporting the phenomenon to the United States (Iwabuchi 2004, 66). With post-US markets and debuts, the producers had, for the first time, both the knowledge and the established momentum to leverage the franchise as a phenomenon and to advance it according to prior export experiences.

Pokémon's global spread was swift, and by the end of 2000, *Pokémon* had become an undisputed entertainment supersystem (Kinder 1991, 122–123): an intertextual collection of media and products that had wide appeal and increasingly attracted a sort of snowballing meta-attention that fed back into the success of its commodification. In the eyes of the wider public, *Pokémon* was not known for its products, but rather it was famous simply for being famous. This moment also marks the phenomenon's translocal (Kraidy 2005) turn. During the turn of the millennium, *Pokémon* expanded into a range of localities far beyond the pop cultural hegemonies of Japan and the United States, and the fad, though certainly gripping audiences the world over, began to have significantly localized impact. The common blocks of experience as directed by the overall framework of *Pokémon's* media texts (such as the diegetic focus on Pokémon creatures and training them, the approximate timing of the release of core media products, and the overall structuring of the franchise) remained on a global level, but the number of contexts affecting individual reception increased dramatically (see Brougère 2004; Lemish and Bloch 2004; Peterson 2010).

Part of the global success of Japanese popular culture is arguably in its strong duality of local and global; a complex dynamic where "mechanisms of global media industry as well as transnational and translocal methods of content creation and consumption intertwine" (Valaskivi 2009, 76, author's translation). The core of Japanese pop cultural soft power (Shiraishi 1997) can be seen in this inherent blending of cultural aspects in the production and especially in the exportation of these pop cultural products as thoroughly Japanese yet also laced with the practices of a globalized media culture familiar to audiences all over the world (Napier 2001, 22; Consalvo 2016; Tsutsui 2010 26–27), This shows Japan itself as a product, "packaged as a cultural object" (Hutchinson 2019, 253) for export and interpretation wherein sometimes Japaneseness is seen as a key property and at others hidden to maximize generalization (ibid. 25–29), with *Pokémon* at the turn of the millennium utilizing both strategies – a distinctly Japanese media franchise that had broad appeal to audiences who did not read it as such as well as to those who did.

During this stage, the second generation of games, starting with *Pokémon Gold* and *Pokémon Silver* (Game Freak 2001a/1999), were published in late 1999, followed by the third generation of games, beginning with the release of *Pokémon*

Ruby and *Pokémon Sapphire* (Game Freak 2003/2002) in 2002.[14] Additionally, during this time, the development of non-core series games began to ramp up, the animated series continued in production, five animated movies were released, and licensed commodities, coordinated by the Pokémon Company, entered the global market (Kondo et al. 2017, 24). At this point, the production of *Pokémon's* media texts starts escaping efficient cataloguing as it becomes a global commodity ecology, where individual products give way to experiences shared between products and accumulated within the totality of the transmedia storyworld and its consumption.

2.1.1.4   Fourth wave (2004–2013): Post-phenomenal progress

By 2003, the *Pokémon* phenomenon had spread well outside Japan and produced global profits of over $15 billion, drawn from markets in over 140 countries (Allison 2006a, 193). As big as the phenomenon had become, this exceptional rise to popularity was not to last. The fall from craze did not, however, spell *Pokémon's* demise as announced by, for example, Joseph Tobin (2004, 3) as well as Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2004, 18). On the contrary, it marked a period of nearly 10 years of steady progress, during which *Pokémon* receded from the public limelight, yet maintaining its position as an actively produced and popular franchise.

Even during *Pokémon's* post-fad era, core series games were published roughly every other year.[15] Remakes of older core series games[16] as well as new spinoff games[17] filled the gaps in between core series games. While reliable information about sales of high-profile videogames is notoriously difficult to obtain and verify (Consalvo 2016, 15), the sales data available for *Pokémon* (Nintendo 2000d; Nintendo 2018a; Nintendo 2018b; Famitsu 2017) does not support a steep decline nor demise even if the fad had ceased.

Merchandizing and related media production also continued largely unabated after the peak in popularity. The trading card game and the animated titles remained in active production (The Pokémon Company 2018a), reflecting changes and new features brought to the storyworld by the franchise's 4th, 5th, and 6th videogame

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[14]   These games established a pattern of publishing where the Japanese releases were followed by a US release and soon after that, versions for other global markets, in roughly a year to two-year cycle.

[15]   *Pokémon Diamond* and *Pearl* (Game Freak 2007/2006), *Pokémon Platinum* (Game Freak 2009/2008), *Pokémon Black* and *White* (Game Freak 2011/2010), *Pokémon Black 2* and *White 2* (Game Freak 2012), and *Pokémon X* and *Y* (Game Freak 2013).

[16]   Pokémon HeartGold and SoulSilver (Game Freak 2010a).

[17]   E.g., *Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Explorers of Time* and *Explorers of Darkness* (Chunsoft 2008/2007) and *Super Pokémon Rumble* (Ambrella 2011).

generations, and four new Pokémon Center Stores opened in Japan and four more were remodeled and reopened (The Pokémon Company 2018b).

Aside from the already addressed significant expansion of *Pokémon's* media portfolio, perhaps the most significant evolution in the franchise took place in its demographic: as the phenomenon grew older, so did its audience. Accounts of the early days of *Pokémon* tend to focus on children (Cook 2001; Heckman 2002; Kline 2003). Indeed, as the first *Pokémon* games were aimed at young Japanese boys (Allison 2006a, 224), this approach is justified but by *Pokémon's* fourth wave no longer tenable. After the early years, the developers committed to a more age-neutral public image and design philosophy (see Masuda 2006; 2004b; DeVries 2009), and Nintendo has expressly noted the ageing of their *Pokémon*-playing fan-base (Iwata 2010).

2.1.1.5   Fifth wave (2014–): The new epoch

After a decade of steady but relatively contained success, *Pokémon* struck a new wave of prominence shaped by three events that breached mainstream consciousness in a way last seen during the franchise's heyday.

In February 2014, *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, the unquestionably biggest cultural *Pokémon* fan event of 2014,[18] had millions of players and viewers take part in a communal playthrough of *Pokémon Red* through a bespoke system rigged onto the steaming platform Twitch. In addition to attracting millions of viewers and players, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* generated a whole culture around itself, with an ad hoc vernacular, codes of conduct, fan art depositories, and even a lovingly crafted theology (Prell 2014), and vitally also attracted attention outside game enthusiasts and the game press (Vincent 2014).

In 2016, the franchise celebrated the 20th anniversary of the original release of *Pocket Monsters Red* and *Green*. The anniversary year focused on selling *Pokémon* as a site of personal and cultural nostalgia, targeting both those who had personal history with *Pokémon* as well as those who had yet to try on the role of a Trainer. A highly publicized Super Bowl advertisement, a global social media campaign aimed at evoking nostalgic memories, a range of special anniversary merchandize and promotions, and, most importantly, re-releases of the original *Pokémon* videogames all drew attention to the past, while new core series videogames of the 7th, 8th, and 9th generations, *Pokémon Sun* and *Moon* (Game Freak 2016), *Pokémon Sword* and *Shield* (Game Freak 2019), and *Pokémon Scarlet* and *Violet* (Game Freak 2022a),

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[18]   For research on *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, see Carter (2014), Koski (2015), Lindsey (2015), Mallory (2014), and Ramirez et al. (2014).

departed from the template that had remained nearly unchanged for 20 years and suggested new developmental directions as well as courted new audiences.

Although *Twitch Plays Pokémon* and the 20th anniversary celebrations had both received mainstream publicity, it took the release of the mobile game *Pokémon GO* (Niantic and The Pokémon Company 2016) in the summer of 2016 to bring the franchise back into global prominence. *Pokémon GO* was downloaded more than 500 million times during its first two months (Takahashi 2016) and attracted massive attention all over the world.[19]

What we see in these three cases is the history and cultural status of *Pokémon* leveraged for profit, attention, and affect. By 2014, *Pokémon* was a pop cultural icon, entangled in a web of its own popularity and nostalgic discourse (Suominen 2008), where the franchise and its characters are simultaneously a site of accumulated personal experience and shared sociocultural heritage. However, we also see a direction towards something new: a collection of developments that yet again propel the franchise towards a new stage, at once nostalgic and novel.

Far from over, *Pokémon* carries on into its third decade much like it always has: in waves of production and popularity, as a continuous process of rising and falling trends, experiments, and transmedia endeavors, all pushing the world of *Pokémon*, along with its creatures and their Trainers, towards encounters in a playful everyday.

[19]   For a general summary of *Pokémon GO* and its early moments, see Hjorth and Richardson (2017).

2.2   Games and play

Because of videogames' importance to the ludic and affective structure of the *Pokémon* franchise and establishing the foundation of role-play and playfulness for its media mix, my work is largely conducted through game studies, understood here as a "multidisciplinary field of study and learning with games and related phenomena as its subject matter" (Mäyrä 2008, 6; see also Mäyrä 2009, 319).

The history of researching games is one of converging and parallel fields as much as – if not more than – canonical developments of "a field". It is an assemblage of methods, traditions, circumstances, and social currents coming together in proclamations and demarcations of an ever-shifting object of analysis, all built on the history of this activity as well as that of the research object itself.

Much of the early research on games comes from late 19th and early to mid-20th century publications (such as Culin 1896; Hirn 1916; Huizinga 1980/1938; Caillois 2001/1958)[20] that contribute towards a proto-field: an interrelated but still largely disjointed collection of works engaging with games, with tentative attempts to build dialogue across paradigms. Juul (2001) suggests that Avedon and Sutton-Smith's seminal *The Study of Games*, published in 1971, drew some of these scattered discussions together to spur a growing community of scholars researching games under a wide variety of disciplines. Whether or not it was the accomplishment of this work in particular, the 1970s did nevertheless see the publication of many works now considered formative for game (and play[21]) research, such as Sutton-Smith's *Child's Play* in 1971 and Bernard Suits' *The Grasshopper* in 1978, as well as the establishment of important scholarly support structures with, for example, the founding of the journal *Simulation & Gaming* (née *Simulation & Games*) in 1970, the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* in 1974, and The Association for the Study of Play in 1973, all contributing to the growing discourse of game, play, and simulation research (Mäyrä 2008, 7–8; Stenros 2015, 22).

These developments, together with the millennial zeitgeist of "the current trend of (computer) games gaining acceptance" (Juul 2001), the emergence of global game research conferences and journals, the establishment of degree paths for game research, and an overall scrambling for a scholastic history of discourse (what Juul suggests took place in 1971 as well) signaled the emergence of the discipline of game studies, often conveniently conflated with Aarseth calling 2001 the "year one of (computer) game studies" (Aarseth 2001a; Aarseth 2017). While obviously hyperbolic, it reflects an intensification of discursive and epistemic orientations:

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[20]   Prior works do exist (see Björk 2013), but they are mostly not attached to a shared field or necessarily even a wider discourse of studying games.

[21]   Noteworthy here is that play studies is also an "interdiscipline or multidiscipline" (Henricks 2008, 171) much like the study of games.

game studies as a field in which a multitude of approaches and methods began to coalesce, not out of nothing but into a particular *something;* a social and cultural assemblage aimed at the study of games and play that did not quite exist before.[22]

2.2.1　Defining games and play

When studying any cultural objects, it is inevitable that what is researched and how that research is conducted is contingent on how the individual authors view their objects of study. To this end, I will next offer clarifications and definitions on games, play, and some particularities therein.

Pokémon – along with contemporary play cultures and their study (Heljakka 2013, 34–35) – combines a variety of toys, games, related media, and playful ways of accessing these. In this, *Pokémon* is a particularly heightened example of a more general trend in postmodernist technoculture where modes of play and playfulness, as well as the artifacts of play such as games, toys, and technology, continue to intermingle, adapt, and contribute to the formation of identities and interpretations of reality. As Raessens notes, we are experiencing an overall shift of culture towards "a predominantly ludic ontology" (2006, 54), characterized by Zimmerman (2015) as a "ludic century", and suggested already in the 1990s by Sutton-Smith as the emergence of a ludic turn in culture and society (1997), all pointing towards a sort of generic ambience of the ludic in an ever-increasing range of domains, and in opposition to exclusionary forms of "hegemony of play" (Fron et al. 2007; see also Parker 2013; Keogh 2018, 11).

Overall, this ambience of the ludic calls for open-mindedness that forgoes exclusionary definitions of games and instead remains sensitive to a variety of *playable media* (Wardrip-Fruin 2007; Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin 2007) and the ways in which they are, or can be, played. Such an attitude is particularly useful when examining a massive playable media network such as *Pokémon* that distributes much of the play it invites onto a variety of media texts and products not all of which are immediately recognizable as games – or even particularly playful! For this broad view of games and play in culture and in *Pokémon's* media mix to be viable in this thesis, however, some attention must first be spared for what I mean by games and play, if only to form a point of origin for an approach that seeks to include rather than exclude.[23]

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[22]　For a more detailed take on the formation of game studies as a discipline, see Mäyrä (2008) and Stenros (2015, 22–26).

[23]　Indeed, the definitions presented here are provided to ground my reading of *Pokémon*, rather than to argue what is or is not a game. Ultimately, I wish to encourage forgoing finding *the* definition and instead delving into a wealth of definitions created, collected,

2.2.1.1   Videogames as games

It is useful to emphasize that I am not analyzing just "games" but "videogames", which can generally be argued to function as a subsidiary or extension or variation of games, but which are nevertheless also their own category of things. For example, Keogh argues that videogames are contingent not only on the ludic traditions of games but also on the technological and cultural history of audiovisual media and the particular assemblages of videogames themselves (Keogh 2018, 10; see also Karhulahti 2015, 57). This aligns videogames, in part, with the theories and developments of digital media, framing them as a contemporary site of play that has developed from the modes of production, consumption, and media culture in the 20th and 21st centuries (Lister et al. 2008, 263).

Games and videogames are set on a sliding scale of cultural and material properties, with different games doing different things depending on their unique relations to other games, their culture, and their material realities. As such, in this thesis I regard videogames as a temporally situated and technologically enabled form – or better yet, constructed category – of games. They are artifacts of, and in, distinct technological and cultural contexts (Wolf 2007; Lister et al. 2008; Huhtamo 2005) that together influenced today's game culture and the notion of videogames as a diverse but identifiable concept.

Furthermore, I discuss *Pokémon* as a series of Japanese console role-playing games (JRPGs), which, as a genre of videogames with roots in tabletop role-playing games and a lineage intertwined with computer role-playing games, is a cultural assemblage of production, consumption, and ludic practice operating on the tensions and dynamisms between games and videogames. Additionally, *Pokémon* draws from the distinct game cultural contexts of Japanese videogames (Hutchinson 2019; Consalvo 2016). I continue to unpack both themes throughout this thesis, and especially in section 3.2., through the *Pokémon* media mix's JRPG origins.[24]

Product categories such as computer games, digital games, and console games are here collectively termed videogames. It is a way of discussing a specific category of cultural products (games as they appear in this particular technological and cultural context) while also remaining as open as possible in regard to the exact composition of that category. More specific terms, such as mobile games, are explained and used when needed.

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and compared (see Stenros 2017; Arjoranta 2014; Juul 2005; Salen and Zimmerman 2004).

[24]   While I analyze *Pokémon* as a ludic system originating from a distinctly Japanese context, I am not attempting to analyze Japanese culture through *Pokémon*. This is an intentional move to set a Japanese studies or "cultural ludology" (Hutchinson 2019, 5) approach outside the scope of my work.

2.2.1.2 Games

As crafting and forwarding definitions is, fundamentally, an act of wielding power and/as politics (Stenros 2017, 512), my attempt is corrected toward inclusiveness and open-ended approaches. My reluctance to offer exhaustive definitions for games is by no means groundbreaking. Perhaps the most famous fuzzy approach to games comes from Ludwig Wittgenstein.[25] In a frequently cited passage about how language functions, he argues that games are not a category of things and activities that we could exhaustively define, but rather "if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that" (1986, 31–32, emphasis in original). Through these *family relations*, games appear as objects and practices that can be cordoned off into smaller or more defined subsets for special purposes, but which, crucially, can also be understood as a heterogenous group, characterized by a wide range of similarities and fully understandable without an exhaustive definition that would cover them all (ibid., 33–34). Although it could be argued that Wittgenstein did not try very hard to look for similarities and differences between games that would allow for a more universal definition (Suits 2014, 1–2; Juul 2015), and indeed that this was not his intention to begin with (Arjoranta 2019), he nevertheless established that such an endeavor is not necessary as long as one is able to note and relay the family resemblances of the object. Thus, to offer an approximation of what we mean by games, "we can do no better than give some examples and point out some of the family resemblances they exemplify" (Bridges 2010, 122).[26]

Following this, each piece of research invariably comes to suggest its own approximation of what kinds of objects and object groups are regarded as games. Indeed, examples of what I understand as games are easily found under the References section of this thesis. In a broad sense, for basic understanding of what games are, I subscribe to Bernard Suits' influential definition from 1978. It is a surprising fit for a work aiming at a Wittgensteinian multiplicity of playable media, because Suits explicitly positions himself against Wittgenstein (Suits 2014, 1–2; Hurka 2014, xiv) and attempts to provide a definition for a domain of life in which Wittgenstein professed there to be only variance. In this conflict, I recognize Suits' project as an effort towards identifying particularly widespread family resemblances that could be called a general view of games, at odds with Wittgenstein, but also

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[25] For a thorough evaluation of a Wittgensteinian approach to defining games, see Arjoranta (2014; 2019).

[26] Alternatively, if one desires a more formal take on game definitions while retaining Wittgenstein's ambiguity, family resemblances can be turned into an inclusive definitional system where typical attributes of games are listed, and the more of them an activity includes the more game-like it is (Whitton 2010, 20, 22–23).

inextricably in a constructive dialogue with him (Ryall 2013). I do not wield the definition as a tool with which to exclude things, but rather as a core of family resemblances that helps connect games and gamelike objects that correspond to or fit into the conversation with Suits' definition.

While comprehensive to the point that it could be said to be too broad and contradictory for its own good[27] – which is only desirable in an inclusive approach, such as mine – Suits' argument is that "playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (2014, 43). Suits expands this definition with four detailed parts: games have *goals*, *means* of achieving those goals, *rules* to govern this process, and they cultivate a *lusory attitude* that enables the whole undertaking.

The *goal* of a game, for Suits, is "a specific achievable state of affairs" (ibid., 38) that he calls a "prelusory goal" (ibid.); something that can be described prior to playing the game, such as the goal of crossing a finish line before others. Stenros (2017, 511) notes that this excludes open-ended pursuits such as toylike games and online multiplayer worlds from Suits' definition. I would agree were Suits discussing, for example, *winning conditions* or other detailed and game-specific attributes as prelusory goals, but Suits explicitly rules them as lusory, not pre-lusory (Suits 2014, 38–39); lusory goals are contingent on the game and its playing while prelusory goals are "specific achievable states of affair" (ibid.).[28] And so, the prelusory goal of overcoming more difficult challenges (via the lusory goal of gaining access to a particular high-level area) in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) is an example of a prelusory goal in an online world. Likewise, engaging with a toylike game such as *The Sims* (Maxis 2000; Wardrip-Fruin 2007, 216) might invite the player to aim for a prelusory goal, or state of affairs, such as designing an aesthetically pleasing arrangement (for example, via the lusory goal of making a lot of in-game money and using that to furnish a house or conversely challenging oneself to create a pleasing in-game environment with scant resources).

Means and *rules* describe the concrete steps of playing the game as well as the underlying agreement on which these steps are based. The rules determine "the kind and range of means which will be permitted in seeking to achieve the prelusory goal" (Suits 2014, 40), guaranteeing that there is some form of friction in the act of playing the game. The rules of golf, for example, prohibit merely picking up the ball and depositing it in a cup, just as *Pokémon* requires a degree of effort from the player to

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[27]   For a summary of critiques of and arguments for Suits' definition, see Ryall (2013). Furthermore, part of the usefulness of Suits's work arguably comes from his ability to switch between clear definitions and ambiguous tales in which they are variously applied, forming a text that thrives on multiple interpretations (Mitchell 2020).

[28]   Admittedly, prelusory goals as a concept with an almost defiantly broad definition seem to invite more trouble than they are worth, and might be better off sidelined for the parts of Suits' definition that have more traction universally (Schneider and Butcher 1997).

level up a character, rather than automatically granting high-level characters to everyone. This is not to say that games would need to be challenging, but that there is almost always an easier way, blocked off by rules, to achieve any given goal in a game, and that it is the limitations to the means imposed by the rules that give the game an important part of its character and structure.

Finally, Suits addresses *lusory attitude* (2014, 40). For a game to function and not collapse into a chaotic mess, players adopt a playful attitude. There is, in a sense, a contract at work, with each participant agreeing to follow the rules even if disregarding them would, due to the rules and means, be generally more efficient. In this way, the contract of football guides players to accept that they should never play the ball with their hands and penalizes[29] players who do so, even if using hands were the superior action. Lusory attitude, then, is the willful acceptance of rules in order to enable playing the game. Conversely, when the authority of rules is thwarted by a lack of such attitude, play deteriorates or collapses entirely (Goffman 1972, 359).

2.2.1.3 Play

Noteworthy in Suits' definition is that it is not a definition of games but specifically of *playing* them. The component parts of Suits' definition describe equally the game as an artifact (a construct made of rules) and an activity (acting in relation to those rules).

Much like games, if not more so, play has been defined, re-defined, and mapped onto countless academic fault lines, and appears to be no easier to pin down. As with games, my emphasis of delimitation leans toward the ambiguous and inclusive. For that reason, I am drawn to Sicart's (2014) open-ended description in which play is defined through a series of modes, all of which, he argues, are often seen in – or in close proximity to – play. For Sicart, play is an activity that hinges on creativity and the management of societal, cultural, and material contexts for generally autotelic purposes, and generative of personal and social experiences. Based on that, he sees play as a general mode of existence, present in all (human) being (ibid., 18).

Salen and Zimmerman have suggested a similarly broad formulation according to which "play is free movement within a more rigid structure" (2004, 304). It bears a striking similarity to Suits' short definition ("playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles") as well as to Sicart's conception of play as being in the world. All three describe a broad possibility space of activities taken mostly at leisure and acted upon, or through, some form of facilitating

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[29]   The penalty itself is also dependent on lusory attitude: there is no universal law forbidding anyone from touching a ball.

structure. This kind of activity, in Salen and Zimmerman's terms, exists both *because of* and *in opposition to* the structures of the play (ibid.).

They all put forward the idea that play is somehow directed at or through something, or structured in some way by the activity itself; play is essentially a mode of relative freedom subject to some artificial or autotelic delimitations. This approach portrays play in general as a similar but somewhat less structured activity than playing games. Indeed, Stenros notes: "there is a continuum from play to games, marked by an increase in complexity of social construction and rules, and a decrease in the phenomenological experience of playfulness" (2015, 77). This further strengthens my resolve to stray from strict definitions of either play or games, as I see both play and games as inherently playful activities with a varying degree of regulating scaffolding.

Stenros raises an important point regarding *playfulness* as a crucial component for play and games.[30] There seems to be an identifiable difference between play and playfulness: for analytical purposes, these two can be separated into an action or activity on the one hand and a mentality or mindset on the other (ibid.). Important for reading Stenros is that the mode of playfulness he addresses is, above all, grounded in a "playful biological tendency" (ibid., 64), a natural trait for many animals, humans included, to which most forms of play hark back to. For Stenros, playfulness is a biological condition of an animal, while the concept of play – although founded on the biological lattices of playfulness – is culturally and socially constructed and influenced (Stenros 2015, 77).

Sicart does not discuss playfulness so much as an issue of biology or fundamental animal traits but as a manifestation in experiences, behavior, and culture. For Sicart, "playfulness is a physical, psychological, and emotional attitude toward things, people, and situations" (Sicart 2014, 21), and furthermore, the relationship between play and playfulness is – similarly to Stenros – that of an activity and an attitude (ibid., 22). As playful creatures, humans and other animals exhibit playfulness and harness as well as evoke it in acts of more deliberate play, of which games are, for humans anyway, a common example.

Essentially, this playfulness can also be seen to change in quality depending on play situations and games played. Montola, taking after Heliö (2004), has suggested the notion of *gaming mindsets*. He discusses a role-playing mindset but notes that many games employ particular modes of playfulness: "some games are supposed to be played with mindset of a conspiratorial diplomacy and backstabbing, while others

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30 Although I do not have the space to engage with them here, playfulness has been discussed in many key texts on games and play throughout the 1900s. From historical works already mentioned in this section, see Huizinga (1980, 7) to Caillois (2001, 7–8) to Suits (2014).

require a honorable sportsmanship or a style prioritizing style over success" (Montola 2008, 23). In this way, playfulness is not only a raw biological undercurrent of playful phenomena but also a tool for players and game designers to use, consciously or otherwise.

Drawing on these discussions, I regard play as a mode of being and acting that arises from biological foundations but is, at least in the capacity it is seen in this thesis, a socially and culturally structured activity of accepting (as well as toying with) rules and make-believe. Fundamentally, I maintain an analytical distinction between games as artifacts, play as an activity often undertaken with game artifacts, and playfulness as an attitude often present in play and in contact with games. Moreover, while I regard them as analytically separate, in actuality – on the level of actions and experiences – I do not expect a definite border between play, being playful, and playing games. Rather, I see them as related states that players can move in between or evoke simultaneously, even within a single activity.

2.2.1.4   Objects and identities in play

As a character-oriented franchise, studying *Pokémon* play is also about studying Pokémon and Pokémon Trainers; playful identities and the franchise's characters that in my work are framed as personifications and mediators of ludic systems of intimacy.

Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider have taken a broad interdisciplinary and transmedial approach to characters, condensing their findings to prototypical characteristics according to which a fictional character is a "recognizable fictional being, to which the ability to think and act is ascribed" (Eder, Jannis, and Schneider 2010, 10). They note, however, that individual characters likely deviate from this in many ways, suggesting that the practice of examining characters is often case-dependent.

To this, games usually add the notion of play, and the intermingling of the player and the game. Characters turn from specific beings to specific beings to play as and with; while there is an element of play in coming into contact with characters, games generally suggest further layers of make-believe through, for example, interaction, role-play, and non-human agency. Furthermore, characters in videogames are not only fictional objects to be interpreted but also components of the game system, actively portrayed and constructed by players and the game alike.

In the study of videogame characters, the terms *avatar*[31] and *player character* (and the derivative inverted term *non-player character*) have been used to describe

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[31]   For the cultural origins of the term "avatar", see Mukherjee (2012).

characters in relation to the player and the game. Generally, avatar refers to identity portrayal, self-presentation (see Filiciak 2003; Murray 1997, 113; Waggoner 2009), and enactment of player agency and embodiment through characters (Klevjer 2006), whereas player characters (when not used as a general term) can be seen to address more inert or pre-defined characters of the game system, separate from the player, that constitute procedural roles and agents rather than direct player representations (Tronstad 2008, 258–259). In the practice of play, however, this distinction becomes more conceptual than taxonomic (Boudreau 2012, 78), and as such all, or at least most, game characters should be understood as functions of both, depending on the way the game and the player use characters (ibid.; see also Burn 2006, 87, 82).

Approaching game characters from the perspective of social play and the play experience, Linderoth suggests an interesting alternative. For Linderoth, characters can be broadly understood as *roles* that players can pretend to be, *tools* that enable player agency in the game, and *props* for the players' presentation of self (Linderoth 2005). Leaning on the above – and further articulating the nuances between player characters and avatars – the primary character position that players utilize in *Pokémon*, the player as a Pokémon Trainer, is a *role*, offering a way to engage with the game and *Pokémon's* media mix through a fictional identity largely, but not exclusively, reflective of their own. The player-controlled Trainer character and the Pokémon also enable the player to exert avatarial agency on the gameworld and its characters in units of player-as-Trainer and player-as-Pokémon, and, as such, the franchise's characters function as *tools* that allow the players' will to manifest in the videogame and in *Pokémon* play. Furthermore, in the shared and social setting of *Pokémon's* media mix and the videogames' multiplayer aspects, the Pokémon creatures and the player's character are *props* through which the social presentation of self – as well as fanhood – is made possible.

Pokémon, then, can be seen to utilize a range of subject and object positions throughout its media mix. Beyond interpreting them through generalizing character theories as above, they must also be examined as bespoke elements of their ludic surroundings. For example, in order to understand the use of characters in the *Pokémon* media mix, it is imperative to address how the design of Pokémon creatures and the framing of players into the role of Pokémon Trainers both position players and characters into thematically and structurally suggested roles as caretakers and pets, offering a wide gamut of characters and roles, whose interpretation and affective quality are not necessarily shaped by the characters and roles themselves, but also by their relation to the storyworld at large. Moreover, these character roles and the forms they take in practice stem from the franchise's origins in role-playing games and the genre of Japanese console role-playing games. Therefore, to understand how characters work in *Pokémon*, we must understand character play in the ludic media mixes of JRPGs and how they mesh with the cultural history of role-

play in general. For this reason, instead of fully subscribing to pre-existing character theories, I direct my reading at the whole media system, starting from the understanding presented here, but building a more precise interpretation based on what emerges from *Pokémon's* overall machinery of transmedial character play.

2.2.2 Boundaries of play: The real and the imagined in everyday life

Play, in *Pokémon* and elsewhere, exists at a crossroad of worlds and beings. Play can be seen as disjointed from the real as it generally deals with illusion, imagination, and fantasy, and oftentimes takes place in designated locations such as playgrounds, sport arenas or, more metaphorically, games and playful mindsets. Conversely, play is also intimately tied to the real in that it is an activity taking place through our corporeal bodies, anchored in the reality unmediated by play, settled into the rhythms of our daily lives, and is unquestionably influenced by things outside of itself. Indeed, concepts such as "real" and "unreal", "actual" and "virtual", and "unmediated" and "mediated" will rise time and again in the following chapters as I attempt to navigate the various playful phenomena of *Pokémon*, the world they exist in, and the worlds they create; none of which are separate and all of which we must be able to write about with clarity.

This muddle is a critical property of play. Play has the power and tendency to create imagined and oftentimes acted out realities in which players conduct actions that "do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote" (Bateson 1987, 185). That is, the actions are meaningful in that they are related to the reality outside of play, but, importantly, their denotations are shifted to match the reality of the play world rather than the real one, and metacommunicated (i.e., expressed to express) as such (ibid., 183, 185).

In this way, these worlds and figments cropping up in play are versions of reality: they have a relation to the reality outside of play, but also an inner consistency, a playful reality, of their own. Indeed, most entertainment media can be regarded as playful for presenting – and inviting to accept – a reality, even if a fictional one (Giddings 2014, 4). In narratological terms, these media construct *storyworlds:* diegetic worlds whose interpretation enables participants to emotionally and viscerally "inhabit a world in which things matter" (Herman 2005, 570) and in which a text's existents are situated (Ryan 2014, 34–36). As an "ecology of narrative interpretation", engaging with a storyworld invites to a playful construction of the fictional world and its contexts (Herman 2005, 570).

These media worlds also shift and transform, upheld as their own domains but also merging with other spaces, places, times, and settings, and sometimes jumping from one world to another: play might begin in the digital domains of a videogame

and re-emerge in the physical space of backyard play (Giddings 2014, 8–9), and it might even be designed and commodified to take place in a transmedial network of products and experiences such as in *Pokémon*. Play in these instances, then, is about make-believe and the creative exploration of fictional worlds, but also about feeling out as well as transgressing the boundaries of different realities.

The concept of a *magic circle* has been used in many different ways in game studies (Stenros 2012; Montola 2012a, 48) to demarcate and investigate when something happens within a game, or in play, and when outside of it – and when something takes place on the threshold between games, play, and the unmediated real. Its origin in the parlance of game studies can be traced to a relatively minor point[32] made by Johan Huizinga (1980), as popularized by Salen and Zimmerman (2004) in an argument that is often somewhat misinterpreted (Zimmerman 2012). For Huizinga, the magic circle is one example among many in a passage where he discusses how play – as a fundamental quality of culture – takes place in, and forms around itself, spaces (physical or conceptual) of specialty and distinctness (Huizinga 1980, 10). Salen and Zimmerman draw on Huizinga when they discuss the borders of play; most notably, they adopt from him the name "magic circle" as a general header (2004, 95), but ground their approach in various theoretical approaches far beyond Huizinga, such as Apter's psychological frame (2006) and Suits' lusory attitude (2014, 40). For Salen and Zimmerman, the term is an open-ended theoretical tool for understanding games (and, essentially, their design) as contexts for meaning-making which "mix elements intrinsic to the game and elements outside the game" (Zimmerman 2012). When playing a game, "special meanings accrue and cluster around objects and behaviors" and "a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 96).

Both conceptualizations of the magic circle have received a fair amount of criticism, with, for example, Consalvo denouncing the concept because it portrays games as something where "the ordinary rules of life do not apply" (2009, 416), and Calleja expressing a concern that by suggesting a border of play, one invites "the immediate challenge of articulating what lies outside of that boundary" (2012, 88). Indeed, the brunt of the criticism directed at the concept falls on the perceived separation of play and life outside of play (Stenros 2012, 3). This, however, is a mischaracterization or misunderstanding of the magic circle. Neither Huizinga nor Salen and Zimmerman – though their approaches differ significantly – suggest a hard disconnect between the real and the playful, or the quotidian and the special, but rather promote the idea of a perceived or felt difference; a separation in a metaphoric

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[32] Arguably, this minor point is an important part in Huizinga's overall argument of the centrality of play in culture, which means that it is minor in form – appearing in the book only a few times – but not in function.

sense, brought about by a playful mode of being, and useful in understanding the design and culture of games and play. As Stenros notes, despite a wide variety of scholars and disciplines having discussed the merits and shortcomings of similar concepts (2015, 132–133; 2012), and although there is no single opinion on the matter, most evidence points to the fact that "play *feels* separate, it is often socially treated as separate, and it is culturally sometimes officially and institutionally recognized as separate" (2015, 133, emphasis in original).

This affective ordering of activities and headspaces into viscerally felt differences does not, of course, only apply to games and play but is more generally an aspect of life that is only accentuated in games and play. The everyday is impossible to exhaustively categorize or interpret, but to make sense of anything, individuals accept certain generally shared points of reference for understanding the world and events in it. A hospital feels different than a restaurant, and the actions accepted at a party differ from those at a work meeting. In this way, we can discuss the concept of everyday life as infinitely variable but ultimately interpretable situations that we understand through sets of subjectively formed but collectively shared primary frameworks or assumptions about the world (Goffman 1986, 26) – the constant social boundary-work of the everyday, which is present in play as well.

These primary frameworks can support additional frameworks of interpretation. Someone seeing children running around on a playground would likely assume that the children are playing. However, were the children playing, for example, an improvised game of intergalactic dodgeball, they would have turned a fairly widely shared conception of playground play into a more specific one (using particular rules for running while throwing and catching balls) and added to it the fiction of intergalactic dodgeball. This is clear to all who partake in the game but ambiguous to those who do not. The players inhabit a mediated mode of reality where everyday life is linked with an additional set of interpretive cues; in this case, the rules and realities of a game.

As this takes place in a shared world with shared primary frameworks, the children are, of course, not immune to the effects of the world within which the play world is established. There seems, then, to be a border of play present that, on the one hand, separates play from its surroundings and, on the other hand, allows the surroundings to enter the situation (for example, by having the children be cautious in throwing a ball when someone walks past the playground) or, in extreme cases, to destroy it (for example, when play is interrupted by the anger of the passerby whose hat was knocked off by an errant ball).

This border, then, does not remove play from the world. It does, however, alter it by excluding some aspects that in other situations would be more relevant. Play, as indeed any social situation, "provides a world for its participants, but the character and stability of this world is intimately related to its selective relationship to the

wider one" (Goffman 1972, 71). In this way, situations depend on constant negotiation and maintenance of boundaries, which, in play, can be characterized as the whole purpose of the lusory attitude (Suits 2014, 40) discussed earlier. This also suggests that the magic circle is not about the separation of play and everyday, but rather that the separating quality of the magic circle – the one that makes one situation feel different from another – is more related to transformation (Montola 2012a, 52). The magic circle is the negotiation and consent-creation required to formulate the playful encounter. It describes the change in concrete and potential actions of the situation as well as their material effects on how the situation is felt, and as such is, for the purposes of this work, an event of managing affect.

What the magic circle of games and play, based on Huizinga, Salen and Zimmerman, Stenros, Montola, and Goffman, does – or rather, what the participants do and the results of which are here *understood as the magic circle* – is that it contextualizes situations in order to enable or help in meaning-making and continued sustaining of the encounter. The "magic" of the magic circle is not in transporting players to another domain or lathing them with some mythical form of immersion, but in the power of (re)contextualization: of imbuing meaning at once trivial and important. Pokémon characters might be a jumble of images and nigh-abstract numbers, but in the magic circle of playing *Pokémon* – be it through the videogames, card games, toys, or an overall playful existence in and with the media mix – these characters gain a special layer of meaning and desirability. In a very material way, they *feel* different.

Play, therefore, creates temporary worlds, but more importantly it changes the way we exist in the more or less permanent world of our everyday reality. The power of games and play resides as much in the imaginative fantasy they introduce to the everyday as in the modes of being they allow for us within that day-to-day world itself. It is the magic circle, as the conceptual idea of a porous and ephemeral border between these worlds and modes of being, that allows players and researchers alike to attend to this multitude of realms and existence, and it is to this combination of worlds and play I situate my reading of *Pokémon*'s media mix and its affects.

2.3   A playground of texts

This thesis is a reading of *Pokémon* and its affective elements. I use a wide theoretical framework to map the way, but fundamentally everything is grounded in the idea of reading videogame and media texts and the way these texts circulate in and around the franchise and its culture, and in so doing affectively shape that culture. Having established what I mean by games, videogames, and play in the previous section, I now address the basics of reading them: how videogames can be considered media texts and studied as such.

2.3.1   What is a text?

In the humanities, "text" holds a position as a flexible description for various objects of interest and analysis. Broadly, text can be understood as an interpretable and structured object to make meaning from (McKee 2003, 4; Lister et al. 2008, 391). More specifically, it is a theoretical construct of co-produced meaning: potentialities and the activation of those potentialities in the embodied, and often pleasurable, process of reading (Barthes 1977a, 162; 1977b, 146; Culler 2002, 34, 77–78). As such, texts are a field of ongoing interpretations and readings that participate in the formation of the text itself.

Keyed to the specificities of mass-produced media commodities and their oscillation from artifact to text and from produced to consumed, Richard Johnson has sketched a useful meta-approach to the research of texts (Johnson 1986–1987, see Figure 1). In his argument, studies and methods focusing on production, text, and lived cultures can be mapped onto a circuit of cultural production and consumption that depicts textual processes as well as their research, highlighting the theoretical and practical plurality of texts, and the ongoing process of creation and interpretation in them.

Johnson suggests an approach to cultural products that does not emphasize any one point in the process of creation and reception, nor assumes that the process ever actually starts from one point and ends in another. Conversely, Johnson's model suggests *moments* (ibid., 46, 58) of production and consumption that affect each other and, thus, act as the ever-shifting setting for texts and readings, which, of course, are also part of this selfsame process. In the model, different aspects of producing, reading, and everyday life are combined to achieve an understanding of their nuances and relations. Each aspect of the text's cycle "depends upon the others and is indispensable to the whole" yet also "is distinct and involves characteristic changes of form" (ibid., 46). Crucially, Johnson notes that different methods grant access to different parts of the circuit while oftentimes leaving others hidden (ibid., 45–46). In other words, Johnson places emphasis on production and reception, but ultimately sees their study as part of a singular pursuit in which texts are not simply

the results of production but themselves produce – or help produce – new texts, and in which the consumption of a product is not necessarily incumbent on only reception but instead also stimulates derivative works and new forms of labor (ibid., 57–58). Johnson's circuit has, for my work, functioned as a map of sorts: of relations and points of importance to address and keep in mind while constructing my reading from cultural history, personal experiences, earlier studies, interactions with fans, and textual artifacts circulating in and around *Pokémon*.
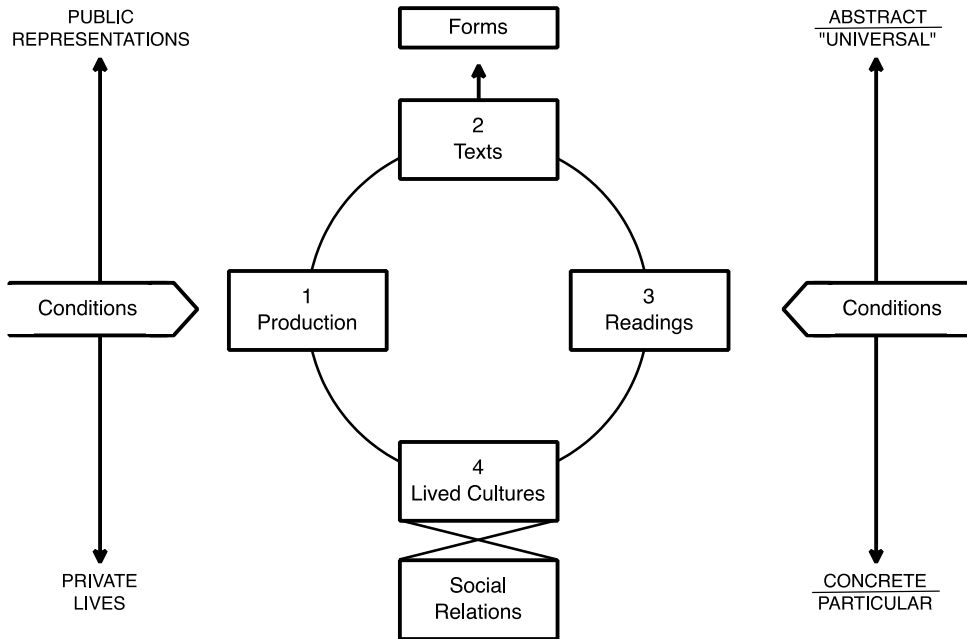
Figure 1. Diagram of the "circuit of the production, circulation and consumption of cultural products" (Johnson 1986–1987, 46–47).

In this way, textual analysis, at least in the form applied in this thesis, focuses on the whole assemblage of cultural action and reaction that constitutes the lifespan of the text. Moreover, the text is not the actual object of research but the tool through which the object can be reached. The actual objects of interest are the "cultural forms which [the text] realizes and makes available" (ibid., 62). For *Pokémon*, this means that through its texts I can abstract and examine, for example, the procedural forms of affection that the texts reflect and propagate. As Sara Ahmed points out, reflecting on her work with reading texts for their affective forms, "although the book involves close readings of such texts, it is not 'about' those texts" (2014, 14). The affects of the text and the reader are the focus of her (and my) work, yet the texts themselves are necessarily foregrounded as the research material, as they act as the formal and

oftentimes material markers for these affects and the potentials that they convey and reveal something about how our worlds are produced.

Media mixes are composed of a multitude of texts and textual relations that form authorial as well as reader-specific storyworlds. Each reader builds their own view of *Pokémon* out of the plethora of texts available to them, but *Pokémon* also exists as something of a grand supertext, the designed and produced full array of components, stories, media, and products that comprise its full media mix. It is a franchise of textual relations that aims at affective resonance through a distributed network of texts within, and *as*, its media mix supersystem. As such, I conceptualize *Pokémon* as a text *and* as a collection of texts; a playground of texts that comprises individual as well as collective texts, all facilitating affective forms of play with and within their worlds.

2.3.2 Videogames as media texts

Analysis of a sprawling collection of texts like *Pokémon* necessarily takes place outside games as well, but as the *Pokémon* videogames are the de facto core of the franchise as well as the primary object of my reading, much of the research presented in this thesis, regardless of media, inevitably relates to videogame texts and their operational logics. For this reason, I examine here how videogames function as media texts.[33]

Tanya Krzywinska offers a broadly applicable definition of videogames as texts. In her holistic terms, videogame texts are combinations of their representational and systemic qualities that together "shape, through certain designer-determined limitations, the potential for 'being' and 'doing' things in the game-world" and eventually lead to a "ludic and aesthetic experience" (Krzywinska 2007, 103). Beyond shaping the beings and doings of the player–game assemblage, videogame texts, as any texts (as per Johnson 1986–1987), can be seen to settle on an overall circuit of production, consumption, and integration into everyday life. To expand on these, I will next address how the videogame text, as discussed above, can be understood as a procedural rule-bound object that structures the players' actions while also being structured by them in return, and connect videogames to wider discourses of production and consumption.

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[33] By using the term "media text" I wish to highlight that some, if not most, texts have particular associations and affordances based on the media they are founded on.

2.3.2.1   Ergodic texts and the readers' agency

In his seminal work, Espen Aarseth suggests new terminology for addressing systemic and interactive texts such as hypertexts, computer games, and MUDs (Aarseth 1997). These systems, which he calls *cybertexts,* are curious in that they center attention "on the consumer, or user, of the text" (ibid., 1997, 1) and challenge the notion of reading by requiring active, sometimes even strenuous, participation to be accessed. They are what Aarseth calls *ergodic texts*, meaning that they require nontrivial effort to traverse (ibid., 1, 9).

Whereas non-ergodic texts are typically inert, only changing on the level of interpretation, ergodic texts require participation already at the stage of constructing the very text interpreted. Their traversal contains exertion of effort, the possibility of failure to proceed, and a sort of intimacy derived from successfully authoring one's own path and the resulting interpretation (ibid., 4). Interpretation and reading take place as a result of joint creation: the player controls their traversal of the text but so does the text – or rather its designers – guide the player to traverse it.

Hence, when analyzing an ergodic text, it is not enough to bring out the text in play and then read it, but to realize that the player position is crucial for the way the text is being traversed and built. Analyzing the player position – the becoming-as-text of the reader – is just as important for understanding the videogame text as looking at the game artifact itself. Of course, most texts have material and ergodic requirements through the act of reading and interpretation alone and are formed as the result of an encounter between the reader and the text, but in videogames this material and embodied textuality (see Keogh 2018) of requiring participation from the player is a paradigmatic notion of the creation and traversal of the text, for which ergodicity acts as an apt shorthand.

This textual construction, volatility, and intimacy closely links ergodic media to the notion of agency. The videogame text functioning on the joined actions of the game and the player suggests that there is something important in this interplay. Agency, as the user's potential to affect the text (as well as the text's way of structuring the experience of the player), is one way of understanding this. Janet Murray has defined agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (1997, 126). Murray later expanded the general term of agency – originally offered as a more analytically potent alternative to *interaction* (ibid., 128) – to encompass designed forms of agency in fiction, specifically. Dubbing it *dramatic agency*, she suggests that "the experience of agency within a procedural and participatory environment that makes use of compelling story elements" (Murray 2012, 417–418) is a particular form of agency that describes how a player can perceive and manifest their agency within dynamic storyworlds. In this way, agency can be used to describe how a player is made complicit in the systems of a played media, feeling responsible for the actions taken

within the framework of possibility afforded to them. Furthermore, as Noah Wardrip-Fruin suggests, agency operates on desire (2009, 344–345). It is effectively the totality of actions the system allows or recognizes but also to the use of which the system often attempts to motivate. In this way, agency can also be viewed as a formation of desires and possibilities to act on those desires as a shared process between the ergodic text and the reader.

To understand these arrangements between the authors, texts, and readers, and their coming together in the activation of the text, we can turn to *procedural rhetoric* as a theory for how a videogame text can be read for its persuasions.

2.3.2.2   Procedural rhetoric

Leaning on Murray's notion of the key properties of digital environments (1997, 71), Ian Bogost (2007) argues that *procedurality* is useful for understanding videogames, software artifacts, and computational systems. Processes in general are ideological and social constructs that structure behavior and actions (ibid., 2007, 3–4). In computers, procedurality – as the sum of the rules, possibilities, and agencies a system affords – becomes a term to describe expression as it arises from a system and its processes, and *procedural rhetoric* is the "practice of authoring arguments through processes" (ibid., 29) as well as a way for examining how these arguments are produced and how they travel in the circuit of a text's lifespan.

For Bogost, videogame play is about utilizing and exploring the possibility space afforded by the game's rules (2007, 43). As he writes, "in a procedural representation like a videogame, the possibility space refers to the myriad configurations the player might construct to see the ways the processes inscribed in the system work" (ibid., 42). In such a setting, the act of analyzing the procedural rhetoric of a text is to read for this possibility space and the rules that govern it. In essence, this requires "playing a videogame or using procedural system with an eye toward identifying and interpreting the rules that drive that system" (ibid., 64), which Bogost likens to the acts of literary or film critics interpreting a novel or a movie.

Examples of procedural rhetorical analyses – particularly as pertaining to Japanese videogames – are numerous (for example, Grau 2016; Harper 2011; Voorhees 2009). Bogost himself offers a reading of the procedural and affective expression of Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo EAD 2001) and its transmedia system (ibid., 266–275). What these works share is an idea that ideologies, politics, and cultural arguments are embeddable to videogames (as they are in any text), either actively to make a conscious argument or circumstantially, as a result of unconscious biases that influence design choices. In either case, the authors of the procedural system structure the activity of engaging with the system (see Schut 2007, 215;

Frasca 1999; 2003, 232–233), and procedural rhetoric, in turn, enables analysts to attune to these methods of structuring as well as the messages they shape.

Procedurality and procedural rhetoric have been criticized for lacking an understanding and praxis of play (for an extensive summary of the critique, see Stenros 2015, 124–130). For Sicart, focusing on the possibility space of games and the procedural rhetoric arising from this structured space of experience suggests a deterministic take on games, inscribing meaning-making power to an inert artifact (2011). Despite his critical stance, Sicart does see merit in proceduralist views. The point of his criticism, thus, seems to be not in abandoning proceduralism but in arguing that even in procedural systems play remains a highly influential force in the meaning-making process.

Similarly, Stenros points out that the crucial sticking point of the argument against procedurality is that, in the end, "the thing being read is not the systemic artefact, but the player experience" (2015, 127), something procedural rhetoric (and proceduralism in general) supposedly misses. Stenros, therefore, frames procedural rhetoric and proceduralist views as a *game-artefact approach* and the more play-oriented analyses suggested by Sicart, for example, as a *game-activity approach* (ibid., 128–129), and suggests that there are uses for both – separately and together.

With these lines of critique in mind, I do not regard play and artifact as separate for the purposes of reading the overall text of *Pokémon*. Instead, I read them as inseparable parts of the same process. That is, in gameplay there is the procedural system, the act of playing according to its intended processes, and the moment of experiencing freedom from – or domination over – these elements in a playful dialogue between the player and the game.

For the design and development of videogames, this process means that a game – and therefore its procedural rhetoric – is never designed as a readymade totality but more as a guideline or expected outcome (see also Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 168, 67; Järvinen 2008,102). Therefore, in this thesis I view the text of *Pokémon* as made in the artifact, in the performance with it and in a wider social and discursive setting where this conjoined process is actualized from person to person.

2.3.2.3   Participation and paratextuality: the shared and material context of textual creation in videogame play

Zooming out from the text and its creation in play, it is clear that the creation and reception of a videogame text is not limited nor reducible to the artifact or its playing. Beyond them, videogames are developed, marketed, and distributed in wider paratextual (Genette 1997; Consalvo 2007, 9) and participatory (Jenkins 1992, 23–24, 46) cultures, all taking part in the creation of what can, theoretically, be seen as the total text(s). In this production – as is inferable from earlier – there is an exchange

of meaning-making and production between the videogame system, the producers who made it, the players who engage with this system, and the sociocultural and material setting in which the text is created and read.[34] In such a context, the authorship of the text falls over a wide range of participants.

The players of course are the arbiters of their own experience, but they also take part in the overall cultural shaping of the text by forming fan communities, influencing opinions and interpretations in social situations, and redefining the text through claims of ownership in reading and in, for example, fan fiction, fan art, and fan theories. In addition to being players, then, these people wield definitional and creative power that rivals that of the original – and in the context of popular culture, often commercial – producers. In this sense, players are in various measures *consumers*, *users*, *audiences*, and *readers*, as well as *authors* of derivative works and discourses. I use these terms throughout this work in a largely synonymous yet connotatively conscious way, acknowledging the varying nuances between these words.

Likewise, the developers who create the artifact hold significant power over textual creation, but even there the process is typically conducted in co-operation and co-creation. Large-scale videogames like *Pokémon* are rarely made by any single author, and while in the case of *Pokémon,* for example, the key figures (Tajiri Satoshi, Masuda Junichi, and Sugimori Ken in particular) are given a lot of credit, the fact remains that the games have been created by large teams, in processes involving a widely varying scale of individual contributions. I acknowledge this authorial breadth in the terms *developers, designers,* and *producers* – depending on the nuance required in a given situation – throughout this thesis when addressing the production-side of the videogame text.[35]

Additionally, the players and the developers are only two nodes in a network that goes well beyond this dichotomy (Bogost 2009; Apperley and Jayemane 2012; Street 2013; Manovich 2001a). Game consoles, the production and history of their physical form, the raw materials that go into them, the online infrastructures of software, hardware and labor, and the corporate web of organizations, funders, and stakeholders all contribute to the transnational and distributed creation of the videogame text and its convergent (Jenkins 2006b) deployment to everyday.

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[34]   As is also inferable from earlier, this tension is not unique to videogames but is rather a crucial phenomenon in all texts and reading, as suggested by Barthes (1977a, 163; see also Barthes 1977b, 146) and Fiske (2000, 537). Videogames generally being interactive objects, however, foreground the theme of co-creation.

[35]   In this acknowledgement of the group-focused nature of game development, I follow, e.g., Martin Roth's approach to the production of Japanese videogames (Roth 2017).

This wider network serves as an apt reminder about the materiality and embodied nature of (digital) texts. For Hayles, the materiality of a text is, first and foremost, a marker of the text's dependence on social, cultural, and technological processes that go beyond the text but which are also reflected within it (Hayles 2005, 103). Much like arguing that the processes of software and hardware must be accounted for in understanding a media text founded on them, Hayles calls for understanding text as dependent "on the substrate in which it is instantiated" (Hayles 2005, 102) rather than abstracted and dematerialized for the purposes of treating all texts as alike. In the context of digital texts in particular, Hayles asks, "why not explore the possibilities of texts that thrive on the entwining of physicality with informational structure?" (ibid.), suggesting that digital texts should not be removed from the material reality of the vessels in which they are embedded, or the materiality of the body that reads them.[36]

Hayles addresses texts as assemblages where paratextual and textual elements join with the materiality and media-specificity of the work (ibid., 105–106). In this way, the text can be seen as grounded in materiality, combining elements from its core body as well as derivative or distributed paratextual fractions, all coming together as a collection of potentialities and actualities: a text at once theoretical and realized.

The videogame text, then, forms a wider ecosystem – what I previously called a playground of texts in connection with *Pokémon*. A videogame, in terms of the totality of its textual framework, becomes a *possibility*: "It doesn't matter if any particular player is aware of every aspect of this extended 'game;' it's a collective and *potential* reality, a transmedia, multidimensional grid of possibilities surrounding any given game" (Jones 2008, 10, emphasis in original; see also Harviainen and Rapp 2018). That is, the videogame text becomes a theoretical totality that is guided by the videogame and playing it, but also shaped by the paratextual elements that contribute to its composition as well as the experiences gained from it.

2.3.3   Playing and reading the videogame text

Ergodicity, agency, and procedurality are ways to describe key elements of the action–reaction relationship between the player and the videogame text. They also illustrate the mechanisms through which the border of play, the transformation of a situation into play, is formed in videogames. As ergodic texts, videogames require (and in agency also admit) acts from players, and through the resulting play, yield

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[36]   For a thorough investigation of Hayles' embodied textuality in the phenomenology of videogame play, see Keogh (2015; 2018).

arguments and create meaning. In a wider context, they settle into the changing paradigm of consuming and producing that is structured by technology and wider (para)textual contexts.

In this way, videogames can be seen as designed spaces where the developers and players alike negotiate their interactions with the technological and cultural aesthetic of the videogame, and in such a way construct, co-create, and perform the media texts that form the individual experiences as well as wider discourses of videogames as texts.

In this thesis, I organize my reading of *Pokémon* videogames and their surrounding media mix through the overall approach of textual analysis, complimented with zoomed-in strips of close reading. In other words, the approach I take is a reading that attempts to provide possible and likely (but by no means definite) interpretations of texts, based on the analyzed content and its contexts, characterized broadly as textual analysis (McKee 2003; Hughes 2007), combined with closer reading that "entails a deep immersion into the experience of a work" and which, epistemologically, "relies on the highly idiosyncratic insights of the individual theorist in order to explicate nuances of the work" (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2001, 301; see also Smethurst 2015, 19). In order to account for the affective nuances of the text in textual analysis and close reading, I draw on affect theory and its reading methods (see below as well as 2.5).

Such combination of wider contextualization and closer reading is described by Fürsich (2009, 247–248) as a vital methodological construct for textual analysis: she, much like Johnson (1986–1987), stresses the importance of understanding the text close-up, but also of being able to see the wider circulation of texts and their social construction among both producers and consumers (Fürsich 2009, 248). The key element that makes media texts – and textual analysis along with them – worthwhile is the position media texts occupy in "a distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding" (ibid., 238) that allows researchers to access the possibilities of a text as collaboratively produced pieces of culture (ibid., 244). In order to achieve that, the critical examination of the text must happen on several levels and take in more than general end-user reactions on the one hand and individual textual moments on the other. As made apparent by Johnson's circuit of cultural products (1986–1987, 46–47) discussed earlier, the text is a process in a longer chain of events, the examination of which – in any detail or scope – necessarily requires that the scholar maneuvers on several levels of analytic attention.

Furthermore, this approach to texts supports exploring mediated realities produced by, for example, *Pokémon*. Textual analysis essentially aims for and produces information about the version of reality a given text brokers: it attempts to answer what the imbued as well as attributed ideologies and perspectives attached to the text are and how the text represents as well as shapes the reality around it. This,

in turn, allows for the examination of the ideological apparatus this mediated reality relies on and produces. As such, textual analysis, as applied here, is a way to understand and theorize practices of sense-making through and with texts (McKee 2003, 15).

2.3.3.1   Playing as a method

As discussed earlier, videogames are created as media textual artifacts, but their textuality forms and is shaped in play, in the enactment of the games' process, through the efforts of the players. In such a way, videogames are "playable texts" (Carr 2009, 1) that form in dialogue between the game as an artifact and the artifact in motion, as played.

The significant result of this view is that the text of a videogame is read in play, even if these readings rarely rely solely on playing. That is, play is not the only focus of a textual analysis of a videogame, but it is an important part regardless. It is a way of seeing what the text becomes in practice (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 6). Indeed, as Stenros points out, there is a historical, practical, and ideological tradition among game studies scholars and literature to appeal on playing as a vital component of any methodology aimed at making sense of games (2015, 40).[37]

Frequently cited examples of play as a reading method – or more broadly, play as a research method – include the concepts of "analytical play" (Mäyrä 2008, 165) and "strata of engagement" (Aarseth 2003, 6). For Mäyrä, playing is a vital component in "any methodology of game studies" (Mäyrä 2008, 165). He is careful to emphasize that analytical play differs from leisurely play and that the range of games the researcher plays ought to go beyond their personal favorites (ibid.) in order for the play-work to enable wide knowledge of games and culture. Furthermore, rather than a method in itself, the concept of analytical play is a wrapper for various researcher-specific processes and methodological details that aim at a thorough understanding of the game being analyzed.

Aarseth, on the other hand, describes seven different ways of analytic play, through what he calls "strata of engagement" (Aarseth 2003, 6). These different modes are arranged from cursory to expert participation, implying a gradient of mastery and an overall focus on skill that he sees as an important part of the research process (ibid.). Although I do not fully subscribe to Aarseth's skill-based

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[37]   This is especially relevant for the topic of this thesis since much of the formative work on *Pokémon* has been done without engaging in personal *Pokémon* play (see e.g., Allison 2006a; Tobin, J. 2004). As Aarseth points out: "When others play, what takes place on the screen is only partly representative of what the player experiences" (Aarseth 2003, 3).

categorization, it is nevertheless useful in showing that play as a research method is not a monolithic practice, but rather a variety of modes, each with different motivations, goals, and outcomes. The way a researcher plays is ultimately formed on a case-by-case basis, depending on the skills and intentions of the analyst as well as the requirements set by the research.

While less widely circulated, Stenros's notion of "scholarly play" (Stenros 2015, 44) is also useful here. Stenros has used playing as one of the methods for his ludological examination of play and games because "it is the best way to access some of the data, and to contextualize existing data" (ibid., 43). By positioning themselves in relation to the games analyzed and the culture surrounding these games, and from there accessing the game as a player-researcher, scholars can gain valuable information through play, even if at the cost[38] of implicating themselves in the process. Furthermore, given how videogames as ergodic objects expect player activation, sometimes playing is the only way to reach the object – or some part of it – studied (Karhulahti 2013).

Stenros, much like Mäyrä, discusses playing games as a way of developing a gaming literacy; enabling a better understanding of games in general and the culture around them. Stenros describes it as "playing for context" (Stenros 2015, 48). In such a way, Stenros, as well as Mäyrä and Aarseth, highlight playing as a method to access one's data and to situate it in relation to other games and playful phenomena. For all intents and purposes, it is synonymous with reading, except that these methods emphasize the need to partake in playing the game, rather than reading on its periphery.

2.3.3.2 Reading play

Despite much attention given to the importance of playing as a method and as a way of, in essence, reading the videogame text, there are no cookie cutter models for the way this play-reading ought to be conducted in practice and connected to other methodological strains in theory. Moreover, even if such models did exist (and Mäyrä and Aarseth come close), leaning on singular methods would be ill-advised for textual analysis. As Fürsich points out – highlighting the strength as well as the

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[38] The practical cost for many scholars is the multidisciplinary methodological weight of deflecting potential criticism that comes with personally participating in the phenomenon one studies. For the sort of cultural, affective, and textual analysis I do here, such involvement is expected, yet in many fields that hold positions of power in, for example, game studies, using one's own experiences and interpretations as an explicit part of the research process is anathema to good practice. For a broader epistemological point on this, see Ahmed (2014, 19n22); see also Stenros (2015, 42–44) and Montola (2012b, 312–313) for game studies approaches.

weakness of the method – in the context of textual analysis, the method "does not draw from a united intellectual and methodological tradition" and consequently is "often poorly defined, and is employed in myriad ways. Its history is similarly fractured" (Fürsich 2009 240, see also McKee 2003, 2; Hughes 2007, 250). It is a piecemeal approach that takes scholarly tools and wields them for analysis but does not subscribe to one historical methodological continuum or established practice. As Childs puts it, loaning from Foucault (2005), reading a text is a process of "placing a grid over the text to see what effect this recontextualization has" (Childs 2006, 8) wherein the grid can be made of practically anything that comprises the theoretical frameworks and methodological details that go into the reading.

Such methodological plurality is familiar to analysts of videogames and new media. As Dovey and Kennedy point out, there must exist "recognition of methodological hybridity" in studying videogames as media texts (2006, 86; see also Mäyrä 2009, 5; Fernández-Vara 2015, 8), as the "intermedial representational strategy" of videogames is, in itself, already hybrid in nature (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 88; see also Linderoth 2015). That is, methodological hybridity is required to research something that is, as an artifact and an activity, a hybrid to begin with. Furthermore, as argued earlier, it is not only the artifact and its modes of operation that are manifold and hybrid in videogames, but the whole participatory and convergent culture of their shared creation and consumption is also founded on a mix of developers, audiences, transmedia product networks, and the various means of creating meaning between them.

To understand such layered and generative media, Dovey and Kennedy suggest approaches to analyzing videogames that favor the use of a multitude of conceptual tools rather than clear-cut models. The approach to a videogame text, then, is guided by "forms of attention" (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 85): analytical inroads into understanding both the ludological structure of game texts as well as their place in a wider context of culture (ibid., 86), all experienced as embodied (ibid., 104). Dovey and Kennedy exemplify this through a list of eight critical focuses (ibid., 120–121) that help shape these forms of attention and aim at bringing about an analytic framework for textual analysis of videogames. The focus areas they suggest for readings are genre, production, materiality, rule structure, possibility space, player position, feedback, and personal as well as social meaning in everyday life. These are not intended as a scholarly bucket list but as a tool for adjusting one's analysis to cover the basic domains of constructed meaning in any given videogame text. Rather than uniform analytical models or formal rigidity, this method of investigation foregrounds using and developing bespoke critical approaches as informed by the requirements of the text and the research.

In this way, forms of attention bear close resemblance to analytical lenses used in close reading and textual analysis of videogames (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum

2011, 305; Carr 2009). Analytical lenses are specific analytical and practical perspectives that a research takes in terms of its methods and objects. Being pre-defined methodological foci as well as theoretical outcomes of the reading (and, as such, of the expertise of the reader), they are both a result of the reading itself as well as apparatuses guiding it.

The primary method of research I use throughout this work is one of playing, reading, and playing as reading, built on the practical and theoretical approaches of the modes of researcher play discussed earlier. This form of reading is guided moment to moment by the forms of attention suggested by Dovey and Kennedy (2006, 120–121), through which I have directed my play and the lines of investigation it has prompted. Rather than using Dovey's and Kennedy's forms of attention formalistically, they had more of a guiding role, chiefly as a handy list of aspects to pay heed to, adjusted and supplanted in the process of this work by other – more precise and interlinked – forms of attention as my reading got more detailed: for example, genre was largely replaced by role-playing games, production by the historical and cultural contexts of the media mix, player position by the Trainer identity, and rule structure by the procedural rhetoric and core gameplay loop of training labor. Furthermore, each of these readings was conducted from the perspective of affection and intimacy – themselves investigated further as analytical lenses and methodological reading tools in Section 2.5.

Overall, the reading was organized through a continuous conceptual mapping to Johnson's circuit of production, circulation, and consumption of cultural products (Johnson 1986–1987, 47; see Figure 1), which allowed me to position my reading moment by moment to a larger whole that encompasses the stages of *Pokémon* media all the way from production to social and cultural dissemination. The texts and their playful and procedural dimensions exist chiefly at the top of the figure, and that is where much of my attention in this thesis is aimed at. But as Johnson reminds, this focus is only useful when it is linked to the other aspects of the text's cycle (ibid., 46), and as has been highlighted in this section, a text is nothing if not a piece of life, imbricated in its acts of everyday production, consumption, and sociocultural existence. For this reason, the texts I read involve a wide cut of Pocket Monster culture. Media and objects such as videogames, toys, animations, comics, character merchandizing, commercials, websites, news articles, interviews, and fan creations connect me to the authored conceptual whole of *Pokémon*, but these texts are augmented with attention paid to mine as well as others' experiences with these texts, the social relations brought about through them, the forms of living they produce, and the ontological complexity they draw around them, all inseparable from each other and ultimately making up the grand supertext of *Pokémon*.

In my reading, therefore, I switch attention between several different modes of media, spatiality, temporality, and subjectivity. At times, I dig deep into details and

experiences, and at others, I attempt to weave extensive contextualization for the things I study. This is an attempt to take in the vast structure of *Pokémon* through personally as well as collectively affective experiences, shared material culture, and an individual informed reading of them all.

This embrace of all things *Pokémon* is an attempt to reach the elusive and complex affects of the phenomenon, but it should not distract from the fact that at its core, the reading is organized around the *Pokémon* videogames and their ludic logic. I use the process of playing and reading *Pokémon* games to guide the work that goes into contextualizing the games vis-à-vis the rest of the franchise and to orient my reading there. It is through play that I view the media mix of *Pokémon* and choose which aspects of it to pull into closer focus and into contact with a variety of theoretical approaches.

Beyond playing and reading media, however, I also maintain what could be called a method of strategic playfulness in accessing the other attractions of *Pokémon's* playground of texts. I do not necessarily play when I visit a Pokémon Center retail store or when I discuss *Pokémon* toys with an enthusiastic child, but I do remain intentionally open to playful modes of being in these situations, taking it seriously (as one does in play) when a child points out that a Mudkip figurine cannot use the move "Flamethrower" and waiting happily in line with fans for rare collectible memorabilia at a Pokémon Center. Seeing as how *Pokémon's* text comprises of social and cultural production of a transmedia whole, these moments of participatory playfulness are as much about enjoying myself as they are about existing in – and thereby also gaining access to – the text itself.

Of course, embracing the relaxed nature of *Pokémon* and throwing myself into a form of indulgent autoplay (Heljakka 2013, 66) where I not only conduct analytic play but also seek strips of pleasurable play does not mean that I forego critical or analytical action in favor of enjoying myself, as Mäyrä cautions by drawing a sharp contrast between pleasurable or leisurely play and "utilitarian" and analytic play (Mäyrä 2008, 165). Rather, enjoyment and playfulness are parts of the formation of an experience of play that I – and indeed anyone engaging in play – read as much as the artifacts themselves. The intention is not to portray play as an affective and frivolous experience to be augmented with the weight of serious scholastic attention introduced to it in analysis but to acknowledge that the act of play, the playfulness that goes into it, and the affective tones carried in them are necessarily part and parcel of the methodology of analyzing games (see Jennings 2015; Sundén 2012a, 2012b), and subsequently an important part of my methodological toolkit.

2.4 Media mixes: Fragmented worlds of production and consumption

Japanese entertainment products such as *Pokémon* are playgrounds of texts where stories and experiences are built in worlds entered through a variety of methods and media. Martin Roth notes that Japanese critics in particular have approached such practices in the production and consumption of texts through "postmodern, contemporary discourses on media and popular culture" (2013, 244). These postmodern discourses circle around the works of Azuma Hiroki, Ōtsuka Eiji, Itō Gō, and the translations and developments of these discourses by equally postmodern scholars such as Marc Steinberg, Thomas Lamarre, and Roth himself.[39] Individually as well as in a shared line of research and theorizing, they suggest ways to navigate research and analysis towards acknowledging the textual and practical multiplicity of Japanese pop cultural production. Common to all these works and authors is a focus on the postmodern production of worlds and stories, operationalized in transmedial frameworks of production and consumption called *media mixes*. In their work, there is an insistence that attention must be directed to the multiplicity of texts and the relations inherent in them; that is, aiming analytical attention to the relations and structures between media as much as to the media themselves.

For the postmodern textual product, such as *Pokémon*, the underlying media environment itself is a vital component in the creation of the texts, meanings, and experiences. Just as readers, viewers, users, and players construct connections between media when they read texts, the media and its materialities also take part in this construction – and not only do they take part, they are specifically designed and created to do so.

2.4.1 Transmedia and entertainment supersystems

An important concept in understanding media mixes as well as the overall production and consumption of entertainment products today is *transmedia*, and the way it has been utilized in the theorization and analysis of, in particular, commercial media entertainment in recent research. Here, it functions as a broad theoretical background for the more specific practices and theories of the media mix.

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[39] Most of these authors align themselves with the postmodern but note that their work is set beyond, outside or conceptually parallel to it (see Steinberg 2012, xi, 211n13; Lamarre 2009, xiv–xv; Azuma 2009, ix; Roth 2013, 244) rather than squarely within the postmodernist tradition. This, of course, is very much in the spirit of postmodernism.

Different fields, disciplines, and scholars have their own more or less established definitions of transmedia, but in broad terms transmedia and its application to media entertainment as used here can be described as the designed and experienced movement of stories, story elements, and experiences from one media to another, so that the parts together bring about a larger whole; typically, a distributed storyworld produced and consumed over time and across different platforms.

As a way of conveying, organizing, and accessing stories, this sort of expansion of stories and characters into various media has been practiced for as long as there have been narrative media (see Johnson 2013; Jenkins et al. 2013, 133; Landow 2015; Mittell 2014, 253). Due to the topic of this thesis, however, I focus on transmedial practices primarily as the economic-affective practice of media creation and consumption in popular culture of the late 1900s, and as such lean especially on the works of Marsha Kinder and Henry Jenkins. They are motivated by attempts at answering questions that arose from mass media entertainment prevalent especially in the 1980s and 1990s, and which still exert influence on popular media today.

An influential and groundbreaking work of transmedial analysis of 1980s and 1990s popular culture comes from Marsha Kinder's exploration of intertextuality in Saturday morning network television (Kinder 1991). This transmedia structure of children's popular culture tracks across media and playthings, effectively turning texts into sites of consumerist desire and intertextual traversal where TV programs, movies, videogames, and toys all refer to each other, the commodity-cultural setting they exist in, and the pop cultural histories they share (ibid., 46). Taken further, this transmedia textuality turns into what Kinder calls an entertainment supersystem, "a network of intertextuality" that is built around a media entity ranging from fictional characters to public pop cultural figures (ibid., 122–123). Differentiating a *super*system from less expansive productions, an entertainment supersystem must contain various media, appeal to a wide range of audiences, encourage collectible products, be highly commodified, and contribute to its own growth and distinctiveness by being a media phenomenon in itself.

After Kinder's influential work, this vein of transmedia theory was further theorized and popularized especially by Henry Jenkins.[40] He approaches transmedia from the angle of storytelling, which, for him, is a practical shorthand for fictional stories and fictional worlds as well as the modes of creating and experiencing them. Already in his early work, Jenkins links transmedia storytelling with the concept of media convergence (Jenkins 2003), but it was not until 2006 that he brought them together more formally (Jenkins 2006b) under the broad rubric of convergence culture. In these seminal texts, Jenkins introduces transmedia storytelling as a form

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[40] For a broader review of transmedia histories and modalities, see Dena (2009) and Harvey (2015).

of structuring a storyworld and its surrounding franchise so that each product under it is "self-contained enough to enable autonomous consumption" but also enables reading across media (Jenkins 2003), leading Jenkins to establish transmedia storytelling as "the art of world making" (Jenkins 2006b, 21). In these transmedia productions, audiences are "information hunters and gatherers" for whom much of the pleasure of an entertainment product comes from the experience of exploring, defining, and expanding the transmedia world; "tracking down character backgrounds and plot points and making connections between different texts" (Jenkins 2003).[41]

Jenkins has kept rearticulating and refining the concept of transmedia and transmedia storytelling in his later works (Jenkins 2007; 2011a), arriving at a concise definition:

> Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (Jenkins 2011a)

In this version of transmediality, one sees a clear emphasis on the organization, distribution, and circulation of media. Indeed, in a critical jab, Eskelinen notes that Jenkins is more occupied with transmedia story-*selling* than transmedia storytelling (2012, 332, 335–336). While an astute observation, it highlights how stories are not the point (nor, as Eskelinen points out, the strength) of Jenkins's transmedia storytelling, which instead enables turning critical attention to the fragmented forms of fiction, media, and use(r)s that ultimately form into stories, worlds, and feelings, all sold to the audience.

Furthermore, while oft-cited, the above definition only describes "one logic for thinking about the flow of content across media" (Jenkins 2011a), in a larger cultural paradigm that contains various other transmedial practices and logics. A transmedia text such as *Pokémon* might thus employ transmedia storytelling[42] but also develop, for example, transmedia branding, play, and performance. Rather than a strictly

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41   "Hunter-gatherers" is an interesting parallel to Jenkins' older term "textual poachers" (1992); active readers who sustain their leisure by utilizing in various ways the bits and pieces of texts they come across and enjoy. The rhetoric of hunters and gatherers appears consistently throughout his later works on transmedia and convergence (Jenkins 2006b, 21; 2007; 2011a; 2011b).

42   Indeed, though he does not analyze it at length, *Pokémon* and its various transmedial practices is a frequent example of transmedia usage for Jenkins (Jenkins 2003; 2006b, 128; 2007; Jenkins et al. 2009, 86–87).

defined formal concept, transmedia is, for Jenkins, a collection of practices, logics, and affective strategies, the only unifying aspect of which is that they are all products of the wider participatory and convergent media culture (Jenkins 2006a; 2006b).

2.4.2   Media mixes and convergent media in Japan

Transmedia is often evoked in discussions of the intertextual creation of franchises in mass media production and consumption. However, when discussing media production in – and expanding globally from – Japan, a more culturally and historically precise term is the media mix.

To carry on from theories of transmedia and convergence, media mix production can be seen as a part of Japanese convergence culture: a geographically and culturally particular take on the global paradigm shifts in media, technology, and entertainment. Originating as a concept in the 1960s and gaining wider traction as a term of art among Japanese marketers, popcultural producers, and academics during the 1980s, media mix has recently been internationally developed and discussed in particular through the works of Azuma (2009), Ōtsuka (2010), Ito (2008), Lamarre (2009), Steinberg (2012; 2015), Allison (2006a), and Jenkins (2006b). Common to all these is an understanding of media mixes as Japan-derived forms of producing synergetic media products as well as ways of engaging with them, as seen in media franchises that deal with polymorphous material and conceptual fictions.

Arguably, as is the case with transmedia as well, there are as many ways of framing media mixes as there are media mix producers, consumers, and scholars. In this thesis, I draw from a genealogy of media mixes established in Marc Steinberg's works. In particular, I will focus on the three distinct media mix modalities that Steinberg identifies: *anime media mixes, marketing media mixes,* and *gameic media mixes*.

2.4.2.1   A multitude of mixes

Steinberg places a pivotal point in the origins and further development of media mixes to Tezuka Osamu's 1963 animated TV series *Tetsuwan Atomu* (Steinberg 2012, 39–40), which Tezuka sold to Fuji TV for far cheaper than what the actual production costs were. Offsetting the cost of such a maneuver, Tezuka hoped that character merchandizing, licensing the likeness of the hero Atomu, and exporting the series abroad would cover the losses incurred by the lowered price (ibid., 39–40; 222n3). Aside from being "the first media mix" (Steinberg 2015, 40), this was also the advent of what Steinberg calls the *anime media mix* (Steinberg 2012, xii): media mix productscapes revolving on the specific affordances and historic lineages of the anime form and its production.

This development coincides with the rise of "media mix" as a marketing term. Curiously, in the same year as *Tetsuwan Atomu* trailblazed its nascent anime media mix practices, the advertisement journal *Senden kaigi* forwarded the media mix as a strategy for distributed and media-savvy marketing (ibid., 139). This *marketing media mix* was a response to the early years of media convergence, when consumers could – and increasingly had to – be reached through a variety of media, whose advertisements and marketing messages had to be carefully coordinated and distributed.

Although varying in purpose and structure, marketing media mixes overlap to some extent with, for example, anime media mixes. The clearest distinction between the two is that marketing media mixes use media synergy to sell a particular product, whereas the version of media mixes used in, for example, anime, manga, and game franchises creates the media mix as a product in and of itself: something that does not necessarily aim at the sale of a specific item other than that of a distributed world-building between producers and consumers, and the motivation for consumers to partake in that through commercial and affective investment into the media mix. However, the line between the two is a blurry one, as marketing strategies in the affective economics of media production and consumption have also steered increasingly towards selling experiences and emotional connections across media (Jenkins 2006b, 68–69).

Further illustrating the progression and overlap between anime media mixes and marketing media mixes, an important development in the history of media mix production is the entry of the publishing house Kadokawa to convergent media practices. In retrospect, this can be seen as one of the turning points in media mix production from Tezuka's idiosyncratic media mix and overall marketing media mixes towards more particular anime-, manga-, and game-related media mixes.

During what the company calls the "Movies and Media Mix Era" in 1976–1981 (Kadokawa 2018), under the leadership of Kadokawa Haruki[43], Kadokawa began implementing a strategy of production across media where cultivation of product synergies and outsourcing production to distributed affiliates was leveraged to drive sales and garner attention (Zahlten 2017, 102–104). This strategy combined books, films, and music into a mutually synchronized collection of texts that all served to advertise each other, turning, for example, paperback books from singular works to

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[43] A controversial and flamboyant figure, Kadokawa Haruki has been vocal in forwarding Hitler as an inspiration for his media mix strategies. Indeed, regardless of Kadokawa Haruki's personal politics, it remains important to remind of the ideological history that media and marketing industries share with totalizing paradigms such as fascism and capitalism especially given the linkages between media mix production, nationalism, and fascism, (Ōtsuka and Lamarre 2013; Steinberg 2017).

a medium through which information and experiences ranging beyond the printed text could be sold (Hartzheim 2015, 13).

This early media mix strategy is significant not only for the paradigm shift it introduced in publishing but also for providing a setting for Kadokawa Haruki's brother, Kadokawa Tsuguhiko, who would tap on to media mix production with his own endeavors within and without the company throughout the 1980s and beyond. Running Kadokawa Media Office, a subsidiary of the publishing giant led by his older brother Haruki, Tsuguhiko focused on smaller audiences and very specific media. Unlike Haruki, who aimed for a general strategy of combining popular literary works, movies, and music and unleashing this trinity on as broad a public as possible, Tsuguhiko focused on magazines for a more defined demographic, such as fans of anime, manga, videogames, and role-playing games (Steinberg 2012, 174–175), connecting the magazines with the circulation of content between comics, novels, and videogames (ibid.). In this new agile media mix production, it was not rare to see a magazine feature a comic referencing, for example, a video game: a media within media within media, all striving to take part in a wide system of products that open up endlessly to new – yet mutually related and Kadokawa-owned – vistas. Whereas the old-school media mix of Kadokawa Haruki was a rather rigid system of creating synergy between carefully selected media and products, the new media mix strategy of Kadokawa Tsuguhiko opened up the relations between products, making it welcoming to additional components and expansions, and, in particular, emphasizing the versatility and transmedia potential of drawn and animated characters in print and visual media. Although they have a lot in common, the old model is essentially about wrapping a story and a world into a few different packages and then selling those, whereas the new model is more about developing a world and its characters and selling an ever-expanding range of access points (such as magazines, books, videogames and so forth) to it.

Much like Kadokawa Haruki and his marketing and production theories being a vital step in enabling Kadokawa Tsuguhiko's mode of media mix, Tsuguhiko is important in enabling the media mix development of a prolific Japanese author, critic, and ethnographer Ōtsuka Eiji. Under Kadokawa Tsuguhiko, Ōtsuka conducted theorizing and development of cross-media production and consumption and helped create media mix franchises such as *Madara* and *MPD Psycho* in the 1980s and 1990s that served as testing grounds for his theories. Being both a creator of cross-media franchises during Kadokawa's paradigm-setting period as well as an influential researcher[44] of these selfsame practices, Ōtsuka is particularly interesting as a central figure in the diversification of media mixes towards a more content-

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[44] The reach of Ōtsuka's theories is evident in the length at which, for example, Steinberg (2012) and Azuma (2009) lean on them in the crafting of their own theories.

focused worldbuilding activity (as opposed to purely a marketing activity or a product-driven approach that attempts to sell different media but not necessarily a world shared between them). He has called his works "late 1980s marketing theory" (quoted in Steinberg 2010a), and, much like Jenkins, Ōtsuka does not attempt to examine stories and commodified narratives as narratological concepts (or even as "stories", really), but rather as media cultural units of production and consumption. To borrow Eskelinen's (2012) quip, Ōtsuka's works have as much, if not more, to do with story-selling as they do with storytelling. Both Jenkins's and Ōtsuka's works are useful in this thesis precisely because of this quality.

Of particular interest in Ōtsuka's oeuvre is his essay on the production, reproduction, and consumption of narrative, published originally in 1989 and translated into English in 2010. In the essay, titled "World and Variation: The Reproduction and Consumption of Narrative" (Ōtsuka 2010), Ōtsuka develops a theory of the commodification of fiction that hinges on the structuring of a storyworld into discrete products that function as pieces of a wider, almost abstract, overarching world or story. He notes that, for example, episodes of an animated series are *small narratives*: singular pieces of fiction delivered as "fragmentary commodities" (ibid., 107) – that is, commodified pieces of a larger whole – that together imply a collection of settings and events that exist (or that *could exist*) beyond the small narratives themselves. Borrowing a word from animation production, Ōtsuka calls this a "worldview" (*sekaikan)*, and further addresses it, in postmodernist terms, as a *grand narrative* (ibid., 107–108). A media mix product, in this way, appears as a collection of discrete objects all engaged with a shared world and offered as points of access – fetishes of definitional power over an unfolding storyworld – to audiences that enjoy the small narratives as much as the grand narrative unfolding through the fragments consumed.

As Ōtsuka points out, in practice, "what is being consumed is not an individual drama or *thing* but the system itself that was supposedly concealed in the background" (ibid., 109, emphasis in original). However, since the system itself is an abstract network of relations and affective investments, it is commodified as small narratives that promise access to the grand narrative: as episodes of an animation, as playthroughs of a game or as chapters and volumes of manga. This is what Ōtsuka calls "narrative consumption" (2010).

However, Ōtsuka's emphasis on audience consumption is somewhat misleading, as his theory also includes secondary production: participatory and convergent fan-made forays into the grand narrative (ibid., 109–110). A successful media mix for Ōtsuka is one that basically invites consumers to become "consumers-as-producers" (Steinberg 2012, 179), developing "variations" (Ōtsuka 2010, 112–113) of the original work. As such, not only do the small narratives help in uncovering and creating the grand narrative, but they also grant a degree of definitional power to the

consumer. Through small narratives, the consumer can direct the storyworld to open up into parts that are particularly interesting to them (for example, by focusing on the storylines of particular eras or characters), and furthermore wield this knowledge to create derivative works based on – and within – the grand narrative. Here we see the mode of production familiar from videogames as well, where games and playful products are made with the facilitation of user co-creation in mind.[45]

Offering a small but useful adaptation of Ōtsuka's theory, Azuma expanded on the idea of small and grand narratives in his discussion of *grand nonnarratives* (Azuma 2009, 33–34). Whereas Ōtsuka views storyworlds through two levels of commodified (story) elements – the small narrative and the grand narrative – for Azuma, the grand nonnarrative takes the place of the grand narrative, forming a sort of database of story elements from which producers and consumers create original and derivative works. Although similar to Ōtsuka's theory, Azuma's addition highlights the formal similarity of original and derivative works to a far greater degree than Ōtsuka.

Although Azuma presents this as a historical procession from Ōtsuka's narrative consumption, in practice it would seem that they are reflections of a general development and operation of media mixes not on the axis of temporality but of design and consumption: aspects of which can be found to coexist in most media mixes, and in the understanding of which both Ōtsuka's and Azuma's theories are useful. It is best, then, to understand Ōtsuka's and Azuma's models as different modalities of media mixes, perhaps developed at different temporal junctions, but certainly equally present today in the production and consumption of media mix products.

The final piece of Steinberg's media mix genealogy addresses a central development in Japanese popular culture: the rise of videogames into prominent parts of popular culture. Combining the development of the anime media mix with the media mix conventions of Kadokawa Tsuguhiko and Ōtsuka Eiji that revolved, in part, around videogames and role-playing games – the rising medium of the time – Steinberg suggests a variation of the (anime) media mix that he calls a *gameic media mix* (Steinberg 2015).[46] Gameic media mixes are media mixes structured around games; product networks where games are at the center of the

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[45] Although not based on Ōtsuka's work, Ito's influential definition of media mixes later popularized a similar notion of active social engagement, communitas, personal authorship, and distributed definitional power (Ito 2008, 402–403).

[46] As an alternative, Steinberg suggests "video game media mix" (Steinberg 2015, 42). Although in the article he writes mostly about videogames, it is clear that media mixes can form around other ludic media as well, such as tabletop role-playing games. For this reason, Steinberg's (perhaps unintentionally) more inclusive term "gameic media mix" is preferred here.

"conceptualization and deployment" of the media mix, particularly as seen in late 1980s Kadokawa (ibid., 52).[47]

Playful and gameic qualities are not uniquely the property of 1980s and 1990s Kadokawa media mixes, of course. Looking more broadly, most creative and consumptive practices of transmedia engagement are easily understood through play (Harvey 2015, 7–8). These cross-media entertainment networks enable – or depend on – audience agency and participation and oftentimes frame it through play either explicitly (as is the case in videogames, for example) or implicitly (such as inviting play with world fragments and characters in a media that is not, as such, a game). In this way, media mixes and cross-media productions shape stories and, in particular, the participation and consumption of that story into something that is playful in its formation.

Looking at media mixes through the lens of games and play, media mix and transmedia storytelling resembles the piecemeal performative storytelling found in role-playing games. Instead of straightforward pre-defined stories, a sort of co-operative creation takes place where narrative snippets are created, moved around, and refitted to create what eventually forms into a more or less coherent whole (see Heliö 2004; Montola 2012a, 88–89; Harviainen 2012, 46–49). Instead of a mere superficial likeness of the structure of consumption, the link between role-playing games and media mixes is, to a degree, deliberate. The media mix in its contemporary formulation as the union of content in, mostly, videogame, comic, and animation mediums, connected through character images, active audiences, and a participatory storyworld, was greatly influenced by Kadokawa Tsuguhiko and based in part on his fascination with the publishing and worldbuilding model of US tabletop role-playing games (Steinberg 2012, 181, 255n34; 2015, 50; Jenkins 2013). Not surprisingly, this link is also visible in Ōtsuka's phraseology where media mixes are discussed through concepts such as "game master" and "world", consciously lifted from the vernacular of tabletop role-playing games and their production (Steinberg 2015, 50).

In light of the playfulness of media mixes and transmedia systems, it makes sense to regard most media mix franchises as at least somewhat ludic. In the case of *Pokémon*, however, its commitment to a gamelike structure and the prominence of videogames in its media repertoire invites to regard it as a gameic media mix that elevates its ludic qualities and role-playing sensibilities to a particularly prominent role. The whole media mix of *Pokémon*, having risen from the original videogames, operates on a ludic logic; the games are the reason the world of *Pokémon* works the

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[47]   For further analysis on the paradigm shift from media mixes centered around anime and manga to media mixes centered around videogames, see, for example, Itō (2011).

way it does even in non-game products. In this sense, it is a network of playable media even when not nearly all of the franchise's products are games per se.

The media mix working on the games' logic extends even to the intended consumer role and to the methods of consumption available. Players of the *Pokémon* videogames – and in extension throughout the products of the gameic media mix, all other *Pokémon* audiences – are framed as Trainers; a role crafted equally for playing and purchasing. A Trainer is someone who participates in the culture of *Pokémon*, and since the structure of media mixes suggest that participation in the fiction and fandom of the media mix is founded upon consuming the media mix products, buying and playing become acts of a Trainer as well. Players are Trainers in the variety of videogames, card games, and mobile games *Pokémon* has on offer, but through the gameic media mix of *Pokémon*, all other audiences are also, at least to a degree, players and Trainers.

Through the theories and histories introduced in this section, I established the media mix as a historically, socially, and culturally situated practice of producing popular culture as well as participating in it. Media mixes, here, appear as networks of products and people, held together by investment and interest in the parts of the mix and the whole it creates – the interlocking dance of small and grand narratives that together form worlds to build and stories to sell.

2.4.3   Media mix characters

A key difference between theories of convergence and media mix is in characters. In a way, one could discuss convergence in terms of media; it is about media and their contents coming together, whereas a media mix (or the *anime* media mix and its close relatives at least) is the converging of not just media but more particularly of media *around characters*. Looking at the origins of the anime media mix in *Tetsuwan Atomu* as portrayed by Steinberg (2012), what media mixes added to the already heavily commodified Japanese popular culture of the rising economic times of the 1960s was the focal point of the character as an ubiquitous sign to focus on. No longer were, for example, Meiji Seika's chocolates sold using merely the imagery of popular characters, but rather what was sold were the characters and their worlds as tied to chocolate products, something the media mixes of anime and videogames took further in the coming years.

Ōtsuka points out a similar logic found in the *Bikkuriman* brand of chocolate snacks during the 1980s, where the act of selling cartoon characters as parts of products and products as adorned with the image of these characters functioned as a powerful marketing and media mix strategy (Ōtsuka 2010, 104). In the *Bikkuriman* chocolates, each snack came with a sticker that had a drawing of a character and a snippet of information about that character. As Ōtsuka observes, on their own each

sticker contained scarcely anything more than a minuscule tidbit of information, but when collected and compared, these small snippets began to form relations and causalities, revealing rivalries, betrayals, and background stories: pieces of a grand narrative (ibid., 106). This prompted consumers keen to learn more about the storyworld to keep buying the chocolates. Furthermore, *Bikkuriman's* paradigmatic media mix success also spurred the creation of anime series, films, and videogames. Ultimately, the franchise's focus shifted away from chocolates and into a transmedia structure revolving around its characters and the sale of various products adorned with the images of those characters. Exhibiting a sort of character-led convergence, *Tetsuwan Atomu* and *Bikkuriman* both rely on convergent and cross-media practices which, crucially, are harnessed for the circulation of characters that consumers notice, connect with, collect, and long for – even as they consume otherwise unrelated products such as chocolate.

Focusing on the production side of media mixes, Hartzheim describes media mixes as largely based on characters, with the process of creating media mix products such as anime necessarily relying on the creation, distribution, and recycling of characters. He defines this practice of "character management" (2015, 20, 209) as "the multi-authored process of constructing compelling characters with a variety of industrial functions" (ibid., iii), illustrating how characters perform a variety of tasks for their producers. In media mixes, characters are elements of stories but also elements of commodification; they function as assets from which different products and product relations can be created. This corporate-driven character creation has potential pitfalls, of course, given how engagement with media texts in participatory culture (see 2.3.2.3) also contains the agencies and affordances of the participating audience. That is, this practice of character management, which forms and maintains a media mix to begin with, also involves challenges to the upkeep of that same media mix. As Blom (2020) argues, this is especially apparent in videogames, where on one hand characters follow their media mix's authorial narrative canon but on the other hand also enable players to enact and characterize them in personal ways. This introduces tension between the audience's individual creative agency and the producers' authorial control and requires the producers of a media mix to carefully navigate the transmedial transferrals of characters to minimize interpretive discord and interruptions of player agency.

Characters clearly inhabit – for producers and audiences alike – a vital role in media mixes, but for the topic at hand, two transmedial roles stand out in particular: characters as affective objects and characters as representatives of their storyworlds. Firstly, characters function as targets of affection, offering a fictional but meaningful other for the audience to encounter and form affective contacts with. Although the transmedia storyworld in general is a site of desire and affection (Harvey 2015),

media mixes wrap this affection especially around the easily commodifiable, dispersible, and identifiable characters.

The proliferation of the character into everyday lives of consumers in order to elicit desire is at the core of the media mix strategy (Steinberg 2012, 42). Typically, a media mix's core media such as anime, manga, or videogames are used to set the character up and develop it, but it is the distribution of this nominally established character into a collection of ubiquitous media, merchandizing, and visual signs – the bread-and-butter logistical distribution of media mixes – that truly cements the character as an object of desire, both as a designed property and as a consumed media product. As such, media mixes function as "infrastructures of desire" (ibid., 45) where the circulating character and its image are designed to facilitate as well as capitalize on desire, actualized in the events of advertising and consuming.

This suggests a virtuous cycle of sorts: proliferation increases interest and desire, which in turn increases proliferation. The consumers are, ideally, connected to the franchise via their investment in the characters, which is only fanned further by the growing presence of the character in media and the everyday. The proliferation, then, aims at producing what Nicolle Lamerichs calls an affective process of fan practices, where the consumption of, and engagement with, popular culture can be seen as the accumulation of affective experiences with characters, worlds, and media products (Lamerichs 2014, 194), rather than as singular events or static fan identities.

This is, in a nutshell, what the *Atomu* and *Bikkuriman* media mixes cultivated. It was not the storyworlds or drawn and animated core media of the respective titles that functioned as the (sole) engine of their success but the act of distributing their characters via channels that their audiences followed and that mattered in their lives: candy packaging, stickers, and, vitally, their commodified relations to the core media.

This brings us to the second crucial role characters have in media mixes: characters function as pragmatic as well as conceptual anchors for their franchises. They are brand signals that demarcate products and small narratives as belonging to (or at least linked with) particular storyworlds and grand narratives. Through this, characters function as ambassadors of their fictional worlds; the character is shorthand for the storyworld it belongs to, affixing this relation to the products and media in which the character – or even just its image – appears. In this way, even flimsy chocolate wrappers and cardboard packaging can become firmly attached to a storyworld and its agents.

As Steinberg notes, "the character in the media mix is an entity that both permits a series to diverge (allowing transmedia development) and holds things together (allowing these divergent stories to be read, despite their incongruities, as existing within a larger, yet unitary world)" (Steinberg 2012, 190). Steinberg bases much of his argument on Azuma, for whom media mix characters – as highly visible and

mobile aspects of pop cultural databases – are structured to inherently encourage this extension and re-capture. The character, then, is an affective element of convergence, simultaneously enabling a franchise to branch out while keeping everything within the same fold, as aspects of a shared storyworld.

Characters functioning as affective symbols, acting as nodal points for media mixes, and offering chances of transmedia expansion also enables them to act as a form of consumption in and of themselves; the consumption of the storyworld through the character. *Bikkuriman* stickers were nary but character images affixed with histories and traits, but these characters and their attributes were the building blocks out of which the world of *Bikkuriman* unfolded in the consumers' imagination. *Bikkuriman* is, of course, a perfect example, being deceptively simple in design and structure, but the same applies to, for example, *Pokémon*: although there *are* elements of the storyworld unrelated to the characters, it is engagement with the characters and their direct relations to the storyworld (and, likewise, to the audience's world) that forms the core of the media mix's commercial, narrative, and affective body. As proliferating signs of commodified participation, Pokémon are particularly effective as media mix characters given how, in *Pokémon's* media mix, they are used specifically for mitigating the tension that arises when both producers and audiences exert authorial control over characters and worlds. In *Pokémon,* Pokémon characters, as members of taxonomic species as well as singular characterizations of them, effectively act both as generic brand signs and personalized interpretations of these generic signs, allowing the same character images to refer to producorial authored characters as well as the audience's interpretations of them. This helps avoid the transmedial and ontological danger of videogame media mix characters that otherwise, per Blom (2020), threatens media mixes that export (dynamic) game characters into non-gameic media. By sidestepping the possible clashes between producers and participatory audiences, this form of character construction guarantees a straightforward access to the consumption of Pokémon characters and their world, despite the complexity and distributed agency of the media mix.

Enabling a smooth and participatory experience of consuming characters and character products, and thus gaining access to the storyworld, is what media mixes are fundamentally about. As Steinberg points out, the consumer desire that fuels a media mix is felt "not for the character or narrative alone but for the prosumer's participation in the character's world" (2012, 200), suggesting a linkage of character and world – the world as unfolded for and through the character – as the central site for the consumers' participation, and thus, desire, in a media mix.

This circulating, consumable, and participatory media vessel of a character is close to Lamarre's discussion of characters as "soulful bodies" (Lamarre 2009, 201). For Lamarre, the style of limited animation common in anime and anime-like

products (and intimately linked to their origins in manga) leads to characters that are "bodies where spiritual, emotional, or psychological qualities appear inscribed on the surface" (ibid.) as well as to the detachment of these visually evocative designs from any particular media or platform towards movement into, and reconfiguration in, other media (ibid., 202–203). This setting of design and intense commodification forms characters into "a portable animus, an image of the soul that can attach itself to anybody or anything. You don't have to believe in the character or even like it to feel its powers of attraction, to know it may stick with you a long time" (ibid., 206). This suggests that the media mix character does not necessarily reside in any product as such, but is rather made of relations and experiences evoked by circulating visual and affective design, and accumulated over time.

If Lamarre's soulful body is a way of describing media mix characters as animated (literally as well as figuratively) and distributable, wrapped in an overall concept of a character's essence and the distributed body it inhabits, Itō offers a similar argument grounded in a fundamental contrast in the design, use, and reception of media mix characters. For Itō, media mix characters exhibit a dyadic form factor, ranging from superficial but highly distributable proto-characters or *kyara* to complex and less easily commodified *characters* (Itō 2005, 94–95, in Lamarre 2011, 128–129; Itō 2006). In such a way, media mix characters have a quality of fluidness to them. Their ability to exist across media is at least partly derived from the way they can span from simple brand icons – all surface and immediate visual affectivity, ready to move from an animation to a sticker, from a magazine ad to a mental image – to complex story components replete with histories, personal relevance, and accumulated value, both forms (often combined in the same character) attaching themselves to different media and interfacing with the world through the attraction and participation they evoke in the consumer.

Common to all these arguments is a view of characters as components of the storyworld as well as mobile advertisements for it. In this way, the act of designing, sustaining, and developing a media mix franchise hinges greatly on the use and management of its characters: the soulful bodies at once imminently distributable and open to many forms of narrative. As Hartzheim notes, character management is not just about making characters or crafting stories and worlds but a more intertwined practice enabling "an ability to construct worlds" through the careful creation and management of characters (2015, iii). The character, thus, inhabits a crucial role as an organizer of the whole media mix's creation, structure, and reception.

2.4.3.1   Character culture

As applied to the wider logics of mass entertainment, media mix characters, the franchises surrounding them, and the structures of creation and consumption formed

around them coalesce into a paradigm of selling-through-characters that I here call *character culture*. The nomenclature of Japanese character culture contains terms such as character goods, character business (Steinberg 2012), character merchandizing (Steinberg 2012; Han 2017), cute (character) culture (Hjorth 2009; 2011, 75–82), character management (Hartzheim 2015), and character franchise (Lamarre 2009, xiv), with each emphasizing a different facet of the same cultural phenomenon of, broadly understood, establishing, circulating, and selling characters. I use character culture in this thesis as a catchall concept for all these slightly varying terms, and more specific phrasing is deployed where needed.[48]

Character culture is a distinct aspect of contemporary Japanese popular mediascape[49] where the proliferation of characters reaches well beyond the conventional framing of fiction (i.e., characters created for – and through – stories). Various mascots and brand icons routinely represent a variety of material and conceptual entities including towns, sights, customs, and organizations (Occhi 2014; Tan 2013), and many areas of life such as cooking and fashion have also evolved to include characters and character-like elements as central concepts (Occhi 2016). Indeed, even anime, manga, and videogame industries that heavily depend on media mixes (which can be understood as especially character-intensive commercial practices within the wider paradigm of character culture) utilize this ubiquity of characters by establishing characters without underlying storyworlds or narratives, and creating franchises around the ones that garner affective resonance (Azuma 2009, 39). Character culture, then, can be understood as an economic and affective pervasiveness of characters as significant cultural objects, with or without narrative embedding, and it often goes hand in hand with, for example, media mix production.

The modern incarnation of commercial character culture as approached in this thesis traces its roots to the early Japanese comics of the 1920s and 1930s, and in particular to the early efforts of Disney around that time to market and license its character properties (Han 2017, 33). However, one can argue that the origins of character culture reach back even further, cultivated in, for example, the intersections of play, religion, and ritual in Buddhist and Shintō practices (Occhi 2012). Furthermore, Adam Kabat has noted that in yōkai narratives dating back as far as the 18th century, fantastic monsters were sometimes created specifically for mass market consumption and were "linked to current gossip, theater productions or sideshow

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[48]   For a similar approach, see Takahashi (2013).
[49]   By this I do not wish to paint character culture as an exclusively Japanese phenomenon. Rather, character culture as addressed here is the global and local cultural and industrial assemblage of characters and their commodification as it is organized in Japan, but similar logics of mass entertainment are easily identifiable elsewhere, as a function of capitalism and the application of affect and desire in commodified characters.

attractions" (Kabat 2001, 75). This indicates a vibrant early industry of character creation and marketing that spanned different media, bearing resemblance to the character culture of the 20th and 21st centuries. Noting this, Steinberg (2012, 233n14) reminds that character booms in Japan are not confined to modern times, and, referring to Kagawa Masanobu's works as well as Kabat's, suggests that Japanese character culture can be seen as extending well into the premodern times, where a vibrant commercial and folkloristic activity saw to the creation and circulation of character goods of sorts.[50] Allison suggests a similar argument via Nakazawa Shinichi's thoughts on how *Pokémon* – despite being the very embodiment of the material and commercial practices of the turn of the millennium – also offers a connection to "Japan's premodern past" (Allison 2006a, 223).[51]

The argument for separating character culture into different orientations of modernity corresponding to paradigmatic changes in production, circulation, and reception of characters and related goods is a strong one, but there is also some merit in identifying and acknowledging the legacy of the premodern in the contemporary landscape. As Lamarre (2009, xiv–xv) has suggested with the epistemic nuances in the art history of anime, the postmodern should perhaps not be seen as a break with the modern, but rather as connected to it: that the modern is present, even if "intractable and indefensible", in the postmodern. Instead of oppositions and ruptures, there is cultural accumulation, overlap, and above all, dialogue (see also Karatani 1989). In a similar way, one could argue that character culture should be understood as a historical whole; a broader network of ideologies and influences within Japan as well as globally, one manifestation of which is the commercial and affectively potent character culture of the contemporary Japanese media environment.

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[50] For more, see also Foster (2009).
[51] Allison cites Nakazawa's seminal 1997 book *Poketto no naka no yasei* (The Wildness Inside a Pocket), which was updated and republished following the popularity of *Pokémon GO* in 2016, and subsequently translated into English in 2019 (Nakazawa 2019).

2.5   Affect and mediated intimacy

Popular culture leans on affective investments and the forming of relationships between audiences and texts. Affect, as the conceptualization of what goes on in this relationship, is a central trait of popcultural industries that profit off of emotional commitment in affective forms of economy (Jenkins 2006b, 20; Ahmed 2014, 44–45). To be successful, a product must engage audiences on an affective level, be it an intense singular jolt of desire fulfilled in grabbing a chocolate candy or attachment born from multiple years of fanhood. In either case, the negotiation and organization of affects is crucial for both the producer and the consumer in the economy of affection mediated by popular culture.

In total, these desires for affective investment in and through media are all examples of what in this thesis I call *mediated intimacy*: a sense of affection and closeness felt as real and aimed at fiction and artifice, achieved through technologically mediated means. It is a setting for affects (and a result of them), and a sort of modulation of encounters to encourage particular affective keys. Mediated intimacy, as used in this thesis, arises between people and objects (as well as between people and people, via objects) in connections and encounters constructed especially through playful media. As such, it is a somewhat object-oriented and ludic take on the term, focused especially on intimate connections with the mediating technology as well as the agents and bodies reachable through it.[52] In this thesis, I understand intimacy as a polyvalent concept and aesthetic of life, fantasy, and feeling, set within as well as outside conventional norms (Berlant 1998). Intimacy is a feeling of connection, belonging, and sensuality (McGlotten 2013, 1) that is social, as exemplified by the popular understanding of the word as closeness and familiarity, but also often tangled with, for example, economic (Zelizer 2005; Hochschild 2012) and technological (McGlotten 2013; Turkle 2011) aspects, as seen in *Pokémon*.

Furthermore, affection, in this thesis, is a modality of intimacy: essentially a way of *doing intimacy*. Affection, here, is therefore an affect, a moment or constellation of acting and being acted upon that takes place as, and in, a form of intimacy. Mediated intimacy is suggested in this section as a term to understand forms of intimacy with and through technology, aimed at a heterogenous group of agents – human and otherwise.

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[52]   For more discussion on the different uses of mediated intimacy, see Attwood, Hakim, and Winch (2017) and Andreassen et al. (2018).

2.5.1   Prior forays into affections and intimacies in Pokémon

Affection towards Pokémon is found in all echelons of players and audiences. Two decades of accumulated fan culture bares these tendencies in nearly any gathering, online or not, of *Pokémon* fans. Talk to anyone who partakes in *Pokémon* and you will likely hear tales of favorite Pokémon (Profesco 2010; Shhmew 2013), of intense time commitments made to training Pokémon (Rubaaducky 2014), and of sadness and nostalgia at the loss of all Pokémon as a game cartridge or its contents are lost (Anonymous 2014; Anonymous 2012).

Aside from the demonstrable affinity towards Pokémon, there is also clear design intent to cultivate that affection. From relating his childhood fascination with insect life in the videogame to augmenting this fascination with the communicative capacities of the Game Boy, Tajiri Satoshi – the lead designer of the original *Pokémon* videogames – has laced the core mechanics of *Pokémon* with replicating life and encouraging nurture. It was under his design direction that the development team created the core concept of *Pokémon* as a creature-catching and nurturing game, with an emphasis on "actual living organisms moving back and forth across the [Game Boy's] cable" (Larimer 1999). For Tajiri, the world of *Pokémon* is a playground of attachments and adventures. As he suggests in an official *Pokémon* guide, players should "carry the monsters you raise around with you everywhere" and "play without any limits to how you play, forming partnerships with many pokémon as well as many friends" (cited in Allison 2006a, 214–215).

Other *Pokémon* developers have also confirmed that affection is an integral design element in the franchise, videogames in particular. In the same guide cited above, graphic designer Nishida Atsuko – designer of, for example, Pikachu – notes that "Battles are interesting, but I'd like you to think not just of winning and losing but also of how to be nice to the pokémon you're raising" (ibid.). Likewise, Masuda Junichi – the producer of *Pokémon* videogames and in part a successor to Tajiri – has emphasized how the need to foster interest in trading Pokémon means that Pokémon must be desirable; they must engender affection in order to fuel and enliven the exchanges that are at the very core of the franchise (Nutt 2012). Related, it is also a recurring idea among the developers of *Pokémon* that Pokémon should feel like they belong to their owners and that they should reflect the players they belong to, somewhat akin to pets (Harris 2009), and beyond that, that they should be more than just pets but more specifically friends and allies that grow together with their Trainers (Nintendo 2000a). Apart from this, the marketing of *Pokémon* follows suit, with Nintendo's long-time spokesperson Minagawa Yasuhiro arguing that a significant part of *Pokémon's* success is pinned on "the fact that we are encouraging love, tendering and caring for others in Pokémon" (cited in Jordan 2004, 478). As games are oftentimes designed to be played with a particular mindset (Montola 2008,

23), it seems that for *Pokémon,* the designed mindset includes the motifs of intimacy, affection, and care in a social setting of human and non-human bodies.

This thematic has been identified in research, too. As part of his research, Julian Sefton-Green, for example, has documented his son Sam's journey into *Pokémon*, an integral element of which was the emotional investment inherent in the action. Sam bonds with the characters, uses them as meaningful symbols in constructing relationships with other fans, and inserts himself into the game through an affective frame, addressing the Pokémon characters directly and giving them instructions and affirmations as he plays (Sefton-Green 2004, 157–159). What Sefton-Green has identified is an affective tie between a player and a Pokémon. Instead of examining it as a part of *Pokémon's* core gameplay, however, he relegates it to an "irrational or aesthetic impulse" (ibid.) that allows a naïve player to play at strategy instead of committing to winning moves or understanding their actions. Although he discusses the affective qualities of *Pokémon* at length (ibid., 157–159), throughout the text there remains a clear division between "cognitive and rational processes" (ibid., 157) as represented by the rules and procedurality of the videogames on the one hand, and Sam's emotions traced on the bodies of Trainers and transmedia texts of the franchise on the other.

In a somewhat similar vein, Samuel Tobin establishes a shifting focus from affectionate to utilitarian elements in *Pokémon*. In his exploration into the pleasures of *Pokémon* play in students of the Pinelands Elementary School, Tobin identifies how young boys' attention to Pokémon and its characters shifted with age from primarily affective to primarily system-driven (Tobin 2004, 244–246), with the emphasis of play changing from straightforward attraction to non-human characters in the younger kids to interest in human characters, the Trainer role, game mastery, and collection in the older students. Unlike Sefton-Green, however, Tobin sees this more as a one-way progression. As argued later in this thesis (see 3.1), both accounts are plausible, being interpretations of a more complex web of interactions and affective circuitry in *Pokémon's* basic design that both Tobin and Sefton-Green come close to identifying but ultimately fall short of by resorting to somewhat reductive dichotomies.

Setting out to establishing a wider argument, Tim Jordan posits that *Pokémon* as a franchise is about "an ethic of love" (2004, 478) entwined with Nintendo's aspirations to profit off of it. For Jordan, *Pokémon* represents a calculated whole that targets children's emotional development and through that, props itself up as a lucrative business (ibid.). In such a way, he frames *Pokémon* as a dyadic product, at once "hopeful and fearful" (ibid.) in that it foregrounds love and care but also ties them to economic mechanisms and forms of mastery aimed at capitalizing on them: the very structure of the hypercapitalism *Pokémon* exhibits and promotes (ibid., 469). However, akin to the tune of Tobin and Sefton-Green, Jordan constructs a

somewhat restrictive juxtaposition of procedurality versus affectivity, arguing that the *Pokémon* videogames and trading card game offer pathways into mastery and acquisition while the animated series and movies play on emotional themes (ibid., 474). While a justifiable analytical distinction, which Jordan eventually collates into the unified theme of an ethic of love, it nevertheless establishes *Pokémon* products and experiences as individual and somewhat isolated islands. This view frames *Pokémon* as a collection of separate media-specific logics and diverging aesthetics that somewhat misses the overall playful affective tone and media mix structure producing it throughout the whole figurative archipelago.

On a different tack, Aki Järvinen examines "distinctive cultural aspects of Japanese culture" (2006, 159, author's translation) and discusses how they manifest in Japanese videogame culture. He notes a quality of animism in Japanese culture and religion, and postulates on its effect on what is perceived as a Japanese proclivity to virtual pets (ibid., 160, 167). Järvinen also identifies a cultural shift in the production of *Pokémon* media and their characters. Leaning partially on Anne Allison's work on the distinctive properties of cuteness in Japanese pop culture (2006a), he argues that the early *Pokémon* products exemplify a Japanese sensibility of cute characters as objects and metaphors of affection and caretaking. In contrast, he deems the animated series and movies as more global in their cultural composition, and as such sees them shifting Pokémon characters towards themes of conflict and identification (Järvinen 2006, 173). Relatedly, and apparently without knowledge of Järvinen's (or Allison's) work, Pizzato has also opted to explain part of the allure of Pokémon characters through a type of animism common to technological toys and virtual pets of especially Japanese origin (2009, 77). According to Pizzato, *Pokémon* offers a passage to a certain kind of "cultural connection with nature" that he deems (somewhat orientalistically) essential to, and derivative of, Japanese culture.

Susan Napier, like Järvinen, also picks up Allison's notion of animism in *Pokémon* and applies it in a reading of transmedia pleasures that result in an effect where "Pokemon [*sic*] and other Japanese toys and goods were particularly effective in creating an interactive fantasyscape that effortlessly transcended material reality" (Napier 2007, 131). Beyond that, she links *Pokémon* to what could be called a cute turn in Japanese popular culture and views the franchise's multitude of image properties as a similarly affective phenomenon as, for example, *Hello Kitty*. For Järvinen, Pizzato, and Napier, then, there is something distinctly Japanese in the composition of *Pokémon's* products, discernible in the franchise's emphasis on cuteness and shintō-derived commodified animism.

In tune with, for example, Samuel Tobin's (2004) mix of affective and systems-oriented interactions discussed earlier, Cary Elza depicts Pokémon as friends and allies that embody a sort of emancipatory task: through careful training these wild creatures

become assets as well as friends, emphasizing how the basic logic of the storyworld empowers children by setting this important responsibility into their care (2009, 55). Essentially, Elza argues that the agency created for participants of *Pokémon's* entertainment supersystem offers a way to reflect on, and learn, the social, cultural, and affective changes in the late capitalism of the early 2000s. Similarly, in his work on children and consumer culture, David Buckingham discusses *Pokémon* as a transmedia knowledge culture (2011, 93) where learning the laws of the storyworld serve as a kind of "ticket of entry" (ibid.) to various social groups and is an unavoidable method of interaction with the whole media mix. For Buckingham, this transmedia system combines emphases on nurture, cuteness (both of which he reads as aimed at girls), collecting, and competition (which he reads as aimed at boys). Marketing conventions and target demographic gender binaries notwithstanding, Buckingham's way of thinking highlights how, in research, *Pokémon* is seen as a social whole, built upon – as well as guiding towards – a discourse of nurture all the while also maintaining a focus on more instrumental elements.

Like Sefton-Green (2004), Seth Giddings (2014) has also examined *Pokémon* using his children as objects of research. His children's years-long fascination with *Pokémon* is documented in an ethnographical examination of everyday play in contemporary media culture. While he notes a wide swath of interactions between the *Pokémon* media mix and his children, the centrality of characters is ubiquitous in almost all of them. From the ethnographic – or, as Giddings frames his more precise method, microethological (ibid., 55) – observations, he constructs an image of a sort of everyday intimacy where instead of discreet moments of affection, the characters and their world are present in the lives of the children through material pervasiveness, affective omnipresence, and low-key capture of attention (ibid., 79). He also brushes on the developing user base and affective longevity of *Pokémon* in noting how the franchise stays with his children as they grow older (ibid., 160).

Lastly, cited by several of the aforementioned scholars, Anne Allison has done extensive research on *Pokémon*. In her groundbreaking book *Millennial Monsters* (Allison 2006a) and in several articles both preceding and based on it (Allison 2003, 2004, 2006b, 2009a, 2009b), Allison has conducted a thorough analysis of *Pokémon* as a franchise as situated in the timeline of Japanese popular culture and media products.

In terms of affection and intimacy, Allison opens up her article *Pocket Capitalism and Virtual Intimacy* by writing: "Pokémon (also called Pocket Monsters) is a world of endless consumption and imaginary relations" (2009a, 179).[53] This is a fine summary of *Pokémon* in general, and it is an especially helpful

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[53]   In an earlier article, Allison opens with an even more straightforward but equally apt wording: "Pokémon is a world of both things and relations" (2006b, 331).

digest of how Allison approaches its media mix overall. Throughout her works, she examines *Pokémon* predominantly through the lens of capitalism and softens this oftentimes cynical and – deservedly – critical view with an emphasis on how the franchise also creates and sustains friendships, communities, and intimacy, framing it as a "virtual culture where digital icons link to humans in relationships at once intimate and instrumental" (Allison 2006a, 266). It is a setting for intimacy as virtual, where virtual is both a synonym for digital – "electronic production and reproduction of materiality" (2006a, 178) – and, more abstractly, a descriptor of global networks of communication and the growing mass of information and production therein (ibid. 265, 266). In this flexible medium, Allison sees tendencies of intimacy but also instrumentalization, utility value, and a sort of play-creation of capitalistic ownership, control, and commodification of fantastical bodies.[54]

As thorough as it is, Allison's research overlooks certain aspects of the phenomenon largely due to the focus, methodology, and timing of her work. Arguably the most significant – and still unresolved – of these blind spots falls on the *Pokémon* videogames. The focus of her work is mostly on *Pokémon's* other media texts, as well as on the ideas of the people creating *Pokémon* and the experiences of the audiences who engage with its storyworld. Although noting that it was the videogames that embedded the players' personal journey of becoming a Trainer into the experiential core of the media mix (2006a, 244–245), Allison does not engage with the videogames in any detail. This directs her view on *Pokémon* towards a form of virtuality and play that omits the player as an embodied agent and the videogames as material participants in the franchise's affective processes. Thus, her take remains disconnected from the formative procedural rhetorics of the *Pokémon* videogames and the prevalence of particular affective modes of play arising from them and reproduced throughout the whole media mix. Indeed, much like Allison, all of the aforementioned scholars identify affection, love, and desire as important properties of the *Pokémon* franchise, but forego a more detailed analysis of these themes especially as promoted in, and established by, videogames and play in the whole of *Pokémon's* media mix. From my perspective, these approaches have left crucial foundations of the franchise untouched and important themes only half explored. They form an invaluable but nevertheless partial source of knowledge, and it is to this partiality that my thesis is, in small part, an answer to.

Present, and indeed foregrounded, in most of these prior works is some form of contrast between nurture and instrumentality – the idea that Pokémon are objects of

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54 For similar arguments exploring the allure of Pokémon through instrumentalization, see Heckman (2002) for the relationship of master and slave in *Pokémon*, and Cook (2001) for the cutthroat economic layer of card trades that instrumentalize Pokémon characters and *Pokémon* play.

affection as well as assets to use or sell. In recognizing these contributions (and their limits), I have made an intentional delimitation choosing to forgo the dichotomy of instrumental and affective values of Pokémon as well as the similarly crafted typology of procedural rule-bound elements versus cute, gentle, and affectionate elements. In my analysis, the procedurality of the videogames – and the logic they have imbued onto the whole media mix and its modes of production and reception – suggests a different way of conceptualizing these contrasts. Namely, I approach *Pokémon* as play that commodifies as well as proceduralizes intimacy and the bodies partaking in it in *Pokémon's* media mix.

In this hybrid approach, I view the commodified instrumentality and affectivity of Pokémon as contingent to a degree where strictly separating them for analysis is unnecessary. That is, the underlying basis of *Pokémon* in the logics and motifs of the videogames imbues the whole media mix with a sense of utility and instrumentality that – while certainly real and worthy of attention – seems best to be read in its proper context: as originating from the playful and procedural structure of the videogames and as expanded onto the ludic logic of the whole media mix. Indeed, all videogames with identifiable playable (or in other ways interactable) characters invite instrumentalization of sorts, as the complex assemblage of "player-and-videogame" (Keogh 2018, 22) in part functions through the players' ability to express themselves in the game through, and often as, a character. In play, that is, characters tend to turn into something to play and toy with. In this way, videogame characters can be read as almost inherently instrumentalized, making the themes of utility and instrumentalization partially par for the course for all characters in ludic surroundings, including Pokémon. Furthermore, in the context of *Pokémon*, instrumentalization becomes a talking point mostly *in contrast to* or *because of* the substantial basis of affective and gentle relations against which the utility value and instrumentalization of their procedural origins can be juxtaposed.[55] For the purposes of my work, I fold the themes of utility value and instrumentality into the larger argument of *Pokémon's* intimate and commodified affectivity – as read through the videogame form and its procedurality – rather than presenting them as contrasting or separate elements.

Regardless, these prior works as well as the publically circulating texts voicing the experiences of audiences and developers alike rather conclusively point out the general existence and pervasiveness of intimacy as a core function of the *Pokémon* media mix. Thus, based on these sources, I step beyond the question of whether affection and intimacy are present in *Pokémon* and instead take this as the starting point, pushing our cumulative knowledge towards understanding how they function.

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[55]   See Brice (2013) for an example of a reading where the affective basis of *Pokémon* is contrasted with the ludic instrumentalization of the videogame medium.

2.5.2 Evolving intimacies and the normativity of feeling

Before looking at intimate affectivity in the remainder of this thesis, I establish what intimacy as an effect of today's media culture looks like to begin with. The contemporary mediascape is full of encounters that generate feelings with complicated ontological positions. If reality TV is not really "real", then are the feelings it evokes real? If videogames and simulations are not "real" but only simulate the real, can their affective potential be regarded real? Both employ a playful investment into a fictional realm, so, more broadly, if play is part of the real as much as anything else is, yet also undoubtedly establishes temporary structures of meaning and feeling that set to augment the unmediated real (see 2.2.2), what are we to make of the feelings therein?

Were this only a question of object ontology, we could establish that since fiction is, by definition, not real, the intimacy it begets is imagined as well. In practice, however, the distinction between real and imagined intimacies is difficult to draw. In Ien Ang's classic examination of the pleasures of watching *Dallas,* she argues that the enjoyment of intimacy derived from the fictional world and its characters hinges precisely on this ontological interaction of the fictional and the real (Ang 1985, 49–50). The parasocial relationships formed in a long-running series such as *Dallas* transcend what is "real", "fiction", or "fact" as audiences choose to playfully experience the series as a form of reality.

The creation and reception of feelings as a mediated form of intimacy is seen here as a real affective process stemming from a fictional source. Rather than regarding these feelings as separate from real intimacies (whatever those are), mediated intimacy not only simulates but also *stimulates* feelings (Kavka 2008, 24–25).[56] That is, mediated intimacy is a feeling of a different kind from unmediated feelings, but no less real. Or, as Kavka writes, "the performance of love will generate the effects of love, just as the performance of reality will generate reality effects" (ibid., 124). Pokémon creatures are created to foster affection and intimacy, set into an interactive storyworld where that quality is foregrounded. This construction and performance of intimacy in *Pokémon* play begets a form of mediated reality that – much like reality TV programs for Kavka – "generates intimacy as its affect" (ibid. 25) despite being obviously fabricated in nature and fantastical in theme.

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[56]   This is essentially the same conclusion that Bateman (2011) reaches when assessing the reality of emotions in videogame play through Walton's (1978) concept of quasi-emotions: emotions in fiction are different to emotions in non-fiction, but as emotions they are nevertheless "no less genuine" (Bateman 2011, 192).

Shaka McGlotten (2013) approaches this through the concept of *virtual intimacy* in contemporary technologically mediated affections.[57] McGlotten discusses virtual intimacy as "the ideological or affective entanglements that stick to and emerge from the collision of the virtual and intimate" (ibid., 12). Virtual for McGlotten is a broad concept describing a technological and conceptual realm at once a utopian playing field of potentialities but also a site of societal scrutiny and norm-policing (cf. Berlant 1998). They argue that, in general, societal norms regulate desire into normatively accepted paths where the aim is a "real" relationship as opposed to something that is virtual; lacking and removed from normal. Online dating, for example, which itself is just emerging from a stigmatized sociocultural position, is often seen as trying to forge real-life – that is, physical and normative – relationships, hookups, and meetings as a way to consummate what would otherwise be a normatively lesser form of digital intimacy. For this reason, technologically mediated forms of intimacy are often structured and viewed as queer relationships: non-normative and susceptible to be regarded as weirder, lesser, or just deviating from the sexually and normatively straight option (see also Ahmed 2014, 146).

Pettman identifies this sort of normative unease as stemming from the "ontological doubt (…) as to the status of the beloved" (Pettman 2009, 203n1). Indeed, just as there is no physical connection between online daters, there is no physical animal to pet in *Pokémon X's* and *Pokémon Y's* (Game Freak 2013) *Pokémon Amie* petting mode, nor is it my own arm that throws the Poké Ball when attempting to capture a new creature: the flight of the ball promising a chance of a new companionship, and the purring Pokémon on the screen of *Pokémon Amie* are related to me only as reflexive reactions programmed into the game. To say that I feel a sense of real intimacy with worlds and characters in these encounters is to invite just the normative policing McGlotten discusses. Intimacy is easy to question when it takes place in an artificial, manufactured, and solitary context. Yet, the whole playground of texts that is *Pokémon* – and arguably much of Japanese character culture in general – is built on this phenomenon.

McGlotten, however, sees the virtual not only as a technological concept that invites normative judgments about the desirability and appropriateness of virtual relationships but also in a more positive light as a Deleuzian concept that relates to immanence and potentiality, something that *can* and *could* exist instead of something that is *squarely opposed* to the real. The dichotomy of real and virtual is, for McGlotten, a false one (ibid., 8–9). In this, McGlotten is not alone; their reasoning

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[57]   To highlight an interesting connection, McGlotten draws on Allison (2006a) when discussing videogames in multiplayer human-to-human (McGlotten 2013, 46–47) as well as single player human-to-machine (ibid., 55–56) contexts, demonstrating key synergies between the two authors, even if their research topics and approaches differ.

– down to the reliance on Deleuze – draws heavily from developments in new materialist theory, which proposes a sort of radical emphasis[58] on the material and immaterial as one, and addresses the agencies and impacts of technologies, media, raw materials, and material objects in society.

By simultaneously viewing the virtual as a technological concept of mediated content and as a philosophical concept of potentiality and play with reality, McGlotten collapses the two. Instead of arguing that "real" and "virtual" intimacies are equally important, McGlotten radicalizes the whole concept of intimacy and argues that regardless of where it takes place, intimacy is, and always has been, virtual: intimacy forms a sort of mental platform for feelings related to connectedness and disconnectedness, a metaphorical place for transformations of one state of being to another. As McGlotten puts it:

> Intimacy builds worlds, affective, social, institutional, and otherwise; framing intimacy as virtual and as queer, rather than distorting or diminishing intimacy's "reality," defiantly argues for its expansion. (McGlotten 2013, 11)[59]

For example, browsing through catalogues of fellow users on dating apps or keeping tabs on new Pokémon characters produces a sense of intimacy and desire regardless of whether this browsing of playmates ever actualizes into anything normatively real or not. There is, then, a sort of fictionality at play in the experience of intimacy; an enjoyment of a fantasy, itself intimate without any actualization other than that which plays out on the level of immanence.

Thus, at least in theory if not on the level of society, normative judgments on technologically mediated intimacies fall short: intimacy is not "real" any more in the physical reality than it is online, on TV or in games, as they all are ultimately based on a state of connections and becomings that are virtual, regardless of their medium or their level of fictionality. Here, McGlotten arrives to the same conclusion as Kavka. The realness of a feeling is not dependent on the extent of mediation: reality TV programs construct artificial and mediated intimate environments (such as the *Big Brother* house and the "romantic" dates of *The Bachelorette*), yet these artificial

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[58]   Radical in the sense of being a clear departure from the lingering legacy of 1990s cyberculture theory (Paasonen, Hillis, and Petit 2015, 9) that regards the virtual and the actual as separate.

[59]   In this, we can see a similarity to Pettman's observation about the codification of intimacy having always been digital (Pettman 2009, 26). Although they make different claims and launch from very different platforms, both McGlotten and Pettman have arrived at the conclusion that the very fabric of today's digital media ecology is a viable foundation, and an effective and co-participating metaphor, for the cultivation of intimacy.

structures produce – cannot help but produce – affectively loaded performances of intimacy (Kavka 2008, 25). Reality TV makes clear that "desire – or better, its manifestations – cannot be compartmentalized as private or public, individual or social. It is only in the sticky, performative space between bodies that desire is produced as love, or its failure" (ibid., 127). That is, desire, love, and affection reside between bodies and in performances, regardless of their media or mediation. Whereas mediated relationships in the technological sense have invited – and to an extent still invite – scorn and distrust grounded in traditional normative expectations of what is appropriate affection, when intimacy, desire, and their mediation are understood not as an alternative to the real but as an equal – indeed base – way of being intimate, a whole range of new possibilities open up.

2.5.3   Mediated intimacy with and through objects

I argue that we live in a time of escalated technological affect, of relationships formed through technology and with it. In the following subsections, mediated intimacy and affection are approached through a perspective combining technology as an affective platform and videogames and toys as sites that utilize it for cultivation of relationships between humans and non-humans. In doing so, I explore approaches to technology and human–non-human relations, and frame technology as a complex site for affections and intimacies, stemming from culture and society but also influencing it.

Technology mediates intimacy, but it is also itself a participant in the intimacies it conveys. To follow Bruno Latour's thinking, technology is – as extensions of human intentions and as standalone objects – a participant to reality just as anyone and anything else (Latour 2009). In that sense, it is not a radical idea that we bring a sentiment of intimacy and affection to our relationships with inanimate objects and feel through them: for example, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) note how everyday objects become meaningful in interaction, where psychic energy (their shorthand for an embodied cognitive and mental effort) gloms onto objects that retain and shape it. Turkle (2007) has approached the topic from a similar angle. In a book filled with autobiographical essays, authors explore their relationships with objects beyond the superficial or the merely pragmatic and "consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought" (ibid., 5). The trains, computers, musical instruments, and comic books thus reviewed are what Turkle calls *evocative objects* with the aim of "underscoring the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things" (ibid.). Her point about objects as important sites of affect and affection is perhaps an obvious one but nevertheless draws attention to how intimate couplings are not limited to interactions between bodies of flesh alone. Furthermore, in a seminal work of artifact-affection, Turkle

notes that our emotions towards technological objects are in part dependent on how we use them. She notes, "We love what we nurture; if a Tamagotchi makes you love it, and you feel it loves you in return, it is alive enough to be a creature" (Turkle 2011, 31).[60]

In Turkle's as well as Csikszentmihalyi's and Rochberg-Halton's works, we can see a nod toward a worldview that seeks to understand objects and humans as interconnected. For Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, objects gain their importance (or lack of it) in *interaction* (1981, 174). That is, objects are not acted upon but acted *with*, and this transaction between a person and object is what creates the final flow of meaning and affection (ibid., 175). Turkle approaches this through a more personal and phenomenological stance, seeing objects as integral parts of our personal reality in which they make up or at least adjust a significant portion of experiences, as well as gain their affective valence in interaction. If the last decades have seen a constant convergence of human and technology in the form of implants and powerful personal technology such as smartphones, she wonders what the future might bring; right now, we tend to think and theorize through dichotomies of "us" and "objects", but a time when "we begin to live with objects that challenge the boundaries between the born and created and between humans and everything else" (Turkle 2007, 326) is not far off, and our theories must – or should – acknowledge it.

Expressing this idea more explicitly than Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, and more extensively than Turkle, Latour has deployed the conceptual tools of actor–network theory to discuss the place and meaning of technology in society (2009) and the fundamental similarity of all matter, human or non-human. The most germane aspect of this discussion for this thesis is what could be called his ontology of technological agency. Invoking basic ideas of actor–network theory, Latour establishes technology as identical to, as well as evocative of, humans in the formation of what we experience as reality. As per Latour, social networks – and society itself – are not formed of interactions between humans but between humans *and also* between humans and technology (Law 1992) – that is, in cooperation

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[60]   At odds with what I do, Turkle is clear in her disdain towards the mediation of intimacy and especially of directing intimacy towards artificial – or technologically mediated – agents. Regardless, I see value in Turkle's anthropologic groundwork. While I agree with Turkle's premise that technology has significant effects on life and social relations, I regard Turkle's overall critique of the mediation of intimacy as something that erases or disenfranchises viewpoints beyond the normative – the sort of biopolitics that McGlotten's approach (2013) so effectively counters. Turkle is not wrong so much as managing to reach only part of the picture. Technology connects us and sets us apart; it offers a range of intimacies and mediations of intimacy as well as the potential for isolation and alienation in the context of these intimacies and their supporting technological platforms.

between humans and non-humans. As Latour writes, "The bizarre idea that society might be made up of human relations is a mirror image of the other no less bizarre idea that techniques might be made up of non-human relations" (Latour 2009, 162). Instead of there being a society of humans and technology of artifacts, for Latour, they combine into a form of technoculture where actors are fluidly human, non-human, machine, and organic; defined more by their relations than by their personhood (ibid.,175).

Latour bases this observation on the equation of the human and the non-human. He sees technology – an automatic door closer as his primary example – as inherently anthropomorphic. Anthropomorphism is, itself, a problematic notion that invites anthropocentrism and presupposes that there is a clear understanding of the "anthropo-" in the image of which these terms rely on (Tyler 2009). In Latour's use, however, the word seems to gain a broader function as a descriptor of perceived or metaphoric aliveness instilled on technological objects by humans. Therefore, the word is used in this thesis in the context of human and human-derived non-human agency; seen, for example, in technology and technological agents as designed derivatives of human action, inviting to be read as non-human agents – *as if they were alive* and imitating, in various ways, how humans relate to the world and to others. That is, anthropomorphism here is a "humanlikeness" of characters (Heidbrink 2010, 72; Gn 2017, 179) that has more to do with aliveness and independent agency than overall resemblance to the human form; seeking via their affects to examine bodies and being rather than injecting one form of life into another (Cullen 2021, 154–155).

Describing the legacy of agency and anthropomorphism between humans and non-human objects of technology, Latour offers three rationalizations or three overlapping modes of anthropomorphism: 1) technology is made by humans, 2) it substitutes actions of people and is positioned in place of humans, and 3) it shapes human action (2009, 160). Technology, in this way, settles into a curious position where it is impossible to point where the biological influence of humans turns into the mechanical agency of technology, or vice versa. This stems from his argument that the division to humans and non-humans is a fragile one to begin with. If we look at the world as networked interactions, we see it unfold as untold relationships between all kinds of objects, and a division of these objects and the connections between them to human and non-human is hardly crucial for making sense of our surroundings. This text, for example, is communicated to you, a presumably human reader, through an assemblage that represents a joint effort between technologies, humans, and relationships, all affecting each other.

In Latour's argument, we see a sort of practical animism at work: we know the door closer is not alive, but we also see it as something resembling an animate being or doing a job like an animate being would; as a thing that is alive insomuch as it

participates in the goings-on of the world – much in the same way as we can (rudely or inconsiderately) regard a porter – a human door closer – as a mechanism that closes a door instead of as an individual person.

Animism, as Harvey notes, is a "hard-working word" (2014, 1). It is used in many different contexts from developmental psychology to study on religions, and from commercial material culture to new-age movements, and as such it is a site of contested meanings and mixed epistemological inquiries. Here, animism is understood in a general sense as a metaphorical and playful investment in objects.[61] It is, then, not solely a psychosomatic phenomenon but also a metaphorical quality of objects and reasoning; a willful investment into things that often represent life, while not alive themselves, through which we make sense of the world (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 33–34). It is a becoming of an entangled posthuman subjectivity where matter is given agency and playful distinctness separate from the human consciousness that has birthed it.

This sort of animism extends an everyday suspension of disbelief – born from genuine confusion in children and from bypassing the rational sensibility in adults[62] – onto objects that we know are not alive in the biological sense, allowing us to regard them as such anyway. As it relates to Japanese popular culture, animism appears as a tangle of commercial products and phenomena linking consumers to non-human objects of meaning such as character images, animated series, and videogames within the affective and transmedial character culture (for more on this, see Brienza 2014 and Allison 2006a). Essentially this form of suspension of disbelief is perhaps not so much about direct animism (although that does play a part in the cultural and social foundations of the phenomenon as Brienza and Allison argue) as it is about the relationship between people and non-human objects and the affective resonances in those relationships.

This symmetry of agency – that humans and non-humans of biological and technological variations influence each other in untold constellations – is an underlying axiom of technoculture in general. In terms of technology, affection, and

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[61]   The link between animistic personification and playfulness goes back a long way, as noted by, for example, Huizinga (1980, 140–141).

[62]   In children, the shifting border between living and non-living and its attribution to animism is often linked with the research of Jean Piaget (1971), but such inclinations have been observed in adults as well. As Looft and Bartz (1969) note, the exclusion of adult animism in Piaget's work does not mean his focus on children would be in contradiction to it. Piaget did not categorically rule out animism beyond childhood, he merely did not interview adults (ibid., 13). Judging from later research, adult manifestations of animism are certainly of a different stock, more aligned with intentional metaphorical or metonymical use (ibid., 13–14) and intentional playfulness (Heljakka 2013, 364) than confusion. It would seem probable, then, that animism stems from naïveté and play in children and mostly just play in adults.

objects, it becomes especially highlighted in the context of seemingly independent technological agents. That is, the door closer only caught Latour's attention because the humorous note about it having gone on strike explicitly framed the closer as a sympathetic and anthropomorphic actor – as a technological independent agent instead of an inert lump of worked metal. While Turkle, Csikszentmihalyi, Rochberg-Halton, and Latour discuss objects in general and veer toward everyday objects designed for purposes other than the elicitation of affection, there are also non-humans for which, historically, the framing of an anthropomorphic actor – the illusion of independence, otherness, and oftentimes intimacy – is explicitly expected of and designed for; to borrow from Latour, non-humans that have the framing device of an anthropomorphizing note embedded in their design.

Objects such as automata – the "living machines" that have been a staple of technological, societal, and aesthetic progress in cultures throughout the history of science (de Solla Price 1964; Lister et al. 2008, 314) – and innumerable toys that in form or function allude to a life of some sort – such as soft toys, figurines, and dolls (Heljakka 2013, 156) – are ubiquitous examples of culture and materiality that harness intentional and playful modes of aliveness to produce intimacy and affective relations. Indeed, they have a transformative effect on reality, enabling slippages into a playful mindset as they make a magic circle (see 2.2.2) out of intimacy. While plainly not alive, these kinds of objects evoke forms and agencies of an other. Their form asks us to ponder their aliveness, and in the intimate magic circle they evoke in play, they invite us to examine how we relate to material objects and our shared affects with them, making them feel alive enough, despite their non-human and often mass-manufactured origins.

Although certainly not a trait of Japanese society alone, Japan in particular seems to attract historical and sociocultural readings of affective and animistic technocultural human–non-human bonds (see, for example, Geraci 2006; Kaplan 2004) that reach from the pre-modern to the postmodern. We see this in the hyperreal simulacrum of contemporary Japanese media culture and its prevalence of lively characters, in everything from service robots to supertoys (Thrift 2003) and from character merchandize to virtual idols. Furthermore, we also see it in the rest of the world's more or less techno-orientalist fascination (see, for example, Morley and Robins 2002, 169) with Japan's postmodernity wherein Japan is portrayed as, and expected to be, an overtly simulacral zone, perennially beyond the curve of technological adaptation.

Exaggerations aside, it remains true that with the majority of robotic labor in the world at the turn of the millennium operating within its borders (Thomas 2009; Robertson 2007, 372) and a grand entertainment industry built explicitly on non-human agents, their affective networks, and (around the time of *Pokémon's* inception) a rubric of healing (Roquet 2016, 152) through, for example, media

cultural products, Japan is certainly an interesting target for research into postmodern technological life and mediated intimacies; bonds that mix human and non-human bodies, capitalism, affection, relationships and mass communication, and package them in, and as, high technology.

Today, of course, the frontier of evocative and playfully alive beings of technology has expanded especially to – and oftentimes combined with – digital mass media such as software and videogames. There, we can see another kind of fantastically alive machine arise; although usually lacking a physical manifestation, the simulated or illusionistic paradigm of computerized simulacra have for some time functioned as sites of illusionistic high technology aliveness and avant-garde animism.

2.5.4   Intimacy of the digital: Non-humans and videogames

Latour did not discuss software in his article on the door closer, but his argument suggests that software-based non-humans would register for him just as important for the formation of the collective technoculture as door closers, seatbelts and Berlin keys did. Indeed, discussing the broader strokes of society, Latour has sketched out a shift of democracy from *Realpolitik* to *Dingpolitik,* stressing the inseparability of immaterial issues of politics and the material objects that these issues are grounded in, and the object-oriented reality to which all of us are affectually tied to (Latour 2005, 5). In the evolving process of intimacy with and through the non-human, we might exercise Latour's suggestions and forego the false promise of the *Real* in favor of the object-oriented turn of *Ding*. To build on Latour, then, we can say that software, as the fabric and facilitator of much of our day-to-day activities (Manovich 2013, 2), is as anthropomorphic as a door closer and participates in the goings-on of the world in as great a degree – if not more – as the door closer does. In the long history of technocultural affections, software has joined material technocultural products as sites and objects of mediated intimacy.

As Nigel Thrift argues, software has become a significant actor in the world, "producing a whole new informational ecology" responsible for all manner of unexpected new relations and the evolution of old structures (2004a, 462). To extend the rhetoric of anthropomorphic non-humans, we can see a sort of animism still at play, only transposed to the new environment governed by software. Not surprisingly, Thrift notes that we often rely on biological metaphors and categorizations in our relations with software, "as a means of framing programs, as a means of framing wider technological systems and as a means of making assumptions about how the world turns up" (ibid., 465). Thrift suggests this agency and animism of software can be better understood by thinking about software as *electric animals*. He warns against hyperbole but notes that software is not only

metaphorically close to animals, but that companion objects and autonomous (or at least appearing so) machines and programs have been making inroads into the everyday (ibid., 470). We are living in a world of things that are animated by software and that interact with us through complex networks of agency and interdependence. In that sense, Thrift's framing of technological agents as electric companion animals of sorts – somewhere between animals (humans included) and machines – is not too far-fetched as an interpretive frame.

The turn to computationally mediated intimacy can be mapped onto the shifting paradigms new media brought along with its attempts at new kinds of representations. Up until relatively recently, manufacturing affective illusions, that is, representing reality in some moving manner, was predominantly the domain of painters, photographers and writers within arts, and artisanal automata makers and industrial designers in the domain of science and engineering. In the late 20th century, however, the technological change to computer-based creation of mimesis marked a shift in these mediums and their logics, as well as brought in new approaches to artistic illusions.

As Manovich points out, new media has changed illusionistic art. These changes include not only things such as embodied interaction (through, for example, controllers, cameras, vibration feedbacks, and pervasive location-based play) and spatialized audio, but also the high-fidelity simulation of physical objects, including character constructs (Manovich 2000, 30). These characters that model or simulate life, "our new computer doubles" (ibid., 32), are invested with new kinds of agency stemming from the modalities of new media: they form into *image-interfaces* through and with which users can control, communicate, and interact with computers (if understood narrowly) and with society and technoculture at large (if understood broadly). In a crucial realization, Manovich argues that these image-interfaces and image-instruments – objects of new media such as user interfaces and personified characters, intermediators between the human and the computer – move us from identification to the stage of action (ibid., 31). In a sense, what Manovich argues is that the revolutionary aspect of the agents of new media is not that they would allow for an ever-greater degree of identification (albeit they might do that as well), but that, unlike components of previous illusionistic media, they enable us to affect through them, thereby contributing to our "assessment of the reality effect of the image" (ibid.). In a sense, then, we might supplant Manovich's term with a slightly more inclusive one and argue that instead of image-interfaces, these new media offer *affect-interfaces* – a heightened ability to act and be acted upon through the medium.

Echoing a similar sentiment and focusing on Japanese dating simulations in particular, Pettman (2009, 197) notes how the animated nature of videogame characters links them to the traditions of intense and interactive illusions such as those Manovich describes; these characters, although existing in a thoroughly

mediated environment and explicitly aiming for an illusionistic representation, nevertheless evoke a sense of realness or immediacy (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 272–273) no human appearing in or via a mediated environment could match. Because these videogame characters – these illusions – are already inherently mediated, they are present in a situation where a technologically mediated human would only be *tele*present. This illusion of life expressed through the image-interface and affect-interface of an avatar or a character makes them attractive facilitators of our biological desires or, at least, means that they feel real in a way that is not trivial. As Pettman suggests, "for the Tamagotchi generation, there is no such thing as a love object, but rather a love *vector* – distributed qualities, splashed across a multitude of people, characters, images and avatars" (Pettman 2009, 201, emphasis in original). Indeed, we can see this by turning from the general assemblage of software and biology to the more specific context of playful software. Videogames, software toys, chatbots, and the like all utilize these love vectors in assuming players will form meaningful relations with them, their characters, and their various gatherings of systemic and representational elements: the procedural text and its rhetorics. No producer expects these products to become a love object, but most will hope to enable at least some love vectors in their works. In short, all these products harness the machinic other as a partner in interaction, and in doing so have proven to be "powerful mediators and generators of new associations, romantic love and friendships" (Enevold and MacCallum-Stewart 2015, 3).

In his influential work *The Language of New Media*, Manovich folds his earlier thoughts into the overall tendency of new media to incorporate automation (2001b, 32) in variations of artificial life and intelligence, from simple software agents that render webpages to advanced AIs (or illusions thereof) used for interaction as well as media creation, all of which structure, and in many cases enable, us to access forms of new media as well as shape it. Of this advent of automated media, the Latourian door closers of the information age, he specifically singles out videogames, which act as everyday points of contact with consumers and high technology (ibid., 33). Angling for something akin to a prototype of Bogost's procedural rhetoric[63] (Bogost 2007), Manovich notes how the automatic and autonomous intelligence of videogame characters is inherently illusory: it works because it is set in a highly restrictive setting. A computer-controlled character can forward a formidable representation of, for example, martial arts in a fighting game

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[63] Bogost has later criticized Manovich's omission of the rhetorical dimension of hypermedia (Bogost 2007, 26–27). Bogost does not, however, engage with Manovich's thoughts any wider than that and as such seems to miss Manovich's arguments about procedurality, implicit in which there is a glimpse of the sort of new rhetoric Bogost himself developed.

because the game is built to operate on a finite set of operations. The player cannot discuss anything with the opponent. They can only fight. As Manovich writes, "computer characters can display intelligence and skills only because programs place severe limits on our possible interactions with them" (Manovich 2001b, 34). In practice, the interactive and autonomous characters of new media gain their spell of otherness from a procedural rhetoric of sorts, where gameworlds and their characters are shaped through rules and dynamics to structure interaction towards particular ends.

A similar way to approach this otherness and illusion of non-human videogame agents is offered by Giddings in his argument that videogames and the activity of playing them present "paradigmatic instances of an everyday, actual technoculture" (2005, 11) where technological systems exert agency just as well as humans do. As Giddings points out, the apparent autonomy – this structuring of non-human agency – of, for example, videogame characters is not to be naïvely described as life or something anyone would really even think of as "alive". Instead, agents imbued with technological non-human agency *appear* almost alive; they *appear* to be acting intentionally and pursuing desires of their own (ibid., 6–7). In this he follows Daniel Dennett's early influential essay (Dennett 1971) in which Dennett argues that chess programs are an example of a computer system so complex that the most pragmatic way of playing against them is "by ascribing intentionality to the computer, by reacting to it as if it were an intelligent player" (Giddings 2005, 6); regarding the software as playfully alive. For Giddings, computer programs deploy their own forms of agency in such ways that they can – and often should – be understood as intentional: "this intentionality does not assume that complex systems have beliefs and desires in the way humans do, but that their behavior can, indeed often must, be understood *as if* they did" (ibid., 6–7, emphasis in original). This mirrors the playful animism discussed earlier. That is, the player has the potential of projecting an imagined consciousness of an other into the game. There is no independent cognizant agent at work behind the characters of videogames, but when viewed as an entanglement of the human interpretive mind with the programmed system, videogames support reading an element of a non-human other into the situation.

In making his argument, however, Giddings situates the artificial life in videogames on the level of systems and processes instead of, for example, characters as nodes where those systems and processes come together. As he writes, "in *Advance Wars 2* we battle against not armies or an opposing general but against an intentional system that mobilizes itself through a variety of soft actors – units, COs [Commanding Officers, the primary characters in the game] and artificially intelligent 'tactics'" (Giddings 2005, 10). His framing leaves characters, among other things, outside the analysis. Characters become one of a number of "soft

actors" (ibid.) that only reflect the non-human agency of the underlying system without seemingly affecting it or themselves employing it.

As we can infer from Manovich, however, characters are rarely just characters but image-interfaces and image-instruments, access points for interaction – and action! To return to Giddings's example of *Advance Wars 2* (Intelligent Systems 2003), we do not fight (only) against a system: we fight as and against Commanding Officers, who *represent* the system. The system and its representation in personalized character constructs – image- and affect-interfaces – are two inseparable sides of the same coin. The visual, textual, and procedural cues conveyed by the characters are in themselves hints and framings of the underlying system and function as guides for interpretation and for ascribing intentionality to the system. Giddings looks at the other side, but both are important. Although he dismisses "naive anthropomorphism" (ibid., 7), it is clear it plays a large part in the very same instance of playfully engaging with artificial life that Giddings discusses and which he sees as a key aspect in our interactions with games.

Here, it is useful to draw on what has been called the *Eliza effect* of games and playful systems. Named after the 1960s computer program by Joseph Weizenbaum, the Eliza effect is the tendency of users to regard computer agents as more complex and more intelligent than they really are (Wardrip-Fruin 2009, 25) – to perceive them more stereotypically human than machine. The *Eliza* program[64] produces textual prompts and responses, and in doing so portrays itself as a psychotherapist with – at times – an uncanny ability to hold a seemingly natural conversation. In the 1960s, it was a rare and potent example of how a computer program might appear believably alive; it laid before users technological agency of such proportions that it was easily interpreted as sentient, and Weizenbaum subsequently committed much work to educating people against the lure of the Eliza effect. His aim was to show that the susceptibility to regard *Eliza*, or any other program for that matter, as truly intelligent would dissipate once the workings behind the program were explained. If one understands how the program works, "its magic crumbles away; it stands revealed as a mere collection of procedures" (Weizenbaum 1966, 36).

While undoubtedly true in a sense, Weizenbaum seems to have underestimated the willing susceptibility often employed by users when encountering constructs such as *Eliza*. As Turkle found out with people who interacted with *Eliza*, while many chose to try and interrogate Eliza into malfunction or a logical cul-de-sac in order to expose its limited procedural structure, many others strove to keep *Eliza's*

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[64] *Eliza* is a natural language processing program that has several different modes or "scripts" it uses to interpret user inputs. *Eliza* is most famous for its *Doctor* script, which turns it into a stereotypical psychiatric interviewer. In this work, I discuss *Eliza* primarily as the *Eliza/Doctor* combination.

illusion going, even while fully understanding that they were partaking in a deception of sorts (Turkle 2005, 42–43). Wardrip-Fruin notes that the curious thing with this is that both approaches require improving one's understanding of *Eliza's* underlying system and using that information to either maintain or dispel the illusion (Wardrip-Fruin 2009, 36). It is the system the users are aware of, of course, but the experience of it can still remain one of playful acting and being acted upon together with the system and its non-human agents.

Nowadays, the same phenomenon can be observed in many different overlapping areas, such as videogames, chatbots (*Eliza* itself is still online and fully accessible), and virtual pets. Although the particularities differ from one media to the next, they are all based on systems that audiences explore and exploit, and furthermore they all share the common root of "human propensity to suspend disbelief in the presence of a persuasive dramatic presence" (Murray 1997, 224). That is, there is more to *Eliza* and all the other agents of playable media than a façade of sentience masking a system of simple "non-magical" rules. They are dramatic actors that tap into older baseline responses humans have, the only difference being that these characters are mapped onto the procedural and systemic media of the contemporary world rather than existing on the pages of books or as oil on canvas. In that context, it is hardly surprising that many users make an effort to keep the illusion going. We have always been playing with the ontology of characters, entirely willing to regard them as playfully real, and the systemic nature of these new illusory companions only encourages that.

To return to Giddings, it is clear that players of videogames are aware of the systems that guide the personas and character constructs they engage with, but they also inject some sense of playful aliveness and otherness – often fanned further by the already affectively designed character image (Steinberg 2012) – to the system. Contemporary audiences, then, understand these assemblages as bigger wholes; as characters or agents as well as systems. As Murray writes, *Eliza* was, at first, a fairly deceptive imitation of a real person, but its real staying power – the reason people are amused by it even today when all the magic is supposedly gone – is that it is genuinely a character; "Few people would now perceive *Eliza* as a real psychotherapist [but] as an improv partner *Eliza* is still quite popular" (Murray 1997, 73). Games, such as *Advance Wars 2* cited by Giddings, are systems for sure, and the characters in them are only smaller subsets of this system. However, at the same time as characters in videogames and playful digital media are only soft actors mobilized by the underlying systems, they are also clear distinct elements at the forefront of interfacing and interaction put forward by that system (or, more accurately, its developers) that affect the way the whole system is accessed and interpreted. The system, then, is not a depersonalized "thing" but something we experience in part through its character(s). Even *Eliza*, with no visual representation

or much textual characterization to go with it, is a named and personified construct, and in part because of that it is highly successful in evoking a sort of playful animism from us.

Indeed, this is exactly what is at work in *Pokémon*, too. The *Pokémon* videogames are systems, like *Advance Wars 2*, and the Pokémon themselves are only soft actors within those systems. But who could say their cutesy and cool visuals and quirky characterization – qualities indicative of, but not directly tied to, the videogames as systems – do not play a big part in, for example, which Pokémon players choose to play with? The whole game series – and through that, the whole phenomenon – literally begins with the players having to choose between three starter Pokémon based only on first impressions and visual distinctiveness, without any real interaction with, or understanding of, the underlying system. It is only after that moment that the players get to explore the videogames' procedural structures in order to develop a deeper association with the character they chose.

Pokémon, in a concrete fashion, actualizes the metaphor of electric animals Thrift (2004a) discussed, and unfolds it through the logic of Latourian techno-agency. As understood through Giddings, this maps onto software as an illusory and animistic media where we know that the agents we interact with are not alive nor self-governed yet still invest into the sensation that they are, and, as we saw with *Eliza*, often strive to keep the illusion going. The literal logic of pet-ownership in *Pokémon* mirrors both the phenomenon where we playfully turn software into a veritable other, as well as the biological metaphor – especially in the light of animism and non-human agency discussed above – that Thrift (2004a) argued for. To connect *Pokémon* to Thrift's wider argument, in it we can see "the advent of software-driven entities modelled on biological assumptions" which "is a significant event that has the potential to decisively change everyday life by adding in a new range of cohabitees" (Thrift 2004a, 476).

Of course, *Pokémon* is far from being the only product that so clearly deploys this effect of non-human agency, intimacy, and playful aliveness to the context of digital animals, pets, and companions. For example, *Tamagotchi* (Yokoi and Maita 1997) turns on this logic too (Pettman 2009; Ruckenstein 2008, 2010), and so does *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo EAD 2001; 2012; Brown and Berg Marklund 2015), *Creatures* (Cyberlife Technology Ltd. 1996; Kember 2003), *Kinectimals* (Frontier Developments 2010; Apperley and Heber 2015), *Nintendogs* (Nintendo EAD 2005; Tsai and Kaufman 2009; Ruckenstein 2013), and the wide variety of growing, collecting, and socializing games of similar ilk, from *Neko Atsume* (Hit-Point 2014) to *Neon Genesis Evangelion: Ayanami Raising Project* (Gainax and BROCCOLI 2001). Although coming from widely different backgrounds and genres, they are all based on a dynamic of non-human agents requiring caretaking or affective labor from a human and in exchange offering mediated intimacy, sense of achievement,

and social as well as game mechanical incentives to participate in these processes. They turn the premise of non-human agency and the degree of animism inherent in it – and in the technocultural society at large – into game mechanics of caring. These videogames deploy a quantified approach to relationships, the aim of which is often to equally sate yearning for control as well as care; a postmodern intimacy with non-human agents subjected to affectionate play. This is essentially what Pettman (much like McGlotten, as discussed earlier) describes when he writes about our new and queer intimacies that have emerged along with all these "new tools of mediation" (Pettman 2009, 202): intimacies both commercial and home-brewn that are ubiquitous in the contemporary technoculture. Here, in these instances of what I call mediated intimacies, technology is not only a medium but also a participant as well as an object of affections, with its own appearances and agencies of playful aliveness.

2.5.5   Researching affect

Next, I connect the themes of mediated intimacy and the methodological underpinnings of reading texts to the field of affect studies. I position theories and methods of affect as a layer between affective phenomena and reading them. They provide an ontology – and vocabulary – of feeling as well as a method to access it, thus enabling the media textual approach of this thesis to address affections and intimacies in *Pokémon's* playful mediascape and the mediated intimacy it produces.

Intimacy of the digital and the material, as well as its mediation in playfully alive bodies discussed earlier, are here seen to function as a field on which affects unfold and onto which they accumulate. That is, this subsection builds an affect-based theoretical and methodological approach to examining the developments of digital, virtual, and mediated intimacy sketched out earlier. As McGlotten writes, "Intimacy is not itself a form of affect; rather it is more like affect's own immanence—proximity, connection—a necessary precondition for certain affective states to bloom, especially those that have to do with other people. *Affect happens in and through intimacy*" (McGlotten 2013, 8–9, emphasis added). Following McGlotten, some registers of affect can be regarded as affective operationalization of intimacy. For this reason, affection is here understood not only as a feeling of fondness and intimacy but also in its archaic origin – from the latin root of *affectio* – as an act of affecting or being affected. The focus of this thesis is specifically in the contemporary sense of the word, on the fond feelings predicated on a sense of intimacy that media products like *Pokémon* elicit, but also in how these feelings and their relations to worlds and bodies are organized and felt as affect. The etymological root of the word in affecting and the contemporary use in fondness are consciously evoked in tandem.

Pokémon depends on intimacy that functions as the bed and the modulator for affects traveling between people, technology, and culture: mediated intimacy is, itself, the setting in which the affects in *Pokémon* happen, in a relationship of humans and non-humans, players and playthings, as sketched out in this thesis so far. Affect, then, takes up a position as an object of analysis in this technocultural context of intimacies and interrelations, and affect theory offers a vocabulary to draw out and examine this multitude of acts and affective encounters that spark from the foundation of mediated intimacy and, especially, appear as its capture in the commodities of popular culture.

2.5.5.1   An archive of thought and theory

In 2001, Anu Koivunen identified a cultural shift towards affective themes taking place in media cultures (2001, 7). These various instances and eruptions of affect around the turn of the millennium encouraged researchers to take up investigations of affective encounters in order to "examine media forms, representations and narratives, cultural framings and meaning-making processes" and to "ask how encounters with different media engage senses and affects (emotions, feelings, passions) and, hence, have effects" (ibid., 7–8).

Of course, these affective encounters are never simply "encounters", as in clear-cut situations where two sides meet. They are necessarily also sites where we can see connections between "the subjective and the cultural, individual and social, self and other, inside and outside" (ibid., 8), emerging from questions such as gendering, sexualizing, classing, and racializing. Affective encounters with media and technology – and their commodification in products – form networks of sociocultural processes as well as human and non-human actors and agencies, all with a range of capacities to affect each other. It is therefore vital to understand media technologies as something we affect but also crucially as something that affects us in return (Kember and Zylinska 2012, 13). Our lives are connected to technology as technology is connected to our life. Or to go beyond that, the extent to which our lives are mediated means that there is little sense in drawing lines between technology and life, in them existing somehow beyond each other or untouched by each other; they are, for the gross majority of humankind, one and the same. In order to discuss these environments and the affective encounters taking place within them, we must have some sense of what affect is.

Affect is, beyond anything, an assemblage, describable only through a collection of works, as an archive of thought and theory. It is a concept of thinking, of organizing thoughts and arguing for ontologies, rather than any singularly

discernible effect.[65] There is no clear definition of affect onto which it could be definitively anchored (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 3; Koivunen 2010, 10; Thrift 2004b). Indeed, there is not even an established "it" to anchor, even if such definitions or canonized works were found. As such, all approaches to affect are in themselves also definitions of it, related but irreducible (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 4).

Most works on affect discussed in this thesis can be loosely grouped under – or at least positioned adjacent to – the heading of the affective turn (Clough and Halley 2007; Clough 2008; Blackman and Venn 2010; Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Wetherell 2012), a moment in writing, research, and theory – as well as, arguably, the phenomena they are aimed at – of heightened focus on the corporeal, the affective, and the politics and aesthetics of feeling. Of course, although describing a distinct period in time, this "turn" must be understood as following a long line of prior work. For example, scholars of feminist theory already have a long history of working with affective topics and criticizing the lack of affective nuance in research, as Ahmed (2014, 205–207) and Koivunen (2001, 7; 2010, 22) point out. Also, as is the case with many terms that illustrate a pivotal phenomenon in culture, there have been studies of what could be deemed affect and affective phenomena *avant la lettre*. Indeed, even within the works cited in this section, such as Csikszentmihalyi's and Rochberg-Halton's studies on psychic energy and physical behavior in a material commercial culture and Latour's study on interdependent networks, are, in their own ways, works on affect that have for the most part taken place "before affect". Perhaps instead of discussing an affective turn – a turn to something and away from something else, taking place at a particular time – it would make more sense to speak of a recent re-emergence of a long-time interest in affective phenomena that offer different ways of approaching social and subjective matters (and matter). As such, the affective turn is better understood as several multidisciplinary parallel movements that coincide and coalesce as and in affect theory (Paasonen, Hillis and Petit 2015, 4; Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 19) instead of a unified and temporally fixed turn.

As a wide generalization, affect theory forms around the emphasis on sensations and materiality, as a something of a counterpoint to the long vogue of "the logocentric dominance of language and the textual as *the* general framework for understanding the world" (Paasonen, Hillis and Petit 2015, 4, emphasis in original;

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[65]   Here it resembles "emotion" as a practical term in that it, too, is used in a multitude of ways that hint at grasping a real-world referent yet defy clinical, psychological, and philosophical synthesis or cohesion (Izard 2010a; 2010b). It is a collection of constructs for making sense of – or offering *a* sense of – the world and our relations in it, regardless of whether this sense-making process is founded on universally shared principles.

Liljeström and Paasonen 2010). A material, affective, and embodied approach such as the one provided by affect theory in, for example, the context of technology and its texts would then help to better understand what Kuntsman calls the "*affective fabrics* of digital cultures: the lived and deeply felt everyday sociality of connections, ruptures, emotions, words, politics and sensory energies, some of which can be pinned down to words or structures; [and others that] are intense yet ephemeral" (2012, 3), to make sense of the sort of structures and chains of effect that easily escape analysis yet to a great degree make up our lives.

Overall, affect can be characterized as *a force of encounters between bodies of all kinds*, or, as Sara Ahmed phrases it, "how we come into contact with objects and others" (2014, 208), as well as how these contacts shape bodies. Much of the strength of affect theory is in its between-ness, as it directs attention to track flows of interaction rather than limiting itself only to the two extremities of action and reaction (Wissinger 2007, 232). Even the capacity of a body to affect another is located not only on the powers of the body itself but also on the interaction in which the affecting takes place (Ahmed 2014, 183; Deleuze 1988). The term as it relates to bodies and their potentialities to have effects – the loose basic tenet generalizable to most of contemporary affect theory – has philosophical roots in the works of the 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza and his examination of emotions in the form of affect (*affectus*), commonly as read through the works of Gilles Deleuze. In Spinozan tradition, affect is a property of an encounter and actions therein, characterizing the changing states of the mind and the body. It is essentially the increase or decrease of a mind's power to think and, relatedly, the body's power to act, with the increase of the power being pleasure (*laetitia*) and the decrease pain (*tristitia*) (Ethics III, 11). Relatedly, Spinoza highlights desire (*cupiditas*) as the third foundational affective element alongside pleasure and pain, and establishes it as an orientation towards wanting to increase power and to avoid anything that decreases it (ibid.; Ethics III, 9, sch.). For Spinoza, all emotions stem from these three fundaments. For example, love (*amor*) is pleasure "accompanied by the idea of an external cause" (Ethics III, 13, sch.). For Spinoza, then, the affective apparatus of life is thus rendered through contacts that either increase or decrease harmony, often in relation to something, and characterized as variances in an individual's *capacity to affect and of being affected* (Deleuze 1988, 123–124; Massumi 2005, xvi).

This take on affective phenomena is predicated on the fact that Spinoza establishes the mind and the body as parallels. That is, they are separate insofar as they are conceptually two distinct and concurrent systems, but, more importantly, they are also two ways of approaching what is essentially only one singular thing: a person (Ethics, II, 13). For Spinoza, the body and the mind are different manifestations of the same unit and its development, and hence the separation of bodily phenomena from cognitive ones – the body from the mind – is metaphysically

worth discussing but in practice leads to them being part and parcel of what, in sum, is a person. It is, as Hardt points out, this very relationship of minds and bodies as autonomous on their own yet locked into mirroring each other that powers affect theory to explore the mind and the body as two-in-one, with affects as the bridge between them (Hardt 2007, x).

Another interesting foundational aspect that stems from Spinoza is the versatility of the notion of a body. Especially with a detour through Deleuze, Spinoza's monism[66] is interesting in that since bodies are examined first and foremost as involving capacities to affect and be affected, there is no need to make an essentialist distinction between non-human and human or natural and artificial bodies, and instead their relations of sameness and difference can be conceptualized through their modes of affecting and being affected. As Deleuze notes, a Spinozist will define a being "not by its form, its organs, and its functions, and not as a subject either; you will define it by the affects of which it is capable" (Deleuze 1988, 124). That is, when looking at bodies on the level of their affects instead of their raw physicality, we can approach all manner of things and phenomena from a new angle; for example, by looking at their affects, a greater difference appears between a racehorse and a plough horse than between a plough horse and an ox (ibid.). A body, therefore, is not a fixed thing but something relational: a shifting collection of relations defined at all times by the affects it is capable of as well by how it is affected. Drawing from Spinoza and Jakob von Uexküll's animal behavior studies (2010), Deleuze sees in this the fundamental root of all ethology, broadening the concept to include not only animals but also bodies of all kinds, as well as their relations with the world (Deleuze 1988, 27, 125–126).

This is an important strength of affect as a theoretical concept in examining a network of human and non-human relations. It allows doing away with – or at least blending – everyday conceptions about what constitutes a body and, by consequence, who and what hold power to affect and be affected. A good example of this is Ahmed's examinations of "nations", "us", and the "other" as bodies capable of affecting each other and being defined in contact with each other (2014). In this sense, although Pikachu is in essence a collection of images, brands, memories, material paraphernalia, and fictional as well as factual histories, it is also a body just as well as the flesh-and-blood frame of the person that is buying a commodity brandished with an image of Pikachu. Furthermore, through the affects of its body, it is aligned with other similar bodies, such as the non-human animals and animal

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[66] For Spinoza, everything is one (i.e., Nature, i.e., God), and all individual beings are of that whole. But Spinoza abandons religion and mysticism as explanations, using God to establish a wholeness – an immanence – and then switching to more granular examinations of causes, effects, and affects (Brown and Stenner 2001, 88).

representations from which its conception derives from. Although it is a body of symbols, semantics, and (digital) media, its affects take their cues from the domain of life as much as technology.

Through this, Spinozist works help in "circumventing the analytic divisions between 'humans,' 'things,' and 'nature'" (Brown and Stenner 2001, 97), substituting these divisions with manifold subjects that are defined – and define themselves – in encounters and relations.

2.5.5.2   Works of a watershed

Despite being a concept grounded in the philosophies of the Early Modern period and discussed under different names but in similar terms in research throughout the 20th century, the year 1995 – what Seigworth and Gregg call a watershed moment in affect theory (2010, 5) – can be set as something of a focal moment in the most recent emergence of these themes, following the seminal explorations of affect by Brian Massumi and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

In 1995, Massumi suggested affect as being central to "understanding of our information- and image-based late capitalist culture" (Massumi 1995, 88), setting up groundwork for his influential work *Parables for the Virtual* (2002). In both, Massumi leans on a Deleuzian framing of cultural theory, through which he establishes affect as autonomous in its openness to the virtual, even as it is bound to the realities and constraints of the actual (Massumi 1995, 96; 2002, 35).

Hence, for Massumi, affect is autonomous insofar as it pertains to the infinite permutations of Deleuzian virtuality. This is also the basis for Massumi's separation of affect and emotion: for him, an affect identified and captured becomes an emotion, a sort of reflection or shadow of the always-eluding affect (ibid.). In a way, then, emotions are what we *know we feel* and affects are what we *potentially feel*. They are parts of the same chain of events but inhabit different ontological and phenomenological links on it, with emotions being affect "owned and recognized" (Massumi 1995, 88). In this sense, Massumi's definition of affect can be described as a potentiality of the body to feel, with emotion being that potentiality collapsed or resolved into a singular identifiable event (ibid., 93; 2015, 3–6).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, along with Adam Frank, took a different approach to affect. Instead of working through Deleuze, they ground their 1995 discussion on affect on the works of psychologist Silvan Tomkins. From their reading on Tomkins's works, they embark on what could be called, in similar terms as Massumi's scholarly trajectory, an intervention aimed at cultural studies theory and post-structuralism. Sedgwick continued this project in, among other things, her 2003 seminal work *Touching Feeling*. In these works, affect appears primarily through Tomkins's theory of the affect system. Tomkins, taking cues from Darwin's thoughts

on evolutionary affects (Darwin 1872), rejected Freudian drive theory – the idea that humans have fundamental instinctual needs that drive our behavior – and argued instead for the primacy of psychological affects based in biology and biological responses (Demos 1995, 19) as the basic motivator of human actions.

For Sedgwick and Frank, what is remarkable about Tomkins's work is the freedom inherent in the affect system (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 503). Following Tomkins, they note that any affect might have any object, which enables a freedom that releases affect from the heterosexist teleology ingrained in, according to Sedgwick and Frank, much of the psychology of Tomkins's contemporaries as well as in Freudian traditions (ibid.). As such, Sedgwick and Frank see in a combination of Tomkins's psychology and various strategies of critical theory a beneficial opening to bring biology back to humanities and social sciences, to the benefit of them all. In doing so, Sedgwick's and Frank's opening was a careful move towards accounting for the evolutionary underpinnings of our emotional landscape.

These two 1995 works along with their authors' further explorations served to herald further work by a number of scholars in a wide variety of disciplines, all of which drew to varying degrees on Silvan Tomkins's psychobiology or on highlighting the importance of the biological body in theory in general (see Wilson 2015; Probyn 2004), and on Gilles Deleuze, Spinoza, and Massumi's popularization of them (Shouse 2005; Clough 2008; Parisi and Terranova 2001). Doing away with a considerable amount of finesse and detail, then, in general it can be said that the millennial turn in affect theory has its roots in Tomkins's psychology and Spinozist-Deleuzian philosophy (and Massumi's readings of it).[67] Along with widely influential research, Massumi and Sedgwick (and Frank) also faced criticism for what was seen as a simplified account of psychological phenomena and the life that influences it, as well as poaching neuroscience to validate their pursuits, and propping up straw men the wrongs of which affect theory is supposed to solve (Leys 2011; Wetherell 2012, 11, 60–61; Hemmings 2005; Papoulias and Callard 2010).

Although inadequate as a foundation for affect studies by themselves, the two seminal works of 1995 are convenient in introducing the broad strokes of mainstream affect theory of the past 20 years, as well as what is often referred to as the turn to affect as discussed above, in that they served to (re-)popularize the consequences and significance of theorizing emotions and affects, their foregrounding as a subject

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[67]   Massumi's interpretation of Spinoza and Deleuze is somewhat idiosyncratic, and his notion of affect as escaping understanding is more his own construction than based on Deleuze and Spinoza. A hint of this can be discerned, for example, in Massumi's insistence on separating affect from cognition, which approaches a dualism where the body reigns supreme and the mind follows suit; an upside-down Cartesian view certainly not supported by either the Deleuzian or Spinozist traditions (Kristensen 2016, 24, 13).

in research, their sameness and separateness, the importance of bodily miscellanea and material particularities to analyses of cultural works and phenomena, and a sort of on-off flirting with biological and psychological sciences, all of which are key themes in affect theory that has since 1995 blossomed into a far wider and more complex body of works, approaches, and methodologies.

The past two decades have seen significant development in affect theory, the cataloguing of which would be an ambitious task bordering on the impossible. To reduce contemporary affect theory to these two accounts would be a mistake as there are unaccountable other lines of inquiry and, as noted earlier, in the end all approaches to affect are idiosyncratic to a degree. Regardless, for attempts at broad typologies, see Seigworth and Gregg (2010, 6–8) and Thrift (2004b).

Although few are as candid about what this idiosyncrasy and multiplicity means in practice, Kyrölä's description of affect as an analytical term comes close to how it is generally deployed in practice in the current theoretical landscape, and how I use affect theory in my thesis as well: Kyrölä points out that their work draws from many sources and uses "'affect' to glue together various viewpoints, even if temporarily, for strategic purposes" (Kyrölä 2016, 16). That is, Kyrölä uses a wide array of theory and binds it together not only with theories of affect but also by reading these other traditions through affect. In such a way, affect is constructed as a phenomenon and a tool that corresponds to a general outset of theory but that is also open to flexible re-readings of itself as well as other bodies of theory. The practical use of affect, in this way, becomes a sort of meta-methodology of conceptualizations and interpretations, where affect theory is not necessarily always explicitly present, but rather informs the whole research process in – to paraphrase Kyrölä – temporary and strategic acts.

2.5.5.3   Affect in videogames

Drawing from the wider discourse on media, affectivity, and reading examined here, Sundén (2012a) suggests that videogame research, too, ought to experiment with the potential affects bring to research. At the time Sundén's piece was published, the study of videogames arguably had a long history of analyzing games from a standpoint that forwent material and embodied dimensions of the text, and moreover relied on close playing that was "often devoid of both the personal and the experiential" (Sundén 2012a, 131).[68] Furthermore, as videogames function on a

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[68]   Polemically and generally speaking, that is. Many seminal works (such as Sudnow's *Pilgrim in the Microworld* in 1983) that circumnavigate this do exist. Also, the field has developed significantly since the publication of Sundén's piece (see, for example, the references in this section). Nevertheless, Sundén's point is accurate. For a more

performance of sorts – on the non-trivial traversal of the ergodic text – the work that is read is necessarily already a product of the playing subject. Or, to rearticulate this, the act of reading the videogame text is simultaneously the act of performing and co-creating the selfsame text to a somewhat more pronounced degree than with other types of texts. In this sense, discussions on the different forms of contact undertaken when reading, the understanding of the text as an other that is interacted with, and the ability to effectively indulge in it as well as reflexively unpack that experience and contrast it to the experiences of others as well as to the wider cultural circulation of the text become essential.

Furthermore, looking at the medium of the videogame, affect appears as a way to understand the foundational links of technology and biology inherent in videogame play. As established previously, affect is a bodily thing, often linked to the visceral dimensions of humans: to feelings, emotions and the complex web of thoughts, actions, and responses stemming from, and further eliciting, them. However, in the case of videogames and their post-media aesthetic (Manovich 2001a), affect is also a function of the technology on which the videogame text is built on, exists in, and is played with. This mirrors a more general strain in affect theory to see affect equally as a product of biological and technological dimensions (Ash 2015). Indeed, as Kember and Zylinska (2012) remind, humans are physically and ontologically part of a shared technological environment.

In his examination of videogames through the works of Deleuze and Guattari, Cremin fashions an approach that essentially forms an affective aesthetic theory of videogames (Cremin 2016, 2). That is, videogame play for Cremin is fundamentally about action, reaction, and interaction between the player and the videogame, and as per Deleuze and Guattari, this sort of mingling co-creation can in turn can be unpacked through affect (ibid., 17). By noting that "affect is always in the middle" (ibid., 4), Cremin positions affect as neither a result nor a point of origin but as something that exists in the events of acting on the videogame and the videogame acting on the player and the world. Although much more connected to the thoughts of Deleuze and Guattari than the other approaches discussed here, his covers much of the same ground in that it highlights videogames as objects of action, with particular possibility spaces and tendency to create player-machine-hybrids as human bodies come into contact with technological apparati and digital objects therein.

Turning the body and its contacts into spatial modalities of play, Colman approaches affects in videogames through the notion of *play place*. It is an abstract construction that "turns the body of the game player into a bundle of perceptual possibilities, a site where a range of affective relations can be generated from the

extensive history – with largely similar conclusions – see Apperley and Jayemane (2012).

singular activities of play" (2008) and that "creates a perpetual action-affection-perception, where singular possibilities are spun together to produce the conglomerate whole of the play experience" (ibid.). For her, the play place is a physical space but also a mental one. A pun can make up a play space just as well as a moment of gameplay in *Pokémon*, or a memory of that gameplay which triggers a playful reinterpretation of, for example, one's surroundings at work. In that sense, play place is the procedural, affective, and virtual possibility space of games and play; the technological, conceptual, and corporeal spatial abstraction that lingers in – and as a result of – playful activities. Regarding videogames and their affects, she writes: "a game system requires a body-player to activate its site. This play-place[69] requires another body to engage in relations that will produce different effects, in turn affecting both bodies" (ibid.). Affects, for Colman, appear in videogame play as the concomitant forces of the player and the system, acting on each other.

Veale approaches the affectivity of videogames through a similar argument, focusing on the hybridity of not necessarily the bodies at play themselves, but rather their agency: he argues that the network between the player, the videogame text and the technology sustaining them both creates a distributed form of agency where the player's power to act on the game and the game's power to act on the player lead to a sense of responsibility and consequence, unlike that offered by many other forms of storytelling (2015, 135–136, 152–153). In this, the ergodic nature of the videogame text seems to imply heightened potential for affect by way of increased investment in the action-reaction loops of the text.

Whether or not there are any vital ontological differences between the affectivity of ergodic and non-ergodic media, it seems clear that the videogame form with its key emphasis on "conjunction of textual interpretation and the performed practice of playing" (Calleja 2011, 136) leads to the "potential to deliver powerfully affective experiences" (ibid.; see also Galloway 2006, 83). Interactivity – as a general word describing this situation where agency meets interpretation in the context of a textual other – is often flagged for being an empty word (Murray 1997, 128), but it does retain a sense of meaning when understood as the ways a player can affect the game and the game, in reacting, the player. This, to paraphrase Murray (ibid., 74), is to say that the notion of interaction is meaningful when understood as arising from procedurality and participation: a situation where the player can affect the play state and the play state is "meaningfully responsive to user input" (Bogost 2007, 42). The affects of the videogame text are in moments of interaction like these: the procedural rhetoric of the game meets the play-participation of the player, forming an interactive circuit of acting and being acted upon.

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[69]   Colman uses "play place" and "play-place" interchangeably.

Combining the examination of human and non-human agencies, Shinkle sees videogames as "embodied events" (2005, 2) in which the body and the game join to form gameplay's affective dimensions. In a later work on the same topic, she phrases it in an argument reminiscent of Veale's: "Playing a videogame involves a kind of Faustian bargain with the technology, a handing-over of real-world agency in exchange for agency within the gameworld" (2012, 103). Shinkle suggests how a successful circuit of game-technology-player becomes essentially a single body, an extension to the players' (as well as the participating technology's) original body. Joining these themes of videogame hybridity, affective enjoyment, and a rhetoric of a cyborgian posthumanism, Lahti discusses "a hybrid condition resonant with the cyborg" in the corporeal pleasure of videogame play (2003, 164) that results from the union of the player's body and the videogame. The closing remark in his article resonates with the sentiment of change and adaption that (videogame) technology has brought about but also reminds that even after such transformation, we are not to forget the body: "If something is left behind when we play, it is not the body. We may be toying with the body when we play, but we remain flesh as we become machines" (ibid., 169).

Following this thematic, affect in videogames can be seen as the union of the biological and the technological. Regarding videogames as expressions and causes of biological affective qualities in and through computer systems, Aubrey Anable positions them as assemblages between machines and bodies (Anable 2018). Anable maintains that affect theory offers tools to "read across code, images, and bodies without reducing video games to either their representational qualities or their digital and mechanical properties" (ibid., xvi), suggesting that videogames are objects at the intersection of many (techno-)cultural properties and as such resistive of readings and theories unable to account for their capacious bodies. That is, "putting theories of affect in direct conversation with video games zeroes in on the contact zones between bodies, platforms, images, and code to redress the atomization of these approaches in new media studies" (ibid., xvii). In such a way, affect theory's inroads into game and media studies stem as much from the need to understand contemporary forms of media and their structures in general as they do from attempts to unpack the affective phenomena they elicit.

Videogames are couplings of the player and the game, forming in that union an affective hybrid place, opening bodies both electronic and corporeal to bilateral acts of affecting. The text of the videogame consists of the player and the game, together; the player as a creative being taking part in the structured lattices of the game. Affect, then, offers a way to read for the structures of this hybrid place and its bodies, as well as the outputs of its procedural interactivity. It is an alternative way to address within one theoretical frame many of the interdisciplinary core aspects of videogames, such as the non-trivial traversal of ergodic texts (Aarseth 1997), the

overall notions of interaction and agency (Murray 1997), and the embodied cybernetic coupling[70] of the player and the game (Keogh 2015; 2018; Harvey 2009; Lahti 2003); the combination and intermingling of body, mind, and technology as well as their influence in the playing subject (Giddings 2009).

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that while the affect system of videogames has previously been theorized to largely work on a cybernetic union of the technological media text and the player, this does not, or should not, convert to a full conflation of the two. Ash (2015) argues through Guattari's concept of ensemble that the use of technology consists of constellations of affect transfer rather than simple merges and unions. A phone call, for example, requires human voice that affects a microphone that translates the soundwaves into electrical signals (ibid., 87). A phone call does create a singular technologically augmented body, but, in order to function, this new temporal body nevertheless rests on a whole mélange of interconnected technological elements: copper wiring or communication satellites to relay the call, plastic and metal crafts to fashion the phone itself, and geological technology to accrue the resources for the creation of the phone in the first place. Furthermore, one could add to these all kinds of social and cultural ensembles drawn anywhere from practices of voice communication to social contacts and from labor to retail chains. Existing in a technocultural space where videogames and supertoys (Thrift 2003, 391–392) exemplify the commodified everyday of technological human–non-human networks of affect and affection, then, is to both erase affective boundaries between human and non-human and to highlight them in order to better see how affect transfers and travels in these ensembles. As such, for Ash, "technical objects operate as sites of translation, where affect is produced and translated into different states and forms for different purposes" (2015, 87), and the mapping and examining of those affects and their paths as they circulate and transform in this space is how affects help make sense of technological and mediated phenomena.

In this sense, affect is a powerful explanatory framework for videogame texts in general and for the transmedial ludic world of *Pokémon* in particular.[71] As already discussed, *Pokémon* is more than immaterial images, conceptual branding, and game

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[70]   Cybernetics, especially as routed through fields of cultural and media studies such as cyberfeminism and posthumanism (Lister et al. 2008, 254–257), is especially closely linked to the study of affect, as it "describes networks of actors (whether living or non-living, natural or synthetic) who are able to express themselves, and who likewise can receive and respond to the expressions of others. Cybernetics thus describes an affective network, a network of affective expression and affective response" (Matviyenko, Clough & Galloway 2015).

[71]   Indeed, Harvey, among others, identifies affect as a key factor in the production and consumption of transmedia (2015), which would suggest that affect functions especially well as a theoretical approach in an environment consisting of transmedial play products.

rules existing as ghosts in a machine.[72] It is also, for example, toys, non-digital location-based play, and metaphoric corporeality of creatures and Trainers, for which the texture of plastics, physicality of the everyday, and a whole plethora of smells, touches, feels, and possessions lend affective gravitas and help form affective ties. Contemporary multimedia game franchises are not about the player's body nor are they about the game. What they rely on is the combination of the bodies as and across platforms. The contemporary videogame player exists at an intentionally designed crossroads of various media texts with a whole plethora of interactions and interfaces available to them at all times. It is not only that they form a joint assemblage with the videogame text and the technology it runs on but that they also engage with these texts on an even wider front. In the case of *Pokémon*, for example, the videogame system with its procedural logics and intimacies with technological animals is the basis of the franchise, expanded on in different forms of play and worldbuilding that take place in non-digital games as well as in other media and cultures of many forms. The audience of *Pokémon* inhabits a textual reality that is less dichotomous between real and virtual as it is mixed and composited: a blend of media, identities, worlds, and interactions both "real" and imagined, where play is the power to wield agency in such an environment. Affect theory – as a field of theories of interaction and networked agency – provides a potent analytical framework to understand videogames and their surrounding cultures, as what is researched is an analyzable series of contacts and their results, emerging, lingering, and circulating in bodily constellations between players and texts.

2.5.5.4   Reading for affect

In Section 2.3, I described how I approach play and playable media as texts open for critical and cultural reading. Here, I discuss the methodology of reading as it relates to affects.

Although sometimes theorized as escaping signification into the unknowable reaches of potentiality and intensity, affects can also be argued to be at least partially discursive, found in (as well as created by) mass culture and its texts (Cvetkovich 1992, 30). Ahmed calls this the *emotionality of texts* (2014, 13), the rhetorical and

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[72]   It is worth pointing out that none of these are immaterial either: images are conveyed through physical means and evoke materiality at least metonymically, conceptual branding is a function of – and productive of – material branding, and no matter how immaterial the rules are, a videogame is still necessarily a physical object engaged with in physical and embodied play. They are, however, aspects that can be meaningfully engaged with by using theories that do not account for corporeality and materiality, unlike many other aspects of *Pokémon*.

discursive affective effect of texts that is formed in their circulation, use, and contact with other bodies and signs.

In the context of popular culture and mass media, the presence of affects is also due to an intentional effect: affective adhesion is designed into products to facilitate certain kinds of experiences and to turn that attachment into a commercial asset. Jenkins points out the logic of designing affective products as "affective economics" (2006b, 20, 61–62, 279), laying out how contemporary cultural industries tend to produce brands that aim at cultivating emotional commitment in consumers. This strategy relies on a commercially empowered consumer who takes part in a larger brand-affiliated community; a consumer who is "active, emotionally engaged, and socially networked" (ibid. 20). Such commitment is the ideal state particularly for an audience of dispersed transmedia and media mix texts that call for motivation and desire to delve deeper, to engage, and thus to consume more. Speaking more broadly, Ahmed (2014), leaning on a largely Marxist economic paradigm, discusses affect *as* economy, drawing parallels between the circulation of capital and the circulation of emotion, noting not only how they are intertwined (as they are in Jenkins's affective economics) but more profoundly as how they fundamentally work on similar logics. The whole notion of affect can be understood through a semiautonomous structuring of feeling taking place in the circulation of signs; affect as capital, which Ahmed calls "affective economies" (2014, 44–45). Affective economics and affective economies function on a similar basis in that both offer the distribution and circulation of feelings as a factor in their accumulation. Attachment and intimacy beget more attachment and intimacy – or other emotional responses regardless of valence – and in the context of commercial pop cultural texts, this basic affective and accumulative relay system is employed and commodified in encouraging audiences to further commit to the products they consume.

Not surprisingly, these same themes of commercial textual affectivity and its intentional accumulation in cultures surrounding them can be traced in *Pokémon* as well. This approach to media texts as intentionally and inevitably affective leads to the conclusion that a textual analysis of these products and their wider structures is not complete without an affective component. This is, of course, hardly a recent development in practices of critical cultural analysis. In her argument for (re)introducing affect into the analysis of texts, Isobel Armstrong problematizes how undertaking a close reading without taking note of affect is to submit to the post-Enlightenment binary of thought versus feeling. For her, close reading "has never been close enough" (2000, 95), as there has been a tendency for more emphasis put on reading for a mastery of texts over their affective qualities. For close reading to be an effective method of analysis, it must reincorporate affect back within the limits of "what is legitimately discussable" (ibid., 87). Instead of turning towards affect, she argues the difference between thought and feeling ought to be abolished entirely,

folding the affective into the cognitive and acknowledging that they are irreducible to one or the other (ibid., 91). Likewise, Pearce argues that reading as an analytical practice is not only about a text and a reader interpreting it; something which she sees as a predominantly hermeneutic approach that – while effective in many ways – falls short by polarizing texts and readers as "active" and "passive" (Pearce 1997, 14), and turning this dichotomy into a flat process of examining the power balance in meaning production (ibid., 14–15). Reading, for Pearce, ought to be an interactive process where the analyzed text is positioned as a "textual other" (ibid., 15–17), and attended to through its affective draw (ibid., 20). She aims for an understanding of the text that forgoes the endpoints of mastery and dissection in favor of seeing the text-reader dynamic as a *relationship.*[73] It is, in effect, a way to foreground the reader's affective responses and engage with the "reading fantasy" (ibid. 18) of emotions willfully and indeed playfully arising from contacts with fictional worlds, characters, stories, and the networks of discourse and context in which they take place.

Pearce does not suggest breaking away from the hermeneutical tradition but instead highlights the epistemic and pragmatic pitfall often inherent in it: when texts are read for mastery, it foregrounds a divide whereupon scholars know how they *should* read a text but also how they *actually* read a text. Bracketing the affective and often personal element from the experience and maintaining a distance to the text in order to remain (somewhat paradoxically) "analytical" are the gold standards of presenting one's analysis, whereas the reality of the reading – and thus necessarily the resulting analysis – is a whole lot messier affair (Pearce 1997, 194–195). Indeed, this messier affair is precisely the sort of reading that, in the context of game studies, Jenny Sundén suggests as done through affective playing: close reading as playing that takes place in "the intricate borderland between representation and corporeality, meaning and affect" (2012a, 145). Likewise, Aubrey Anable, putting forward an argument similar to Pearce's, encourages to connect the analysis of game elements to the study the "affective relationships that develop between players and video games, across bodies, code, molded plastic, and screens" (Anable 2018, 132), and to pay particular attention to what the game asks of the player and how it embeds into the everyday (ibid., 131). In this way, these theories of affect and reading encourage remaining curious, flexible, and above all honest about one's textual traversals and the affective circuitry that they produce. Rather than reading specifically for feelings, the mode of affective reading is a composite approach of switching between different

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[73]   Indeed, as Brinkema notes, a certain active relationship between a reader and a text is necessary to read affects: close reading does not "uncover" affects and intensities, but rather the force of affect is "produced and brought into being as its activity" (Brinkema 2014, 38).

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tracks of analysis and acknowledging their holistic whole, feelings and all. On this point, Paasonen, drawing from Pearce, notes that the key issue in understanding this kind of an approach to reading is maintaining self-reflexivity as one navigates different modes of reading (Paasonen 2007, 45). This might indeed reveal a path to affective reading that no single method of reading alone would show, and more importantly might reconcile that this path of reading is well trod to begin with, even if rarely acknowledged (Pearce 1997, 24).

Addressing the issue of the emotionality of texts more broadly, Ahmed notes that whether they are acknowledged or not, personal feelings do tend to be present in close readings anyway because there do not exist any separate analyzable units of affective material that could somehow be removed from their surroundings (Ahmed 2014, 14). Since emotions and affects relating to objects are ultimately social and contingent – that is, they depend on contact of various kinds (ibid., 1, 6, 18n13, 194) – the professional cannot and, per Armstrong (2001) and Pearce (1997), should not single themselves out of the affective processes they discuss. Whatever is analyzed is, in part, created and relayed through the one who is reading, and understanding as well as acknowledging this is vital in all forays into reading. This is particularly relevant for a textual analysis of videogames and playable media where the ergodic and embodied textuality of play suggests a strong relationship between the game and the player in creating the text.

Affect, as a force between bodies, can be seen to take on a role as an element in texts as well as in their production, reception, and research. Affects, as ubiquitous aspects of life and as commercialized assets aimed at cultivating affective ties and experiences between products and audiences, are vitally present in texts, and as such examinations of these textual affects offer means for tracing the contours and collisions of signification and embodiedness in close readings. For example, whereas Keogh (2018) elegantly discusses the broad mechanisms of videogame texts as a form of embodied textuality – i.e., what takes place between the game and the player's body in play – affect offers a way to start from that foundation and carry on further into the relationships formed with the text. Through affect, attention is drawn to human and non-human actions in play: how the text builds the position of its player, how the player becomes the co-creator of the text, and, overall, how the player and the text act and in turn are acted upon in play. In other words, it helps to give form not only to the relationship with the text but also the acts that create, sustain, and shape it. Likewise, thinking through affects helps in navigating the researcher's understanding of their own affective experiences with these texts and in turn helps theorizing the wider affective impacts of texts. Affect theory functions in all this as a setting that enables switching between these registers of personal and social, and by doing so hopefully brings close reading, in Armstrong's terms, "close enough" without letting go of the bigger picture.

In aiming for a close enough reading that understands the relationship readers form with textual others, the question becomes, how do I attune my analysis to pick up on these relationships and their affective elements? In Section 2.3, I described how I read playable and playful texts by paying attention to their different components and the procedural rhetoric that forms in play. To join that with the analysis of affects in (and arising from contacts with) those components and procedural rhetoric, I draw on another set of methods.

In examining different approaches to collecting data on affective processes and affective layers of media texts, Knudsen and Carsten describe one lineage of "affective methods" (2015, 18) for similar readings as largely stemming from the theoretical basis formed around the works of Sara Ahmed, which is indeed my affective approach here as well. The focus on Ahmed as something of a trailblazer for this methodological slant is understandable, given her prominent role in the narratives of the affective turn. She is an important theorist for affect, and importantly also a theorist who did not turn to affect as a way to let go of emotions, but rather who found affect and emotion to be part and parcel of the same phenomenon, retaining much of Spinoza's philosophy in her own work (Ahmed 2014, 208).

For Ahmed, affect and emotion are ways to discuss the same thing: affective phenomena that are contiguous in a way that they *can* be separated into affect and emotion but that still exist as one (2014, 210). Despite the distinctive "composite and elastic" (Sundén 2012a, 137) view of affects and emotions presented in her seminal work *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004 and 2014[74]), it is not difficult to see how Ahmed's theory turned into a key text in the then-nascent affect theory. She leverages Spinozist philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari, and takes a critical stance on Massumi's (2002) notions of affect, emphasizing that her approach is one that does not differentiate between affects and emotions, leading to her theories being interpretable as being about either and both (2014, 40n4, 207). In her later work (2010a; 2010b), she continues on this composite path, but her view on affect is markedly more influenced by the wider discourse of the affective turn*,* and more than before she relies on affect rather than emotion as the prominent nomenclature of affective phenomena. Despite this shift, even in her later works she maintains that separating affect and emotion can lead to an erasure of the visceral in emotions and

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[74]   *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* was published in 2004. The largely identical second edition published in 2014 has some updates and a new afterword in which Ahmed positions the book in relation to her other works, and recounts the effect the book had on, among other things, the development of affect theory. I use the second edition throughout this thesis, but for the development of affect theory, it is useful for the reader to know that Ahmed's arguments were – for the most part –forwarded as early as 2004.

the particular in affect (2010a, 230–231n1), since both are basically contiguous aspects of a single phenomenon. As such, although I discuss affective phenomena primarily through the language of affect, I acknowledge that affects and emotions are always intertwined: as bodily actions, reactions, and transformations (in and between bodies of all kinds), and as attributed feelings recognized as emotions.

Broadly speaking, the overall content of Ahmed's work is that affect is a force in between bodies that makes and hides borders in their moments of contact, orients us towards others, and congeals as an effect of histories and contexts. At the core of her theory, Ahmed speaks of the aforementioned affective economies, where feelings do not inhabit signs or commodities, subjects or objects, but instead are produced in the process of their circulation (2014, 8, 45). This is a move to depersonalize affect. Here, affect does not reside primarily in an object or in a person, but rather in a holistic economy of affect where "emotions do not positively inhabit *anybody* or *anything*" (ibid., 46, emphases in original). Thus, affect can be said to exist as relations in an affective economy or network where it forms in points of contact, as encouraged by objects, bodies, and movements.[75]

For texts, this means affect can be discussed as a field of sorts: an affective dimension of doing, being, and acting that can be read from (and into) a text and its manifold connections, and which, to a degree, augments interpretation as well as discourse related to the text. In this sense, affect – and the affects of texts in particular – bears a close resemblance, functionally and conceptually, to aesthetics as ways we relate to and make meaning from the world (Anable 2018, 120; see also Cremin 2016, 2). Ngai discusses this theme of affect's quality as a co-efficient force that keys experiences into potential affective states through the idea of a "cultural artifact's feeling tone: its global or organizing affect, its general disposition or orientation toward its audience and the world" (2005, 28). Tone, then, is neither the text's internal representation of feeling nor the straightforward emotional response of its reader but a more complex concept that includes them both, albeit not limited to them. The subjective experience of a text is part of it, the discourse in which these experiences are generated (and which in turn generate the discourse), and the more or less objective registers of creative intent and formal issues present in the text all contribute to the complex push and pull of subjective and objective aspects of tone. Indeed, Ngai notes that the tension of subjective/objective in addressing the affective tone of a work is precisely what tone describes and what gives it its analytical power: "tone *is* the dialectic of objective and subjective feeling that our aesthetic encounters inevitably produce" (ibid., 30, emphasis in original).

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[75]   Much like Latour's material-semiotic networks that have greatly influenced my reading as discussed earlier, Ahmed's affective ontology requires that one attend to material as well as immaterial and human as well as non-human relations (Ahmed 2014, 7).

Here, as a zone of potential emotions (Kavka 2008, 31), affect manifests as a tool for reading the feeling tone of a work, to explore its affective potential as a force of affecting and being affected, linked to the subjective and existing to a degree also in the broader orientation that make up the structure of the text. In this way, reading for the ordering and organization of affect also works as a tool in looking closer at videogames and their affective designs. The procedural rhetoric of the videogame (see 2.3), comprised of the way the game as a system structures the experience of playing it, can be read specifically for the affects it suggests – much like how Ahmed reads texts specifically for their subtly rhetorical affective power (Ahmed 2014, 194–195, 225).

The result is an examination of what Sykes calls the "affective tone" of videogames (2006, 80–81), the designed affective experience the game is intended to evoke through the stimuli it aims at the player. Likewise, Carr notes how both *Silent Hill* (Team Silent 1999) and *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios 1999) build their affective tones through the structuring of their (cyber-)textual forms and the player's means of traversing them (Carr 2006, 71). This enables the games to conform to and reproduce their respective genres and the emotional affect aligned with these genres. This is not to say that this affective tone is a certainty for all players, but rather that it is an identifiable and ambivalent general structure of affect in the text. It does not necessarily manifest for all players, but it nevertheless *generally* modulates the affective experience of, and discourse related to, the game, whether explicitly identified or not.

Furthermore, the affective tone of the videogame is not only something read from a finished product, but rather it is also a function of the design process itself (Calleja 2011, 136; Ash 2012, 3–4). The process itself can be framed as one of intentionally managing and manipulating the affects of the videogame into a "framework of experience" (Klastrup 2008, 145). Experiences of a game are, of course, subjective, and as such, game designers cannot design for particular individual affective reactions. Instead, they can aim for an overall framework that maintains general alignment or structuring of affect.

In this, Ahmed's and Ngai's theories intersect to the degree that for Ngai (2005), the tonal discourse of a work seems to be dependent on the very circulation of the work and the dialectic of objective and subjective feeling therein. The creation of a work's feeling tone is largely an effect of the affective economy in action. For Ahmed (and, to a degree, Ngai as well), then, the point is not necessarily in the affect itself, which easily leads down to the unsteady ontological paths of, for example, Massumi, but in its networked nature; in the "circulation of emotion between people, as well as between people and images or objects" (Szott 2010, 39). The affective aesthetic of a work can be argued to consist of innumerable relationships with texts as well as the affective valences produced by those relationships, calling for exactly

the sort of sensitive attention in reading suggested earlier by, for example, Armstrong and Pearce. Arising from the circulation of texts and discourses, then, are the affects of reading, and in large part my approach is to examine – through a reading of my own – some of them as constituents of *Pokémon's* mediated intimacy; the feeling tone of *Pokémon* as it pertains to a sense of affection and intimacy.

In order to identify and discuss the aspects of the procedural rhetoric of *Pokémon* that in particular contribute to the media mix's mediated intimacy, I use a central concept in Ahmed's affective economies: *stickiness*. Describing the contact between personal effects and social circulating discourses, at its simplest it means the accumulative value emotions accrue in affective economies. That is, signs accumulate affective potential – in Ahmed's nomenclature "become sticky" (Ahmed 2014, 4, 11) or "saturated with affect" (ibid.) – by way of being circulated. Much like capital for Marx, from whom Ahmed loans her metaphor of economy, affect accumulates in circulation, and "the more signs circulate, the more affective they become" (ibid., 45). Ahmed's own example of this is how the word "Paki"[76] has become sticky through repetition and association with other signs, until it accrued a metonymic status affixed with derogative power, becoming heavy with affect (ibid., 91–92). Ahmed illustrates the practicality of this process by noting how, for example, happiness or disgust can "depend on histories of associations that have become 'sticky'" (2014, 220). In this way, stickiness is essentially "an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs*"* (ibid., 90). Repetition, for example, can make something sticky, as can all manner of associations, prior experiences, representations, and discursive linkages. They allow for a history to build and for affect to become attached to that history (ibid., 91). Likewise, these histories all contribute to the affective predispositions that guide a person's interpretation of any given situation, and through repeated reworking, the sticky object might also take on new meanings.

In a wider sense, affect functions through context.[77] Indeed, the whole notion of an affective aesthetic tone, and the nodes of stickiness therein, relies on the interplay of personal experiences and the context arising from the contacts between bodies in a wider network. For instance, a gift from a loved one imbues an object with feeling, and a place may become affectively loaded through what has happened there (Ahmed 2010a, 20). Here we also see the contiguous nature of emotions and affects in Ahmed's work: our bodily responses (what generally would be called affect) are formed through histories and contexts of contact. They are not autonomous to any

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[76]   A predominantly British racial slur aimed at people perceived to be of South Asian descent.

[77]   This contextuality of affect is not limited to Ahmed's work. For example, Massumi emphasizes the importance of prior events to the formation of affects (2002, 30).

degree, but rather depend on, for example, past actions, associations, learned or internalized values, and recognized emotions (ibid., 231).

Stickiness, then, describes how affect is not *in* anything, but rather is present in contacts between bodies and objects, in their relationships and effects, whereupon some surfaces accrue affect and others reject it. In this way, stickiness is both the accumulating effect of affects as well as affects themselves insomuch as they sustain or preserve "the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (Ahmed 2010b, 29). Hence, examining affects becomes, in part, a task about identifying nodes of stickiness in the network of an affective economy in order to gain understanding on how signs circulate, stick, and evade contact. This is what I, too, am ultimately after when I examine the mediated intimacy arising from the core ludic elements of the *Pokémon* series and its media mix.

The work of a brand like *Pokémon* is in the shaping of these sticky sites, forming stable signs that, while always on the move, appear to consumers as familiar, stable, and intertextually – at least within the media mix – relevant. The media mix management of *Pokémon* is to produce and sell fragmentary media that is unceasingly in motion, yet to build into them a mechanism through which they also stick, coalesce, and collapse into collections of particular affective nodes. The identification and examination of that process as well as these sticky nodes as they relate to affection and intimacy is the key aim in this methodological apparatus. Of course, *Pokémon* and its designs of affection are not built upon a singular affective key (such as "love" or "joy") but instead its allure shifts within a wider selection of interrelated affective states and the network of relations built as one navigates the textual playground of the media mix and its products. Affection and intimacy are, however, here understood as one of the primary organizing forces in *Pokémon's* affective economy: the franchise's core functions of enjoyment circle around building histories of desiring, taking care of, training, and exhibiting Pokémon.

In practical terms, my reading began by immersing myself in the media mix of *Pokémon*, which, in Section 2.3, I call the method of strategic playfulness. This formed the basis of my relationship with *Pokémon*. The textual collections in this relationship, such as gameplay notes, play experiences, observed game mechanics, the playful ludic form of the media mix, fan-created paratexts, and social contacts, are the object as well as the building blocks of my reading. They are what I use to understand the procedural rhetoric of the gameic media mix and, most importantly, to analyze how this rhetoric is utilized as an affective economy, where affective stickiness appears as a sign of emotional and oftentimes also economical investment into playful worlds and their beings.

Affects, as the contacts, actions, and the sparks of feeling and emotional tone therein, are in essence what structure this reading relationship with the text, and which I analyze for affection, intimacy, and their intensities of stickiness. This I

contrast with the cultural and social practices surrounding the *Pokémon* franchise today as well as historically. In this way, the focus is on *Pokémon's* texts, contextualized with the other aspects of the textual cycle of production and consumption, all aiming to understand the designed and emerging circuits of affect and affectivity in *Pokémon* – the mediated intimacy that forms one of the media mix's cores.

3 Analyzing Affection in Pokémon

3.1 What are Pokémon made of?

Lending perhaps to the plurality of playful and transmedial activities in the *Pokémon* media mix, players and audiences encounter Pokémon characters in wildly varying ways. As Samuel Tobin notes, based on his experiences with school children, play with Pokémon takes on forms ranging from, for example, delighting in cute character images in cards, toys, stickers, and tie-in merchandise to playing at being a Trainer or learning and mastering the various games and trivia potentialities of the franchise (2004, 244–246). From this multiplicity, Pokémon characters emerge as something made of image and data, of cuteness and instrumentality, and of linkages to a wider supersystem, existing in complicated character-relations revolving around accumulation, learning, and playful caretaking. What is shared between these forms is the ubiquity of the characters in the media mix. No matter what you do in *Pokémon*, it will most likely include Pokémon characters in some form or fashion.

This comes as no surprise given *Pokémon's* proclivity toward the contemporary media mix production strategy and its character-centric structure. Referring to Azuma Hiroki's work, Thomas Lamarre notes "it is today the character – or more precisely, *kyara-moe*, the affective elements of characters – that plays the pivotal role in organizing and holding together media franchises and media mixes" (2009, 300). In this sense, Pokémon are the base unit of the wider media mix. They are the singular nodal points around which the whole transmedia latticework is built.

Before addressing the wider domains of *Pokémon's* media mix and the acts of affecting and being affected therein, I take a moment to examine the structure of Pokémon characters, asking what they are made of and what their bodies can, affectively and ethologically speaking, do. My approach is morphological (Heidbrink 2010, 103) in the sense that I attempt to address qualities of Pokémon characters across the franchise but ground this examination in the videogames that form the basic logic of the entire transmedia system. That is, by cross-examining what Pokémon characters were originally in the videogames and what they became in the transmedia system, I produce a general view that applies broadly to all Pokémon characters but acknowledges their ludic foundation.

Setting this analysis to a broader affective frame, I argue that in the vein of playfully alive non-human agents such as the personified manifestations of underlying procedural systems discussed earlier (see 2.5), Pokémon are circulating character images that are collected generally, and personalized – made histories with – personally, all under design conventions capitalizing on the concepts of symbolic and technological life.

3.1.1   Pokémon and character image

Character image – as well as its circulation in products related and unrelated to the original medium and storyworld – is a key component in media mix production as discussed in Section 2.4. Character images stem from the authorial content of a media mix, such as animations, illustrations, game graphics, and their implicit connotations. Functionally, the point of creating and circulating character images is not only in maximizing captured attention via an easily distributed form factor but more crucially in the fact that the increased contacts with audiences play on as well as build affective responses with the character and the media system it represents.

In this way, characters in a media mix are able to function as affective objects and as representatives of their storyworld, conflating contact with the storyworld with affective investment to it (see 2.4).

The process of commodification that made the nascent media mix character leap from its original medium of comics and television screens and settle into a ubiquitous and flexible mode where it could appear just as easily on the side of a candy container as within the immaterial diegesis of a storyworld relied heavily on the image of the character (Steinberg 2012, 42). It used the visual design of the character to advertise the character as well as its storyworld and the relations audiences potentially had with the small and grand narratives of the media mix (Ōtsuka 2010). In this way, the point of "a media mix character" is not purely centered on the character, its visual representation or the storyworld it inhabits. Rather, the focus shifts onto a more networked mode of reading and consuming fiction that incorporates them all and affixes the character as a visual transmedia figurehead – an evocative small narrative in its own right. In this mode, the media mix character acts as an accumulator and representative of the sensations, relations, and desires the media mix elicits; and it is often via the character image that this affective assemblage is deployed and disseminated.

In *Pokémon*, the character image (and oftentimes the affective potential) of the creatures has been engaged first and foremost through the aesthetics of cute or *kawaii* (see Allison 2006a, 205–206, 224; Allison 2003; Iwabuchi 2004, 70; Ito 2006; Yano 2004a, 112; Järvinen 2006, 169). Cuteness is, in a way, a straightforwardly apt summary of the overall visual charm of Pokémon, especially insomuch as it relates

to desire and affectivity. Crucially, however, the concept of cuteness and what it means for *Pokémon*, its characters, and affectivity requires some further critical examination through which I approach the character image of Pokémon here.
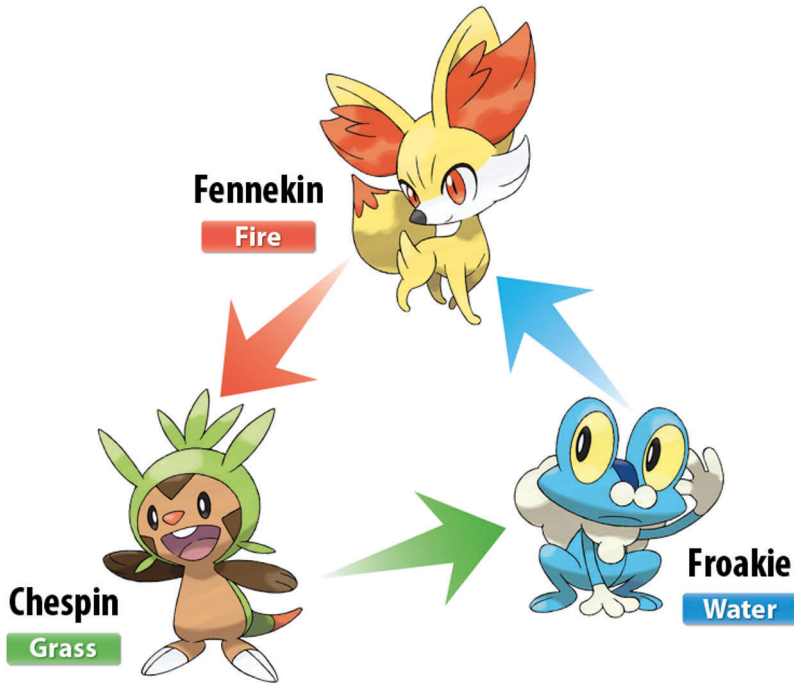
Figure 2. Promotional image of the starter Pokémon from *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y*. *©2023 The Pokémon Company International. ©1995–2023 Nintendo/Creatures Inc./GAME FREAK inc. TM, ® and character names are trademarks of Nintendo.*

Used, for example, in the aforementioned scholarly works, the current discourse of cuteness, as centered on the term *kawaii,* developed in the intense period of commodification in Japan between 1970 and 1990, and reached something of a cultural peak in the 1980s (Kinsella 1995, 220–221). There are no universal identifiers for what constitutes (commercial forms of) cuteness, but in general it revolves around replicating and caricaturizing biological (and mammalian) infantile traits such as "a head large in relation to the body, eyes set low in the head, a large protruding forehead, round protruding cheeks, a plump rounded body shape, short thick extremities, soft body surfaces, and clumsy behavior"(Morreall and Loy 1989, 68). Kinsella sums the archetypal features of commercial cute characters in the context of *kawaii* as "small, soft, infantile, mammalian, round, without bodily appendages (e.g., arms), without bodily orifices (e.g., mouths), non-sexual, mute,

insecure, helpless or bewildered" (Kinsella 1995, 226).[78] More than just a collection of vaguely cute traits, however, McVeigh notes that these "images of cuteness – bright colors, small children, lovable and friendly creatures, smiling, playful animals, and personified objects that walk and talk – connect up with normative principles, notions of power, and gender definitions" (McVeigh 1996, 308), establishing *kawaii* as a sociopolitical and sociocultural whole that combines material culture and ideology into a phenomenon that manifests in products and identity-work but that, at its base, links up with wider and more foundational elements of society. Cuteness, then, is perceivable as a general visual aesthetic, but it is also a reflection of deeper flows of influence and power in culture and society.

Although the origins of *kawaii* are largely in grassroots youth culture, it was nevertheless rapidly commercialized. For example, Sanrio – who would ultimately go on to develop Hello Kitty – began selling its products by utilizing commodified cuteness in the 1960s and onwards (Belson and Bremner 2004). Cuteness such as this is a totalizing concept, in use both commercially and individually. It is a property designed into consumer products, but it is also, for example, a personal aesthetic of accessorizing and dressing (with and without these products), language use, and a general disposition towards the world. Especially on the commercial side, it is used as means for affective ends: for example, much of the idol industry hinges on a performative, visual, and ambivalent reproduction of cuteness (Aoyagi 2000, 311–313) that aims at producing a sense of mediated intimacy with a media person.

In this way, there is a dual nature to commercial *kawaii*, mirroring the phenomenon's development from subcultural tendencies to commercialized repackaging of the selfsame practices. Tied to capitalistic consumer culture, *kawaii* is at once a derivative of it and an affective escape from it: a material and individual presentation of self among emancipated participants of a (sub)culture as well as a cultural trend caught and commercialized by businesses. As Kinsella points out, "what capitalist production processes de-personalize, the good cute design re-personalizes. Consumption of lots of cute style goods with powerful emotion-inducing properties could ironically disguise and compensate for the very alienation of individuals from other people in contemporary society" (1995, 228). For Kinsella, cuteness as a commercialized practice is a strategy of characterization and personification that turns cute commodities into objects with which to forge

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78 These traits hint at an overarching theme of cuteness: anthropomorphizing the inanimate (Ngai 2012, 60); using cuteness as a strategy to metaphorically slide the product into the realm of human infants and, through that, human-like characterization in general. For more discussion on the definition and description of kawaii, see Yano (2004b, 57–60).

relationships (ibid.): a remedy to loneliness that is as indicative of the root of loneliness as it is an aid to it.

Cuteness is also often associated with gendered practices, in particular as they regard women (Akita 2005; McVeigh 1996). Cuteness is normatively linked to femininity, both in acts of presenting self (for example, by "acting cute") as well as in the production and consumption of cute goods in order to facilitate this performative cuteness.[79] In this way, cute aesthetics can be seen as an emancipatory project of identity performance and a commercial capitalization of it, both also engaged in the configuration of, and conforming to, norms; a complex system of interlocking power plays (McVeigh 1996).

Ito (2006) positions the contemporary Japanese videogame culture into a post-*Pokémon* era where cute videogame commodities can (and do) encourage women to take up games and direct developers to consider interaction models beyond male-targeted violence and conflict. For her, *Pokémon's* success and its ties to the overall culture of cute is an emancipatory signal of global flows of popular culture responding to and spreading content embraced by women (2006, 3). She also notes that despite this, cute products have appeal across genders and age groups (ibid.), suggesting that while tied to gendered performativity, cuteness also transcends it to be a more of a general, ubiquitous aesthetic. Far less optimistic (and much more gender-essentialist), Samuel Tobin sees in cuteness – and in particular in its perceived gendered normative nature – what could be called a crisis of fragile masculinity that pushes some preadolescent boys away from the *Pokémon* franchise unless they adopt strategies that distance them from appearing to enjoy cuteness and reframe their fan practices as collecting, financial speculation or mastering *Pokémon* knowledge (2004, 242–243). In this way, boys, according to Tobin, can "combat this specter of emasculating cuteness" (ibid., 242) while continuing to enjoy their pastime. It does seem, however, that despite the adolescent gender-normative shock identified by Tobin, more generally *Pokémon* was received (as Ito 2006 argues), and indeed intended (Larimer 1999), as a largely gender-inclusive product in which cuteness as a central concept serves as a marker for themes of caretaking and affection instead of gendered gatekeeping, and furthermore in which these primary themes effectively support a wide variety of modes of action, both gendered and beyond genders.

Adding another layer onto the inclusive qualities that cute aesthetics bring into game culture, Hjorth (2009) notes how cuteness enables "various atypical or casual

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[79]　In the gendered space of *kawaii* praxis and discourse, male participation is also commonly noted, but is typically, and somewhat problematically, linked to the deployment of cute aesthetics in sexual imagery or highlighted as a factor in the patriarchal structures of (in particular Japanese) society (Ito 2006; McVeigh 1996).

players to enter into gaming" along with catering to women in particular (2009, 7). She creates a dichotomy of hardcore and casual players, where gaming practices become more diverse as a function of cuteness and regardless of gender. A somewhat problematic but accurate way of rephrasing this would be to say that cuteness, in this way, can be understood as a way of moving away from the stereotypically masculine practices in videogames.[80] Cuteness offers a way out from entrenched masculinities towards a more generally inclusive and balanced take on production and consumption regardless of gender: not cute things for girls or women but cute things and gentle aesthetics for *everyone*.

In a general sense, Hjorth sees *kawaii* as "cute culture" (Hjorth 2009, 2), an overall cultural dynamic taking part in "a broader rubric of personalization politics within social and participatory media networks" (ibid., 2009, 2) where the personal becomes attached to the technological as trailblazed by Japanese technoculture in particular. Eventually, what was particularly a Japanese approach to new media became, in lockstep with the spread of Japanese and Asian pop cultural soft power at the turn of the millennium, something of a global super trend (Hjorth 2011, 76). Indeed, Allison aptly calls cuteness Japan's national export (2003): an asset observable in popular culture, contemporary art, and personal aesthetics alike, arising from Japan and manifesting globally.

The overall tones of *kawaii*, then, utilize thematics of infantile presentation (visually, aurally, performatively), commercialized production, gendered but also universal appeal, and (stereo)typical production and consumption conventions of Japanese media ecosystems. Indeed, as several scholars have argued before, *Pokémon* is emblematic of this sort of cuteness. The world of *Pokémon* is full of sweet themes, round shapes evocative of non-human animals, caretaking, and something of a gender-fluid approach to key demographics, with little intent to aim the products at any explicitly gendered group, all founded on themes of mobility and portable play in Japanese technoculture. As an emblem of *Pokémon's* cute aesthetics, at the head of the franchise Pikachu expresses a totality of cuteness, being visually and aurally cute, acting cute, being reproduced in cute products, and being portrayed as a companion to be cared for and a product to be desired; the perfect character for a media mix dependent on the circulation of cute character images.

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[80] The problem here is that the straightforward and implied associations of cuteness and femininity, while perhaps statistically still relevant, strengthen their stereotypical linkage, easily leading to reproductions of gender roles that, as exemplified by Samuel Tobin (2004), result in both essentialist takes on gender as well as practical problems for players who either conform to or stray from these norms. For a problematization and expansion of gender in the context of cuteness and videogames, see Hjorth (2009, 5).

3.1.1.1 Rethinking cuteness

The straightforward assignation of the Pokémon character image as cute or pet-like and of the characters as eliciting (primarily) affectionate responses because they are cute ignores the structures beneath the sweet surface. In the context of *Pokémon*, the uncritical acceptance of a general visual culture of cuteness as *Pokémon's* core aesthetic without accounting for cuteness's (or *Pokémon's*) depths beyond the surface level omits the agency of the characters themselves as well as their other qualities, reducing Pokémon creatures to consumable and passive cute-objects or images acted on but rarely acting in return (or, especially, on their own).

According to Ngai, cuteness is an "aestheticization of powerlessness" (Ngai 2012, 64; cf. Lamarre 2011, 124) that easily turns into a catalyst for affection as products submit to our will and appear to need us more than we need them. Mirroring the etymological traversal of the word *kawaii* from a mixture of shyness, vulnerability, and endearingness into something cute (Kinsella 1995 221–222), cuteness is a way to capitalize on and communicate this submissive position of a passive thing. Yet cute products are designed to wield their cuteness *as power*. Cuteness is a form of visual language that positions the consumer as a caretaker and the product as being in need of caretaking (Dale et al. 2017, 5). A cute doll speaks to a potential customer through the language of nurture and desire, promising intimacy. In its cuteness, it wields an affect relationship with potential consumers that positions the toy as impinging on the consumer instead of solely the other way around.[81] This Ngai sees as something of a core trait in the Japanese variety of cute, where the power play of the object relation does not necessarily establish the cute commodity as powerless or docile. With cuteness in general, and in its Japanese variants in particular, cute objects hold power over others just as easily as power is held over them, enabling cute objects to be simultaneously, for example, cute and aggressive (Ngai 2012, 85).

This is how the style of cuteness employed in Pokémon functions as well. In their distinct cuteness, there is also variability and a sort of challenge for power: a "changing charisma" (Surman 2009, 170) that operates on the idea of cute objects as wielders of power and dominance as well as docile objects of care. Through a visual analysis of the design of Pokémon, Surman identifies some Pokémon as cute and generally toy-like, susceptible to just the kind of cute capitalism highlighted by, for example, Allison and others (ibid., 169). However, factoring in the actual

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[81] Relatedly, McVeigh sees a similar power play dynamic in the culture of cuteness in general: personal presentation that happens through cuteness – be it commercially or personally – is a power play that requires those who are in power to "bestow favors and benefits on those below" (1996, 308). In this way, cuteness is a method of power-use far stronger than its foundational aestheticization of powerlessness would imply.

practicalities of *Pokémon* play and the subsequent playful mechanisms of *Pokémon's* storyworld, Surman identifies two more archetypes for Pokémon: that of the *repose* (adolescent rather than infantile, ibid., 169) and *counter-pose* (monstrous, challenging the authority of the Trainer, ibid., 170) that appear as designs of more powerful, and often evolved, forms of Pokémon. These three categories roughly map to the three evolutionary stages of (most) Pokémon, showing how while the surface level in the games is comprised of infantile cuteness, the deeper layers – ones the player typically encounters only after significant expenditure of time and effort – contain more nuanced character images as well as player-to-character relations. Of course, these wilder Pokémon are also to some degree – through their evolutionary history if nothing else – subjected to cute aesthetics and the following easy commodification and toyification, but in drilling down into only cuteness, the other modalities of Pokémon should not be forgotten.
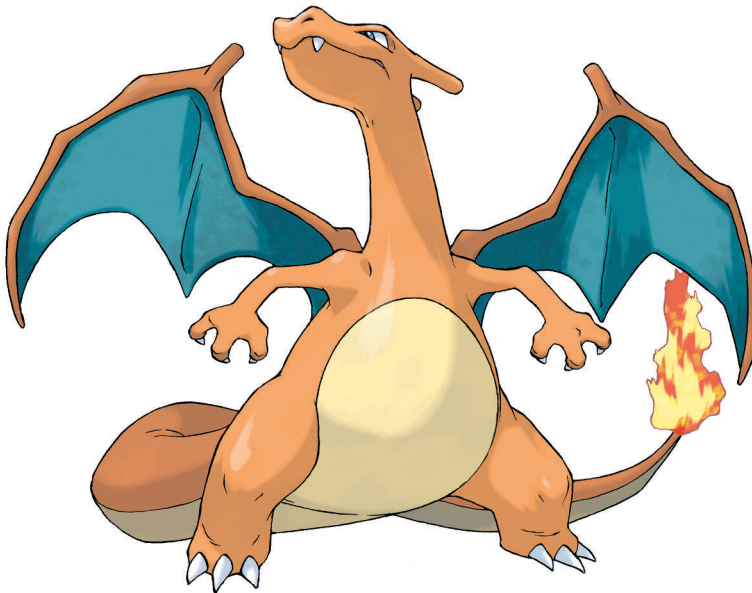
Figure 3. Charizard is the final form of the cuter, more toy-like Charmander and the adolescent Charmeleon.
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Although simple, in Surman's three-point categorization, we see an emerging visual design continuum that mirrors the intended use of Pokémon: toy-pokémon are easily accessed and generic, readily available as (and like) commodities whereas counter-

pose Pokémon take significant time and effort to catch or train, and as such also function as badges of merit and as sources of cultural and social capital within the player community in addition to being particularly effective in the game. All Pokémon contain a variable mix of these archetypes, of course, as even the fiercest character images are fundamentally designed for commodification and the cutest of characters can also signify power and effort. Nevertheless, this back-and-forth between cuteness and its use in – or morphing into – something more ferocious and wild is a core tension in the character images of *Pokémon,* especially in connection with the procedural core thematic of expending effort in catching or training the Pokémon.

For example, in the 2014 *Pokémon* Videogame World Championships, the would-be world champion Park Se-jun fielded Pachirisu, an electric squirrel Pokémon renowned for cuteness and relative game-mechanical inefficiency. Nevertheless, Park's carefully trained Pachirisu – of which he had a soft toy accompany him in the final matches as if to underline the commodified and toy-like nature of his Pokémon – was instrumental in his championship win, upsetting the general expectation and consensus that Pachirisu, while cute, is of little use competitively. The Pokémon was later turned into a more or less literal badge of merit: after the championship tournament at special promotional events, a limited edition Pachirisu fashioned after Park's winning Pokémon could be downloaded onto – and subsequently used in – the *Pokémon* videogames. In this way, the Pachirisu had now become a cute commodity as well as a signifier of power and guile.

The charm of Park's Pachirisu can be, in part, explained through cuteness, but it is in no way limited to it as thematics of power, fierceness, and effort also link up with it. Surman's visual categorization suggests that in addition to the foundational visual cuteness and its centrality in the *Pokémon* games, there are also significant aspects besides cuteness that make up the structure of any given Pokémon and its visual and procedural aspects. There is a potential in these iconic character images to fluidly traverse the gamut from cute to any number of other traits and back again. In this way, the character images communicate affect-interactions inherent in *Pokémon* play; caretaking, training, and progress through effort, suggesting intimacies and powers achieved through participation in the media mix and portrayed – among other things – on the visual bodies of characters.

Cuteness – particularly cuteness as understood through an essentialist heteronormative lens and as a straightforward visual adorability – as the primary or sole driver for character popularity seems to be misguided. Were the cuteness of *Pokémon's* character images a straightforward and fundamental factor in the charm of the characters, one would certainly expect it to show up significantly more in, for example, fan discourse. Yet, a look at the "favorite Pokémon" thread on, for

example, Serebii.net[82] (Profesco 2010) provides a much more varied picture. Cuteness, joined by its evolution into coolness and power as highlighted by Surman (2009), as an overall visual aesthetic is definitely a popular justification for liking a Pokémon, but the forum posters list reasons for liking a Pokémon far more diverse than that. These reasons range from overall cuteness or other aesthetic preferences to in-game usability, and from general affective associations to particular personal histories, with the commenters liking all kinds of Pokémon from toylike to counter-pose, from weak to strong, from pretty to ghastly. A resonant design manifesting in a cute character image and the various power plays inherent in cute aesthetics are certainly part of the charm as, indeed, some form of cuteness can arguably be attributed to all Pokémon designs, but it is clear that this alone does not explain the affectivity of Pokémon or even that of their character images. Furthermore, although Pokémon characters all share a general sensibility of aesthetic cuteness, this cuteness is, in itself, complicated.

In media mix production, a character image is the authorial iconic image of a character as forwarded in various media and embedded on products. In *Pokémon,* it is best understood not only through an amalgam of visual and performative cuteness but also of the incorporation of game mechanical dimensions such as visual representations of effort and value, leading to an overall assemblage that includes cuteness and power but also themes of personal history, evolution, fierceness, and wider game-systemic elements expressed in and interpreted from the characters' visual and easily distributable image.

3.1.2   Collecting creatures: the pleasure of taxonomic play

Character images circulating in *Pokémon's* transmedia world make for the visual affective side of a Pokémon. Pokémon, however, have never been just images; rather, they are images referring to game objects, with particular attributes and rules bound to them and foregrounded in *Pokémon* play regardless of media. This is the practical aspect of collecting and categorizing Pokémon as data-driven taxonomic entities – the "gotta catch 'em all" process of the franchise as inscribed into the very data of Pokémon characters.

The original premise of *Pokémon* was to use the Game Boy's link cable for communication and trading (Larimer 1999; Nakazawa 2019, 82–83). For that to work, there had to be tradable things that would, in themselves, be interesting enough to motivate collecting and trading. Pokémon characters emerged from that need

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[82]   Founded in 1999, Serebii.net is one of the oldest (and largest) English-language *Pokémon* fansites. Its forums have over 280,000 members and more than 15 million posts.

(Nintendo 2000a), joining the easily circulating character image of a Pokémon to the cataloguing and valuing processes of Pokémon as quantifiable data and forms of currency; enablers of micro-scale capitalism (Allison 2006a, 16; Pizzato 2009, 75).

The method of collecting Pokémon is organized and portrayed through the process of taxonomizing. At the center of all core series *Pokémon* videogames[83] is the organizational tool called Pokédex, a device in the fiction of *Pokémon* but also in the praxis of *Pokémon* play that records (or, in practice, reveals) taxonomical information about the different species of Pokémon the player catches, and is available to the player's perusal any time outside battles and dialogue scenes.

Originally, the Pokédex listed the character image, number, species, category, cry, height, weight, habitat, and description of Pokémon. Later additions include, for example, the Pokémon's type, relative size difference, time of availability, and footprint, with the exact combination of information varying from game to game. All in all, and regardless of the game, the Pokédex always portrays the bare essential data of a Pokémon: its taxonomical number in the franchise's ecosystem, the iconized character image, physical measurements, and species-related background information, all working as information nodes pointing at the larger media mix. The description section of a Pokémon's Pokédex entry, for example, stays relatively consistent between games, sometimes highlighting different aspects of a Pokémon but always striving for overall intertextual consistency and character/world building between games and franchise elements. The function of the Pokédex in this sense is to offer – again, both in the fiction of *Pokémon* and in the praxis of play – a canonized package of information on characters the player encounters on their journeys through the game and in their contact with the franchise. Whether it is about the concrete abilities of an in-game character or the theoretical affordances of a soft toy, the Pokédex is the definitive guide to finding out what any particular Pokémon is and what it can likely do; a glimpse to its taxonomical data.

In this way, the Pokédex is akin to an encyclopedia (to which its original Japanese name ポケモン図鑑, *Pokémon illustrated reference book,* refers) except that it starts out empty, unlocking entries only through player effort. Every new Pokémon caught triggers a sequence where the player is shown the freshly accessible Pokédex entry for the Pokémon they just caught. And this is what "catching 'em all" refers to: filling one's Pokédex – that is, unlocking each of its entries – by encountering and catching one of every species of Pokémon available. Mirroring the drive to collect character merchandise in *Pokémon's* media mix, the unchanging and

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[83] Outside videogames, there are also official Pokédex applications for mobile phones and the 3DS, staying true to the theme of the player as a Trainer and *Pokémon* play reaching beyond the franchise's games (for further discussion, see 3.2 and 3.5). These applications, however, are based on those found in the videogames.

ultimate achievement in all of the games is a full Pokédex – a feat that becomes more and more impressive with each new game generation (and hence new flock of Pokémon species) released.

Pokémon is grounded on a pervasive learning experience where knowledge is a vital concept in the gameplay and, mutually, in involvement with the media mix (Neiburger 2011). Facilitating this, the Pokédex functions as a knowledge bank and a numerical measure of progress, and furthermore directs players to pay attention to things like the archetypal image of a given Pokémon as well as its taxonomical number. That is, it drives play and advances learning about Pokémon, helping players to fare better in the games, but also advances fluency in the particularities of the media mix. The whole of *Pokémon* is, pragmatically and conceptually, contingent on the player's – and, in a wider sense, the consumers' – personal taxonomical project where Pokémon are caught and learned about, and this knowledge is deployed in continuing to catch more Pokémon and in learning more about them.

Classification is, of course, not only a way of learning and organizing information but also a way of manifesting power and projecting control over the classified. In the case of Pokémon, this metaphor has been loaned from human–animal relations where taxonomical pursuits and overall textual construction (Banting 2009; see also Foucault 2005) shape our everyday understanding of nature.[84] *Pokémon* reflects the overall dynamic of power and knowledge in the interhuman discourse related to animals; The Pokédex is a straightforwardly Foucauldian take on power relations as hinging on the interplay of knowledge, discourse, and power (Hall 2005, 76). It exemplifies how thinking and talking about non-human animals affects our orientations towards them, and how these discourses are invariably reflected in, among other things, fiction. It links to "human interpretation of and discourse about animals and how this understands, classifies, and constructs animals, hence operating as a form of power" (Palmer 2016, 116), of which, of course, taxonomy and categorization are prime formalized examples just as much in the everyday world as they are in *Pokémon*.

As far as *Pokémon* goes, the general motif of natural monsters is obvious. Beyond that, numerous Pokémon such as Ninetales and Exeggutor are clear remediations of old folklore monsters, and the franchise links itself to old yōkai

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[84]   As a practical example of classification as use of power: the anthropocentric concept "human–animal relations" includes the common classification of non-human animals into one category and human animals into another, whereas a more exact phrasing would be "animal relations" or, if thought through the ethology of affect "body relations", as the differences between human animals and non-human animals are, in the greater scheme of things, tenuous at best.

traditions through strong emphasis on the taxonomy of the Pocket Monsters. Michael Foster has noted that accompanying the cultural history of yōkai is a tendency for taxonomy, a sense of *catching 'em all*. And not just any form of taxonomy but a "ludic mode" of encyclopedic work (Foster 2009, 71–72): an attitude of playfully presenting that which is not real in the format of the real. *Pokémon's* Pokédex and the aim of catching and categorizing all the monsters sets up an authoritative and mock-serious natural historical mode, just as the yōkai encyclopedias of yore, with all the borrowed seriousness of the encyclopedic and taxonomic forms of representation, only to pull out the rug from under this graveness by aiming the process at the absurdly unreal.

Overall, this is the taxonomic logic of collection and information management in *Pokémon*. Pokémon are categorized, collected, and mastered, as dictated by the core procedural elements of the game. Each Pokémon is made not only of a circulating character image but a *taxonomic data* component that contextualizes the character image. A Pikachu is not merely an iconic yellow mouse with a lighting tail but an electric type Pokémon with the taxonomic number #025, a particular pool of battle moves it can learn, and a proclivity towards being fast in battles (as evidenced by the base speed statistic of the Pikachu species being comparatively high). In this way, the central affect of desiring Pokémon is realized, in part, through taxonomical pursuits. Apart from visual qualities, what is also (potentially) desired are a particular set of taxonomic qualities and their addition into a database – be that the formal database of the Pokédex or the more rhizomatic database of the collector's totality of knowledge about the storyworld and its components. This also offers an economic driver for the developers: by expanding the storyworld toward new classifiable characters, the developers can introduce new collectibles to facilitate this affective and taxonomic process of accumulation, organization, and mastering.

What are here portrayed as the systems of classification, accumulation, and motivational pushes to master the system specifically in *Pokémon* are prevalent in the commercial and narrative design of Japanese popular culture in general.[85] Tom Gill notes that in his observations of children's media-related play in Japan, "the mastery of classificatory knowledge" rose to an especially prominent role (Gill 1998, 50). He remarks that in play and pastimes related to Japanese superhero shows, catalogues of heroes and monsters, lists of powers, techniques, origins, and taxonomical details are extensively featured (ibid.). Likewise, Steven Jones's reading of collection as a central aspect in the textual strategies and designs of

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[85]   Collectability, learning, and a classificatory attitude to characters are of course prevalent in popular culture and children's media products globally. Their Japanese modalities are highlighted here mostly for the focus of this thesis rather than their geographical uniqueness. For more, see Ito (2008).

videogames and videogame fan cultures also highlights this. He argues that, aside from videogames themselves utilizing motifs of collecting (2008, 47–48), increasingly, enthusiasts of videogames have become enamored with the immaterial knowledge surrounding games and game culture as much as with the material objects that are the source of this knowledge (ibid.).[86] That is, "true collectors collect 'data' or lore as much as they collect objects" (ibid., 60). For Jones, this data or lore – the sum of knowledge, history, and related information attached to a game – becomes something of a Benjaminian aura that surrounds games and game paraphernalia, and which in turn serves as the foundation of material commerce. Expanding this to examinations of Japan in specific, he notes that the Japanese arcade (here a metonym for the Japanese videogame industry in general) is "built around collecting of various kinds" (ibid., 61), from UFO catchers to *gashapon* machines and from tie-in trading cards to home console videogames.

In Jones's work, collecting as a function of games and as a fan practice are related but distinct phenomena that sometimes, fortuitously, concur. For Gill, the classificatory manuals children voraciously read position somewhere between fannish lore-collecting and authorial commodification of the superhero shows. Crucially, Gill notes that the manuals "have almost no stories in them", functioning purely as tools of rote learning and advancing one's mastery of the details of the storyworld (Gill 1998, 50). Seemingly, then, both authors discuss collection and categorization as something consumers and audiences do at least partially removed from the narrative logics of the commercial texts they consume, and as an authorial move producers sometimes inject to their commodities in hopes of encouraging collection and categorization.

Looking closer, however, the themes of collecting Gill and Jones discuss (though not explicitly identify) are the practical side of media mix production and its monetization model, where products rely on smaller interconnected textual units out of which small narratives emerge – or are actively produced by fans – so that they tie back into grand narratives (Ōtsuka 2010) and grand non-narrative databases (Azuma 2009): a *taxonomix* where classificatory desire meets the conventions of the media mix in an intentional attempt at capitalizing on the pleasures of collecting, mastery, and learning.

Superficially, the superhero manuals – just like the Pokédex – have no stories in them. They are field guides with fragmentary information that exemplify and advance their owners' proficiency and commitment. At the same time, however, they contain an untold number of stories: they are a thousand intentionally designed

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[86]   On a related note – and interesting for *Pokémon's* role-playing heritage – digital role-playing games in particular rely on this sort of mediating and narrative power of archives and databases (Henton 2012, 84).

pathways into the wider franchise. Likewise, the gathering of lore and assorted information in videogame culture could, as Jones suggests, be seen as a fan practice that marks the true enthusiast from a casual passer-by who merely plays a game instead of catalogues its contents; gathering lore and information is, arguably, the immaterial extension of the material accumulation celebrated in fan culture.[87] Beyond that, however, it is also a way to shape the storyworld through forming the fragments into small narratives and chasing their linkages to the implied grand (non)narrative. The creation of these collectible fragments of the storyworld by producers and the collection and curation of them by consumers is a central logic not only in fan practice, as Gill and Jones imply, but in popular culture production and consumption under the logics of the media mix in general.

Taxonomic artifacts such as the superhero manuals, the Pokédex, and fan wiki sites documenting assorted paraphernalia of a game are *nothing but stories*, told in the compartmentalized and fractal narrative language of this collection-based media mix form. The collection and categorization of data is not just an incidental collision of fan practices and formal qualities of videogames or superhero products but the intended mode of play and the general narrative and economic point of these franchises, of which *Pokémon* on the whole and Pokémon characters in specific are terrific examples.

3.1.3   Individual data, character permanence, and personal histories with Pokémon

Character image and taxonomic data are the pre-determined and unchanging (or at least slow-changing) elements of a Pokémon character. They constitute its generic form. To create a cadre of cute and cool collectibles suffices to establish the bare essential needs of a transmedia character franchise such as *Pokémon's*, and as such it is no wonder that the common interpretative frames for *Pokémon* fixate on (cute) character image and commodified collectibility. Less discussed is how *Pokémon* also enables – and relies on – personal and personified elements to enter the mix. In order for Pokémon collecting and trading to work, the franchise needed not only something to collect and value but also something to bond with. Pokémon need to be valued in terms of rarity and (social or monetary) capital worth, but also in terms of affectivity: the Pokémon must have personalities, feel personal, and be befriended (Nintendo 2000a).

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[87]   Noteworthy here is that "merely playing a game" is just as valid a form of enjoyment as attaching taxonomic and accumulative aspects to fan practices, and there are indeed many mechanisms of gatekeeping and exclusion that hinge on this very dichotomy. Nevertheless, in wider commercially aligned fan cultures, acquiring merchandizing and exhibiting social capital through collecting play a big role in the activities of fans.

As opposed to the taxonomical data that consists of the games' and media mix's rule-boundaries and which characterize each Pokémon on the level of species and generic canon (for example, that Charmander is always of the fire type, a Gyarados is always more powerful than a Magikarp, and that Pidgey's Pokédex number is #016), the *individual data* of a Pokémon is the foundational uniqueness of an individual Pokémon and the players' own physical and emotional – affective – input into the transmedia world as captured on the bodies of Pokémon.

Figure 4. An overview of the taxonomic and individual properties of a particular Pumpkaboo. *©2023 The Pokémon Company International. ©1995–2023 Nintendo/Creatures Inc./GAME FREAK inc. TM, ® and character names are trademarks of Nintendo.*

All Pokémon have what are called their "base stats", the set of species-specific numeric values for each of their statistic aspects (attack, special attack, defense, special defense, hit points, and speed), describing what a Pokémon is like in the context of the games and in relation to the other Pokémon in the transmedia system. These base stats – as mentioned above in the case of Pikachu's speed, for example – are in the domain of species-related taxonomical data. More fundamentally, however, all Pokémon in the videogames depend on an additional hidden set of values that modify these base stats. These *individual values* (IVs) and *effort values* (EVs) are what individuate one Pokémon from another. They are accessible to

players through various opaque intermediaries such as NPCs who describe the player's Pokémon's qualities in general terms.[88] For the vast majority of players, they are inferable or intuitable only from the Pokémon's performance in general, if at all. As Game Freak's long-time game designer and director Ōmori Shigeru explains, the aim of these values is to offer uniqueness and consequence to Pokémon by bringing them closer to life:

> I prefer to think of [Pokémon] as real, living creatures. It's the same way that if you have a pet and someone else has the same breed of dog, it's a different dog. That way people can play the game and my Pokemon will be different to your Pokemon even if they're the same type. (Kamen 2014)

And as to why these individuating values, their accumulation, and their exact effects are largely hidden, he continues on the theme of Pokémon as metaphorical data animals:

> A comparison would be looking at a datasheet on different dogs and deciding about the data on the different dogs and deciding which one you want based on that data -- that would be soulless. (ibid.)

In practice, IVs are a diversifying function in determining any particular Pokémon's stats. Whereas base stats offer the species-specific foundation, all Pokémon have their unique (randomized) set of individual values – generated when the Pokémon first comes into contact with the player, be it through a chance encounter or as a present from a non-player character – that are added to the base stats. If the Pokémon is hatched from an egg, some of its IVs are passed down from its parents (the exact hereditary details change from game to game, however).

Effort values, on the other hand, are an approximation of the Pokémon's training and activity, and as such, unlike IVs, they are open for the Trainer to manipulate and influence. Every time a Pokémon defeats another Pokémon, it receives EVs affecting a particular stat, depending on the species of Pokémon defeated.[89] For example, if a Pokémon defeats a Pikachu, it will receive an increase to its speed stat after the battle

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[88] For example, in *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y*, a particular Ace Trainer will comment on the IVs of the Pokémon the player presents to him, saying things like "Incidentally, I would say its greatest potential lies in its Attack" (in-game dialogue).

[89] In generations 1 and 2, the EVs received were based on the base stats of the defeated Pokémon rather than its species. Also, there are other ways of gaining EVs, such as Super Training in *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y*, and the Poké Pelago in *Pokémon Sun* and *Pokémon Moon*. These, however, are additive modes that accompany or offer an alternative to the basic functionality of gaining EVs by battling Pokémon.

(or, in games preceding *Pokémon Black* and *Pokémon White*, after it levels up or is taken out from the in-game storage computer). And so, if a player wishes to train their Pokémon's speed, they could guide it to fight mostly Pokémon that bring increases to speed (such as Pikachu). In a way, effort values are a tracker for an individual Pokémon's training and a reflection of its history, helping to set them apart from all Pokémon that have not received the personal attention of a Trainer.

IVs and EVs are foundational to the whole franchise in the sense that – although the particulars have been tweaked along the line – they have been used in all of the core games, right from the first ones. They have been at the heart of Pokémon characters for the full lifespan of the franchise. Later additions to the Pokémon data structure that became similarly seminal parts of the distinctness of Pokémon included abilities, natures, and shininess. Introduced in the third generation of *Pokémon* videogames, abilities are passive effects Pokémon can have (usually[90]) during battle. Each Pokémon has a single ability (out of one, two, or three species-related possible abilities) that the developers use taxonomically to characterize the Pokémon and its species. For example, the typical ability of a Pikachu is "Static", which might inflict paralysis on an opposing Pokémon if it attacks the Pikachu with a move that makes physical contact. Abilities are generally dependent on the taxonomic species of Pokémon, and there are also rare "hidden abilities" the Pokémon might have as a result of special circumstances. For example, particular in-game locations or encounters can yield Pokémon that have the hidden ability of its species, and promotional or event Pokémon are also often adorned with a hidden ability. This variation turns abilities from purely taxonomical traits to also potentially individuating features. Another 3rd generation addition was the introduction of "natures", a set of 25 mentalities a Pokémon can have, such as timid, naughty, brave or lonely. Each nature increases and decreases the growth of one statistic (excluding hit points, which fall outside the influence of natures), granting additional variation and individuation between Pokémon. Likewise, ever since the second generation, the digital body of Pokémon has been augmented by shininess. In exceedingly rare cases, a wild Pokémon a player catches or a newborn Pokémon a player breeds can have an alternative color palette, signifying that it is "shiny". Shiny Pokémon are also often handed out in promotional events.[91] Shininess has no gameplay benefits,

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[90] Abilities mostly take effect in battles. However, some abilities have additional uses outside battle. The ability "Static", for example, has the added effect of increasing encounters with electric-type Pokémon, in addition to its battle effect. In some rare cases, such as with the ability "Honey Gather", the ability is active only outside battle.

[91] For example, the special Pokémon Center Mega Tokyo Pikachu – a promotional Pokémon handed out at the Pokémon Center Mega Tokyo in celebration of its opening – was shiny and, to refer to an earlier point, also had the hidden ability "Lightning Rod" of the Pikachu species.

but as a rare occurrence and a stark contrast to the otherwise unitary character images of Pokémon, it is a highly visual marker of the Trainer's effort, luck, and skill, and as such is a trait sought after in the individual data of a Pokémon.

Aside from these core elements, a Pokémon's individuating data set also includes the name and identification number of the "Original Trainer", the player(-character) that caught the Pokémon, the name given to it by its OT (if the Pokémon is named), its level, and the battle moves it has learned as it has leveled up (as chosen by the player). Also, from generation 3 onwards, Pokémon can be adorned with various ribbons, indicating assorted feats and events it has gone through. For example, the Effort Ribbon is awarded to a Pokémon that has reached the maximum amount of EVs possible.

All in all, base stats combined with IVs, abilities and natures result in Pokémon that are unique regardless of player input. Additionally, playing – applying player agency on these unique data constructs – further individuates Pokémon: EVs, level, name, Original Trainer designation, battle moves, and ribbons are all affixed onto a Pokémon's data structure and form the player-dependent uniqueness of Pokémon. Together, these data points form the individual data of the Pokémon character, as codified onto the digital creature itself.

When the player catches a Pokémon, its taxonomic data is registered into the Pokédex, but that does not mean the player has the definitive version of that Pokémon, just one of many. That is, they have one *unique* instance of that Pokémon. This contrasts the generic character image with the personalized character, differentiating *a* Pikachu from *the* Pikachu. It encourages affect to move between the generic image and a separated instance of that image; a dual move where all images are affected by the personal and the personal gains the potential of the general images. A Meowth the player catches in the game might be interesting because they are everywhere as generic images in *Pokémon's* media mix, and conversely something adorned with Meowth's character image (or the image itself) becomes interesting because it invariably refers to a particular, *personal*, Meowth in addition to the generalized character image.

Moreover, the importance of individual data as separate from – but factoring into – character image and taxonomic data is in large part supported by a fundamental aspect in the structure of Pokémon characters that I call *character permanence*. Through their IVs and other individual data elements, all Pokémon characters start out unique, and this uniqueness is emphasized with permanence. The player can delete – that is, "set free" – any Pokémon, but once it is done, the Pokémon is gone forever. The player would struggle to find an identical Pokémon ever again. Likewise, players cannot (apart from hacking) change the IVs of a Pokémon, and if a Pokémon is received through a trade, it cannot be renamed, as the option to name

a Pokémon is limited exclusively to the Original Trainer.[92] Even things that *are* dependent on player agency, such as the learning of moves and accumulating EVs over time, require significant time and effort, and are laborious, if not impossible, to duplicate or reverse.[93]

Also, Pokémon are never copied; there are no duplicates.[94] For example, with some limitations, throughout the franchise's several generations, players can move individual Pokémon from one game to another and migrate them from one generation to another. When the Pokémon is moved, its uniqueness is enforced by how it ceases to exist in its old home cartridge as it moves on to the new one. That is, the Pokémon is only ever in one place and one game at a time. This is in stark contrast to many other games (see, for example, the *Baldur's Gate* and *.hack* series) where character data is transferred between games in acts of copying and multiplying: the player can go back to the old games with their old characters at any time as what is transferred to the next game is a copy of the original and not the original itself.

This is why losing one's game cartridge is such a grievous loss in *Pokémon*: the cartridge contains individual characters that are impossible to recover or remake. In many other JRPGs, the characters are malleable in the sense that if lost, they could, with effort, be built again with no diminishes to narrative or game mechanical consistency. In *Pokémon*, however, the creatures are unique and permanent in a way that if one is changed or lost, recovery is difficult or outright impossible.

All *Pokémon* videogame characters, then, depend on their individual data and overall character permanence to individuate them from the generic character images

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92   There are some exceptions to these, particularly in the newer games, such as the limited ability to name an unnamed traded Pokémon once in *Pokémon Sword* and *Shield* (Game Freak 2019) and using the Hyper Training mode for setting limited and non-hereditary multipliers for IVs after becoming champion in *Pokémon Sun* and *Moon* (Game Freak 2016). Curiously, although they are implemented for increased usability, these features still retain significant limitations as well as requirements of time and effort.

93   Moves and EVs can be changed, but the means to do so are limited, achieved mostly through particular items and non-player characters. In *Pokémon HeartGold* and *Pokémon SoulSilver* (Game Freak 2010a), for example, the player can collect or grow particular berries, each of which offers a decrease in a single stat's EV, and in the majority of *Pokémon* games, particular non-player characters will help change a Pokémon's moveset in exchange for a particular rare item. While neither method is difficult, both are discouragingly baroque and laborious, requiring both specialized knowledge and in-game resources.

94   Exceptions to this are some data transfer cases where, technically, the Pokémon is copied, and, as a safety measure, the duplicate is automatically deleted only after a successful transfer is registered. For the player, however, there is no indication of this, allowing Pokémon to remain individual and singular regardless of what goes on behind the curtain.

and taxonomic data constructs circulating in the media mix. In this way, they change from being generic affective signs to particular characters that afford and accumulate emotional investment. What separates Pikachu from Hello Kitty is that whereas Kitty is a cute character image and an occasional narrative agent (Yano 2006, 208; 222n1), Pikachu is both of those *and* contains an intended vector for further individuation, codified in the structure of the character itself. Kitty can become meaningful through, for example, personal histories with Hello Kitty commodities (and indeed, this is a core property of character goods and brands in general), but in *Pokémon,* this logic of individuation is explicitly modeled on the original characters themselves. It is the same dynamic, only integrated further.

Beyond the commodified character image of *Pokémon* and Hello Kitty, this permanence is a central aspect in the ontology of fictional characters in general. For Eco, for example, it is their very permanence that grants many fictional characters their individual and affective basis. Eco calls these characters that have become so affectively loaded that they, in various ways, exist outside their original texts "fluctuating entities" (2009, 87). He traces their intertextual, transmedial, and even metaleptic (see 3.5) qualities to what could be called the overall permanence of characters: on how characters "will remain the actors of what they did once and forever" (ibid., 94). What he means by this is that regardless of personal interpretation and derivative works, for a character to remain recognizable it must have some original and canonized qualities (varying from character to character). Anna Karenina ultimately died, Darth Vader is Luke's father, and Sherlock Holmes lives in Baker Street. Although fictional entities, these characters have strong – more or less permanent – defining characteristics that delimit them. These original foundational aspects of characters – indeed, what could be called their original *characterization* – are what allow characters like Mickey Mouse, Anna Karenina, or Madame Bovary to "become individuals living outside their original scores" (ibid., 87), offering them a chance to circulate between texts, discourses, and media while remaining identifiable and retaining some modicum of their original nature. In practice, players might have different experiences about the life and personality of *Final Fantasy VII's* Aeris, but it is generally known as an undeniable fact that she "really" died, just as the death of Werther in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is generally indisputable regardless of individual interpretations.

But whereas Aeris's canonical death is a function of cutscenes and unchangeable story structures that the player triggers (and interprets through their own experience of agency in the game's world) and Werther's story is printed in a relatively unchanging form on the pages of books, individual Pokémon receive their uniqueness and permanence from the interplay of player action and the game's systems. There are no cutscenes to characterize them, just the agency of the player and the agency of the Pokémon – concomitant acts of affecting and being affected –

meshing and reconfiguring what the Pokémon is and what it does, stored in the data structure of the Pokémon "once and forever".

Curiously, when discussing technological toys and games, this mimetic mechanism of representing life through permanence and consequence is easily missed over a focus on the fluidity that digital media afford. Bloch and Lemish, for example, see *Tamagotchi* (Yokoi and Maita 1997) as materially and affectively disposable (Bloch and Lemish 1999, 290). They argue that the simulated life of a *Tamagotchi* is a form of trivialized being (ibid., 290), prone to cycles of death and birth where players can (re)create the *Tamagotchi* and its digital life with the push of a button and as such suffer no affective loss when it dies (ibid., 298). In a seeming contradiction, they also recount anecdotal and popular stories about grieving rituals centered on perished *Tamagotchi* (ibid., 286, 298), by and large predicated on the affective tension between permanence and either the fear or realization of discontinued interaction.

Tamagotchi are always powered on, with each *Tamagotchi* existing continuously from the moment of its birth to its eventual demise, be it through the end of its simulated life (a *Tamagotchi* can die if, for example, the player neglects its basic needs) or a mechanical malady (running out of battery or accidentally pushing the reset button). The uninterrupted existence is, in a sense, a marker of the Tamagotchi's life and a sign of its individuality. Once it shuts down and/or dies, the new *Tamagotchi* can feel like a different being; as one child describes, "It comes back, but it doesn't come back as exactly your same *Tamagotchi*… You haven't had the same experiences with it" (Turkle 2011, 33). Another child suggests, "They say you get it back, but it's not the same one. It hasn't had the same things happen to it" (ibid.). For both children, this uninterrupted existence is vital for an accumulated history to build. The individual play-life of *Tamagotchi* is upheld in conjunction with the permanence of its being, as a function of a shared history with it.

Tamagotchi do contain the possibility of a reset cycle, as noted by Bloch and Lemish, but clearly this transience, together with permanence, acts to individuate the life of a *Tamagotchi*. It is something of a *carpe diem* of digital life, where technological agents have permanence and uniqueness, designed to foster bonds and accrue shared histories, but also the possibility for equally permanent loss. The player is guided to enjoy this digital being for its playfully real uniqueness and aliveness that is, in theory, permanent, but in its individual nature also always potentially transient.

Arguing in similar terms as Bloch and Lemish, Allison connects the dynamic and changing existence of digital beings to *Pokémon*. For her, the games' fundamentals revolve around Pokémon being lifelike by virtue of being "in a dynamic rather than static form, where they not only change and evolve but also do so according to a player's input" (Allison 2006a, 266). For Allison then, the fact that

Pokémon change in interaction with the player is what communicates their lifelike traits to the player. Her argument, however, contains only half of the picture: that Pokémon are dynamic and change according to player input is important, but what makes all of it meaningful is that Pokémon are dynamic *only to a degree.* Much like the *Tamagotchi*, Pokémon are dynamic, but also retain individuality independent of the player, as well as a mode of permanence that resists fluidity. This ability to resist change, to change only as a function of labor, if at all, and to retain these changes as parts of their permanent bodies are the other side of their flexible nature.

Likewise, Allison sees flexibility and dynamism at play when Pokémon are traded and accumulated as a form of playful currency:

> Treated like private property, the pokémon differ from the property in another children's game, Monopoly. In contrast to houses and hotels erected on Monopoly's fixed properties […] pokémon are a much more fluid and flexible currency. Composed out of multiple parts that break down and recombine in a complex array of possible constellations, the postmodernist pokémon are less stable or reducible to a material thing than the fixed real estate offerings of the more modernist Monopoly. (Allison 2006a, 220)

Here, Allison again misses the permanence of Pokémon for their postmodern flexibility. That is, Pokémon *in general* are less fixed than *Monopoly* pieces. A generic Pikachu is malleable to changes and different characterizations. But Allison is addressing the players' own stock of Pokémon, and in that context, Pokémon *are* often stable and tied to singular states of being. Even in their limitless variation, individual Pokémon retain their uniqueness and meaning between game sessions, games, and indeed even across years or decades. A Pikachu caught, named, and raised is unique and in many respects "permanent" even if it also functions as flexible currency, just like property in *Monopoly* is meaningful as a permanent rule-bound object, transient objects in the context of the game currently underway, and, more broadly, as a function of past associations with that property. Permanence and change factor into play with both *Monopoly* and *Pokémon*, making them ill-suited as contrasting points, and crucially highlighting how change and permanence form a dynamic rather than a hierarchic order.

In this way, the interplay of permanence and uniqueness allow to build personal histories with particular Pokémon. The player is not interacting with just any Pokémon but a Pokémon with a unique data heritage and permanent shared history with the player, both codified into the Pokémon's body.

It is this interplay of fluidity and permanence that makes the media mix's business model tick. The shared, copied, and duplicated aspects of Pokémon meet up with individual, unchangeable, and limited features. This is a hallmark of a

"virtual economy" (Lehdonvirta and Castronova 2014) in which the aspects of a traditional economy meet with artificial scarcity within the boundless creation of digital environments. That is, there is no reason for Pokémon or any other digital object of value and socioeconomic worth to be scarce other than the act of limitation itself and the forms of uniqueness, desirability, and value it bestows on what would otherwise be endlessly reproducible and customizable – in Allison's words, fluid – digital objects.

Were Pokémon identical, it would not matter, for example, where a Pokémon was caught or what the player has gone through with it. Now, however, it is a particular character that was caught from a particular part of the storyworld and used to achieve particular ends ("this is the team I used to beat the Elite Four", for example). It has gained affective and social value via its distinctiveness. Through character image and taxonomical data, Pokémon are characters without player input, but the core logic of the *Pokémon* videogames and the virtual economy it produces also affixes them with individual elements. That is, it turns them from generic characters to specific characters. Reflected in the franchise at large, generic character images are in a constant motion towards individuation and personification (for further exploration of the modalities of character images, individualized characters in media mixes, and the affective potentials therein, see 3.3).

In this way, Pokémon are forwarded as sticky signs onto which it is easy to affix, conceptually as well as literally, personal meanings and histories. The uniformity of character image and taxonomic data makes it possible to encounter generic Pokémon in a wide variety of situations, whereas the personal nature of the individual data brings a personal or personified component to these encounters.

3.1.4   Animals of the media mix

From the point of view of the videogames, and expanding from them to the wider media mix, Pokémon, at their core, are a combination of character image, taxonomic data, and individual data. Their structure, to which player interaction and integration with the broader dynamics of the game and media mix connect to, consist of a general circulating image, shared universal attributes, and a potential range of individual elements, setting Pokémon on a gradient from general to unique, and public to personal.

In this dynamic, we see the coalescence of the various aspects shaping Pokémon in a general sense. Things like the media mix form, biological metaphors, player input, and the characters' own individuality and agency turn into an axiom of characterization for a Pokémon; a Pokémon is both an individual(ized) agent and a ubiquitous character image that collects meaning as it circulates in the media mix and comes into contact with the audience. In this way, the affection built with

Pokémon can set on a multitude of levels and combinations. One can enjoy a Pokémon character on the level of its character image (for example, by liking Pokémon that look cute), its taxonomic data (for example, by enjoying strong or rare Pokémon) or its personal data (for example, by the strength of the character attained through personal investment of time, or a particularly fortuitous stat spread of the character). Moreover, affection can – and often does – stem from each of these layers, or perchance from a particular combination of them (for example, enjoying a cute Pokémon that also happens to be unexpectedly fast).

This is by and large what Ōmori meant with thinking about and designing Pokémon as "real, living creatures" (Kamen 2014) that, according to Masuda, are conceptually aligned somewhere between pets and friends (Nintendo 2000a). Pokémon are designed to visually convey aliveness, function as taxonomic objects after the fashion of animals and (mostly) natural objects, and be unique and permanent the way a pet or a similar companion would be. Pokémon can never be real, living creatures in the literal sense, but their design and data structure sets them up as close to it as possible. Pokémon are made by developers and audiences alike into textual others that invite Trainers into a relationship of intimacy and ownership in which affection plays out and accumulates in various ways. Thus, character image, taxonomic data, and personal data of Pokémon are used to highlight Pokémon as playfully alive: a fantasy of Pokémon as characters that feel affectively real and encourage desiring for them and to distinguish between Pokémon in general and "my Pokémon" in particular.

Tajiri Satoshi, who is responsible for much of the foundations of the *Pokémon* videogames, notes that in the original videogames Pokémon were intentionally designed as dependent on players (Nintendo 2000b). Although advanced AI routines that could have helped Pokémon act more independently were already available in 1996, Tajiri chose to forgo them in order to highlight the interaction and interdependence of Pokémon and the player. Pokémon, in their procedural form in the videogames, uphold a fantasy of non-human agency while also remaining subject to the actions and the activating inputs of players. This is combined with the intentionally complex and obfuscated Pokémon data structure that aims to portray Pokémon as living beings. Likewise, Tajiri's co-developer Ishihara Tsunekazu views the complexity of the Pokémon data structure and the ability for Pokémon to develop in many different ways, along with the social functionality of the media mix (i.e., Pokémon trading, receiving Pokémon from various sources outside the game itself) the fundamental aspects of Pokémon being playfully alive (ibid.). The relatively hidden mechanisms responsible for the particularities of Pokémon's individual data add factors of unexpectedness and emergence that, while basically founded on relatively modest programming, play out as complex chains of actions and reactions

in *Pokémon's* context, characterizing Pokémon and highlighting their individuality and uniqueness.

In this way, the intimacy and playful aliveness of Pokémon depend on active play with the assemblage of image and data that the Pokémon are, and the affects that arise from it: the potential action-reaction chains between players and Pokémon that eventually turn into meaningful histories. It is not that players imagine Pokémon as alive but that the very way players act upon Pokémon and are acted upon by Pokémon in return set up a field of intimacies, encouraging a surrender to the franchise's fantasy of Pokémon as living beings. Pokémon have affective impact as electric animals not because the media mix says they are alive but because it is designed in a way that they, on an affective level, *feel* alive; it is easy to playfully ascribe them with agency and autonomy because that is systemically true. In play, the very logic of the franchise breathes life into the characters, even when those characters are as literal envoys of capitalism, commodification, and procedurality as Pokémon are.

This original logic of encouraging and upholding the illusion of life is the same one the lead director of the franchise Ōmori (quoted above) aims at. It seems to be a motif the *Pokémon* franchise wields to attune the attachment consumers manifest towards Pokémon. Spending time with Pokémon – as, indeed, there is no way to play *Pokémon* without doing that – encourage memories of them to accrue (Nintendo 2000b) and the framing of Pokémon as playfully alive pins these memories onto textual others that are affective objects at once playfully alive and straightforwardly objectified; forwarded as alive by the videogame's design but also commercialized in products that utilize their character image as much as the affective ties to individual characters. The thingness of Pokémon and the aliveness of Pokémon both stem from Pokémon being, essentially, commodities that in and of themselves are affective (akin to Hello Kitty, for example) but that come with the additional layer of simulated playful life, to make them affectively resonant in a way that differs from many other character products.

This project to frame the affective potential of products through animals and animalistic anthropomorphism is something of a mainstay in entertainment media, of course (as already evidenced with cute commodities). Hoyt Long theorizes the notion of "symbolic animals", signs that derive part of their meaning from real animals but in their symbolic nature are also accommodating to other meanings and discursive constructions (Long 2005, 25). For example, Disney's Bambi relies on references to deer but is also a collection (and result) of cultural meanings largely detached from the biological animal. In this way, the notion of a symbolic animal is, by and large, a thematically specific instance of Ahmed's affective circulation (2014), in which bodies gather affective residue as a function of association and linked discourse; in the case of Bambi, becoming invested in connotations of

innocence and sadness turned the character from a fictional component into an affective and symbolic site that fueled, for example, animal rights activism. As such, symbolic animals are discursive sticky sites of affect, taking the connotations of non-human animals and coding fictional or symbolical objects with their properties. When utilized in the context of commercial entertainment media, the result is a product like Bambi, Hello Kitty or Pokémon, all of which – each in their own way – take after the world of animals and commodities.

Long also notes that modernization brought with it the widening of the gap between humans and non-human animals, "opening up a space for machines and other objects to serve equally profound symbolic functions" (2005, 23), essentially enabling machines to function in the symbolic cultural space of a non-human other that was previously held by non-human animals. In such a way, Tajiri and his team follow the scholars, inventors, and technologists ranging from James Watt to Walt Disney who, in their pursuits starting from the late 19th century, have drawn from the material and symbolic resources of non-human and anthropomorphized animal life, shaping technology towards industrial and aesthetic forms relating to, and derived from, non-human animals (Lippit 2000, 1–2, 187). As exemplars of the intertwining on animal and machine logic, Pokémon are the successors to both of these legacies. They are, essentially, machines in the image of animals, founded on the same basis of "machine nature driven by a 'bio-logic'" that Thrift (2004a, 469) identifies as a motivator in much of technological work aimed at creating non-human objects, ranging from computer programs to robots that take after the automata tradition (ibid., 466, 468).

Pokémon, as procedural metaphors, use the visual cues and mental schemas of pets and wildlife. They look like animals – or animated nonanimals, things-come-animals – and their mechanisms of permanence and taxonomy alongside this associative visual language of non-human animal otherness turns them into symbolic animals. Ethologically speaking (Deleuze 1988, 124–126), by virtue of the capacities of their bodies, Pokémon are aligned with animals as much as, if not more than, with purely technological agents.

This is their core nature, flush with willful animism of a long technocultural tradition; they are inanimate things used and cherished like tools, machines, and currency but also imitating life and encouraging affective registers connected to living others. They are machines of (and for) affection that mimic animals and the general idea of life, forwarded as objects that are agentic, individual, and alive in their relationships with players and audiences. In this, they exemplify Baudrillardian simulacra, where copies and originals blur and it becomes unclear whether something refers to reality or representation (Baudrillard 1993, 56–57; 1994). Through the notion of the hyperreal, the mediated world of the postmodern fills with titillating trespasses and mixtures of reality and representation: Pokémon are

metaphoric animals and literal products, copies and originals, individual characters and generic character images, on the cusp of reality but staunchly positioned in an ever-becoming fantasy.

This is a crucial part of the affective framework that helps turn Pokémon characters – the results of character image, taxonomic data, and individual data – into media mix animals that by virtue of their individuality and interactivity (and systematically upheld illusions thereof) encourage players to imagine them as being alive in some way. In this way, Pokémon are playfully real others that are beings as much as they are things. More than just bits of data, Pokémon are objects and friends, pets, and commodities. On the level of character images and taxonomic data they are generic and commodifiable, and through their individual data they have the potential to grow unique and personal, with themes of affection and desire laced throughout the whole assemblage of this fetishistic materialism, digital life, and proclivity for mediated intimacy with non-human objects.

3.2 Being a Trainer: Pokémon as a role-playing game

My player characters in the *Pokémon* videogames are a collection of loose characteristics and some diegetic family ties to non-player characters, a gender that changes from game to game, and a shared tendency to climb on top of the Pokémon Leagues of various fictional continents in *Pokémon's* storyworld. They are a set of characters, but they are also me: a collection of my choices, their results, and the accumulated experiences arising from them. My personality is manifested in the *Pokémon* world over tens of different player characters, changing slightly on my whims and by my experiences as I grow older, game by game. With the videogames being so disinclined to characterize their protagonist(s) for me, I am left with a hybrid agent of a sort; what little characterization there is of my characters on the part of the *Pokémon* videogames, it is not narratively enforced in any great detail. That leaves me to shape the character into what is mostly just me, augmented with the identity and affordances of a Pokémon Trainer. Over the course of the games, player characters and identities emerge that are not quite me but not quite fictional either. Ultimately, this also suggests linkages to the wider playful media mix where all consumers are players, and all players are Trainers.

The questions of who and what *Pokémon's* various agents and characters are, what the world of *Pokémon* is and where it exists, and what it means for players to interact with these characters, this world, and its commercial extension in the media mix are at the center of this thesis. In the previous section, I examined the structure of Pokémon, positioning them as procedural metaphors made of various levels of data and personal history, affective in their general and personal dimensions. In this section, the role of the player – and the audience position of the media mix in general – along with the constitution of the player character are examined in order to establish the other half of the affective Trainer–and–Pokémon assemblage. The underlying assumption here is that examining *Pokémon's* mediated intimacy and its affects depends not only on investigating the design of the videogames and the media mix or the Pokémon characters themselves, but also on understanding the specific designs of the player position within the media mix and its textual production.

In this section, I argue that *Pokémon* is a role-playing game. More precisely, I argue that through remediation, it is situated alongside derivative and hybrid texts that draw from role-playing games and role-playing activities but are not usually studied as such. In this way, I position *Pokémon* in relation to Japanese console role-playing games (JRPGs), a variety of other games and ways of role-playing, and a collection of activities ranging from storytelling to shopping. I argue that in its almost extreme adoption and usage of the media mix tradition of Japanese entertainment production connected with the heritage of role-playing games, *Pokémon* as a game and as a franchise has become an ontologically complex

participatory form of storytelling where the access points for the audience are devised to frame interaction with the franchise through certain kinds of roles and actions, and where the storyworld and quotidian reality bleed into each other forming a ludic frame – an enchanted everyday. The affective formation of its mediated intimacy, thus, is predicated on the identity and role of a Trainer, a position the audience takes in the diegetic and commercial totality of the media mix.

To approach the topic, I draw on research on role-playing, role-playing games, and Japanese transmedia practices. Within these topics, I focus both on the earlier forms of role-playing – largely unassisted by computer technology – as well as on forms developed in and for computational environments. This approach, calling back to Björk (2013), sheds the "digital dichotomy" in an attempt to be inclusive and, in doing so, catch something more about *Pokémon* than an approach vested either on the digital or analog sides of media mixes and role-playing alone could afford.

3.2.1   About role-playing games

Role-playing games and role-playing are notoriously difficult to pin down. Widely adopted suggestions for definitions of role-playing, live action and tabletop alike (Harviainen 2011, Montola 2008; 2012a), as well as role-playing games (Lortz 1979; Mackay 2001, Hitchens and Drachen 2008) are aplenty. Noting this multiplicity, Harviainen has pointed out that this variety of definitions and the methods for researching them necessarily require that "any definition of role-playing should also be seen as a conclusion of the respective author or as an analytic base assumption, not only as a discourse tool without bias" (Harviainen 2008, 67). Such is the case in this thesis as well; what I present as role-playing and whether it takes place in games of analog or digital kind is already a conclusion of sorts, and is mirrored in the analyses presented in this work. Furthermore, as Harviainen notes, being conscious of the difference of role-playing and role-playing *games* is important when discussing role-play and related phenomena: "The first one is the process, the activity, a way-of-being, a fictional *Dasein*. The second one describes its framing and context – or, perhaps […], more accurately, products" (Harviainen 2012, 22–23). In this thesis, approaches to role-playing and role-playing games as they pertain to *Pokémon* are informed by the act of role-playing as well as the format of role-playing games. Role-playing games are the historical continuum onto which *Pokémon* – through some cultural twists and turns – is tied to, and role-playing is something that in part this heritage and in part *Pokémon's* transmedia structure encourages players towards.

In an earlier attempt at defining role-playing and role-playing games, Hakkarainen and Stenros have argued that "a role-playing game is what is created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and gamemaster(s) within a specified diegetic

framework" (Stenros and Hakkarainen 2003, 56). Although they refer to what a role-playing *game* is, they do so by defining the *activity* of role-playing, dislocated from any specific game or system. As they paraphrase their definition: "As long as there is interaction in a diegetic frame through roles, the activity can be called a role-playing game" (ibid., 59). Curiously, this leads to a situation where they view many activities such as playing videogames as something that might support role-playing, but which are not, for them, role-playing games as such.

Such a view of role-playing potential outside the established domain of role-playing games can be understood through Heliö's notion of a *role-playing mindset*, where role-playing games are not just objects that can be clearly demarcated but are more (or at least also) components in a larger system, a crucial part of which is a mindset one can slip into (Heliö 2004). Role-playing is not just something that takes place in role-playing games but a way of playing in general. Things that are not instinctively role-playing games, such as football, can nevertheless be played as role-playing games as long as the players maintain a particular mindset and narrative desire (ibid. 70–71). Important here is Heliö's observation that this narrative desire can be "'fed' with specific game design solutions" and that "it is also possible to guide the player's interpretations with similar means" (ibid., 69).

Adopting Heliö's stance means that role-playing games in the traditional sense have no monopoly on role-play; they are just more commonly associated with role-play and harness it more efficiently than many other forms of interaction and art. Indeed, if experienced as such, almost anything can be role-play (Harviainen 2012, 23; Waskul 2006, 35), and furthermore, many instances encourage or require some form of role-play even if not generally identified as such.

Of course, such a wide view smothers the analysis of different forms of role-playing and should be regarded as a general ontological quality of role-playing that is nevertheless affected by countless nuances and variance. Even as role-playing is related to a mindset common to many situations in life, it is clear that some instances in particular foster it. Furthermore, it must be noted that not all manifestations of role-play feel the same: role-playing a druid in *Dungeons & Dragons* is phenomenologically different from role-playing in a business simulation, even if the act of role-playing can take place in any social (or mediated) interaction. As games are artifacts designed to structure the experience of players in some fashion, it remains useful to examine in what ways, historically and culturally, a particular game or group of games have directed this tendency of humans to role-play.

Following Montola's lead (2012a, 115–116), in this thesis the definition of role-playing games put forward by Hitchens and Drachen is viewed as a good basis for a closer look at role-playing games. Hitchens and Drachen define role-playing games through six central markers: game world, participants, characters, game master, interaction, and narrative (2008, 16).

This list, based on an analysis of existing forms of role-playing games, offers a comparative tool to contrast and examine games that might fall under the umbrella of role-playing games. For Hitchens and Drachen, a role-playing game is a game set in an imaginary world (1) that affords some liberty for exploration, with participants (2) such as players and game masters (4) – the latter can be a player or software – bestowed with different amounts of power to define the game world and affect changes through characters (3), which are constructs that players can control and shape to some degree, with the game reacting in some capacity to these changes. These elements form the play situation through interaction (5) with and in the game world, and the result is a portrayal of various events that form a narrative (6).

Hitchens and Drachen emphasize that their definition is useful for categorizing games (but not necessarily for ways of playing them), and therein they identify its potential. They regard the examination of game artifacts as a useful way to gain an alternative perspective to role-playing on the whole (ibid., 9). Although the list might appear formalist and binding, Hitchens and Drachen stress that the definition they give is not an attempt at creating strict boundaries and that there is much variation between different forms of role-playing games, many of which resist clear definitions (ibid., 16). All in all, it functions as a general baseline for investigation whenever I study a role-playing game, *Pokémon* included, in this thesis.

Another useful formulation of role-playing games comes from Daniel Mackay. For him, a role-playing game is an "*episodic* and *participatory* story-creation *system* that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional *characters'* spontaneous interactions are resolved" (2001, 4–5, emphases in original). The act of role-playing is conducted in "*sessions* that, together, form *episodes* or adventures in the lives of the fictional characters", and when episodes are stringed together into a longer continuum, they become "part of a single grand story that I call the role-playing game *narrative*" (ibid. 5). This definition is drafted on the basis of "tabletop role-playing" or "pen and paper roleplaying", a specific form of roleplaying that is often, although perhaps a little misguidedly, seen as the "traditional" form of role-playing. This is, however, also relevant in the context of videogames, as tabletop role-playing games indeed had a direct influence on early videogames, including computer and console role-playing games, as discussed later. Despite this, it is important to remember that historically, role-playing as an activity has existed in various primordial forms for an indeterminably long time. Although not role-playing in the sense it is understood now, and certainly not including the sort of games discussed here, everything from Roman spectacles (Morton 2007, 246) to the 19th century Prussian military training game *Kriegsspiel* (Mackay 2001, 13) have been identified as early occurrences of role-playing.

These precise (and thereby necessarily rather reductive) definitions of Hitchens, Drachen, and Mackay can be augmented and expanded by further examination of the activity of role-playing. Montola (2008, 23–24) characterizes role-playing as a structured social process[95] where the process forms a mindset; as noted earlier, this means that role-playing can turn "activities such as ordinary gameplay into role-playing" (Montola 2012a, 117). In Montola's model, role-playing is generally structured around three implicit rules: the world rule, power rule, and character rule:

1) *The world rule:* "Role-playing is an interactive process of defining and re-defining the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world."
2) *The power rule:* "The power to define the game world is allocated to participants of the game. The participants recognize the existence of this power hierarchy.
3) *The character rule:* "Player-participants define the game world through personified character constructs, conforming to the state, properties and contents of the game world" (Montola 2008, 23–24).

He also establishes further endogenous rules (i.e., relating to and stemming from games and their particularities) that differentiate some forms of role-playing from each other. Of these three, the ones characterizing larps ("In larp the game is superimposed on physical world, which is used as a foundation in defining the game world") and virtual role-playing ("In virtual role-playing the game is superimposed on a computational virtual reality, which is used as a foundation in defining the game world") are of most relevance here (ibid., 24).

Drawing on these definitions, it can be said that role-playing games are an identifiable (or at least distinguishable) but diverse form of playful products in which

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[95] This means that Montola's definition excludes single-player videogames; after all, a social process requires "two sentient participants" (Montola 2008, 27n11). As a single-player videogame, *Pokémon* would fall outside Montola's definition, but as demonstrated in this thesis, *Pokémon* is much more than a single-player videogame, containing multiple participants on a wide range of aliveness and sentience, conducting play on a variety of platforms and in various forms. Even so, it is good to remember that although *Pokémon* bears resemblance to the kind of role-playing Montola discusses, it is clear that it would likely not pass as role-playing under the requirements Montola presents in his article. This is not surprising as he examines role-playing grounded in a particular context; the Nordic tradition of tabletop and live action role-playing (ibid., 34), and as such privileges some aspects of role-playing over others (just as I do in this thesis, as per Harviainen 2008, 67). A good middle-ground solution here is to acknowledge that although "digital role-playing games do not represent the full spectrum of role-playing games" (Hitchens and Drachen 2008, 16), they nevertheless are part of a wider role-playing culture.

players, through their characters, play in – and in doing so, define – a fictional world. Similarly, role-playing is the act of participating in that activity, but it is also a wider concept that applies to a broad set of other activities and is more akin to a mindset disjointed from any particular game system. This formulation bears close resemblance to that of Lortz's definition that has seen wide circulation over the years (for example, Fine 1983, 6; Choy 2004, 54; Jones 2012, 87; Brown 2015, 31), in which role-playing games are seen as "any game which allows a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment" (Lortz 1979, 36).

3.2.2   Descendants and derivatives of role-playing games

In the light of these discussions and definitions, it seems that *Pokémon* both exhibits shared traits as well as clear departures from role-playing games and role-playing. A parallel can be drawn to, for example, the trading card game *Magic: The Gathering*. The game's designer Richard Garfield has noted that he experiences the game not only as a card game but as a sort of role-playing game as well (2005, 549). Garfield suggests that the decks built by players are like characters (and are perceived as such). Furthermore, he sees that players often determine the object of the game in non-structured modes of play, that is, save for tournaments and other strictly governed situations *Magic: The Gathering* allows for a variety of unstructured play where goals and sources of enjoyment are largely player-determined. He also notes that although *Magic* is a very formative card game at heart, it is also the ludic engine at the center of an expansive fantasy world. By acquiring cards, playing matches, and taking part in experiencing and shaping the stories – both pre-authored and spontaneous – players of *Magic: The Gathering* explore the game's storyworld. His observations are supported by Brett Martin, who explores how players of *Magic: The Gathering* "generate the fantastic imaginary during consumption" (2004, 136). In his work, Martin points out several different aspects of the process discussed by Garfield (although he does not mention Garfield's thoughts) in which players essentially role-play or at least experience episodes of role-playing in the game.

Similar examples of activities and games that resemble role-playing are numerous. Even setting aside non-recreational and non-ludic cases of borderline (or even straight up) role-playing such as acting, running a confidence trick, or performing a ritual (Morton 2007, 246), there exists a wide variety of activities bearing family resemblance to role-playing and role-playing games despite not commonly being – at least solely – about them. For example, social games (often called social network games specifically) and pervasive forms of gaming such as alternate reality games fall into this category.

Using the game *Spymaster* (Irata Labs 2009) as a point of focus, Newsom examines the makings of social games; a type of game that "takes place in a liminal, or in-between, space that is not quite the fiction of the game, and not quite the reality of social interaction" (2012, 168; see also Willson 2015). Newsom discusses social network games such as *Bejeweled* (PopCap Games 2001) and *Mafia Wars* (Zynga 2009a) that utilize pre-existing modes of communication and networking such as social media platforms, and the blended state that is produced by constant negotiations between the mundane world of the platform and the ludic world constructed on top of it: "players do not enter a completely separate space when social gaming, but rather play takes place as one part of the larger activity of social networking" (ibid., 170).[96] The player is the character and the player's own social network forms much of the game's cast and milieu. This makes the game into a constant boundary negotiation between players over what is part of the game and what is not. As one of Newsom's interviewees puts it, "Some people think it's real life and some think it's RPG" (ibid., 178). In a sense, social network games are a way of injecting a role-play element ("me as a *Spymaster* assassin") into a generally very mundane setting. Through this sensibility of introducing playful roles and activities on top of social media platforms and browser-based games, less RPG-like examples of social games such as *FarmVille* (Zynga 2009b) and *Kantai Collection* (Kadokawa Games 2013) still retain a sense of ludification and diegesis over what is usually an everyday humdrum of social networks.

Similarly to *Pokémon* and social games like *Spymaster*, many forms of pervasive games (Montola, Stenros, and Waern 2009, 37–40; Gosney 2005) engage in an appropriation and redevelopment of role-playing into new directions. Despite not being role-playing games in a conventional sense (and oftentimes not even in any practical sense), pervasive games nevertheless owe a lot of their heritage to role-playing games (Montola, Stenros, and Waern 2009, 64). Pervasive games like treasure hunts, assassination games, pervasive larps, and ARGs also introduce a similar fluid mixing of real and fictional as social games – and indeed many role-playing games – do. For example, *Ingress*[97] (Niantic 2013) casts players as agents taking part in a global conflict where players equipped with GPS-enabled

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[96] Although not discussed here, it is useful to note that this same sort of boundary work and social role-play reaches well beyond social media platforms and applies to, for example, social deduction games such as *Mafia*, *Werewolf* or *Among Us* (Innersloth 2018), and many of the social layers of game platforms such as Steam.

[97] Games like *Ingress* portray aspects of both social games and pervasive games. Relatedly, Niantic Labs – the Google-backed developer of *Ingress* – is also the developer of *Pokémon GO* (Niantic and The Pokémon Company 2016), with the two games sharing much in terms of gameplay and technology. Hence, most of what I write here about *Ingress* is directly applicable to – as well as observable in – *Pokémon GO*.

smartphones roam across cities, maintaining and progressing a conflict in a series of skirmishes and maneuvers near real locations with virtual (and thus real again) significance.

The core framing in *Ingress* does not highlight the idea of role-playing but instead centers on resource gathering and area control gameplay while tying the players' real-life identities[98] into the game's fiction. The player is exclusively referred to through their position as an "agent" and the needs as well as affordances of their everyday life are extended with the powers of this role; statues, churches, and notable public spaces – the locations contested in the game – turn into sites of strategic importance demanding potential interaction, and passers-by become possible enemies and allies that must be kept a close eye on. *Ingress*, then, employs a "dual role" structure that allows players to slip in and out of play at will, at times being agents actively committing to the diegetic content of the game and at others their everyday selves with the *potential* of whipping out their "scanner" (i.e., a smart device) and resuming their role as an agent. Playing *Ingress* is not a role-playing experience per se, but as a pervasive game, it does stem from a tradition of RPG-like phenomena and it engenders an element of role-play in its framing of players as agents. It takes the idea of the player as an augmented persona – an everyday you combined with the game's you – and connects that to the fictional world of the game, offering a ludic frame on the everyday and making the everyday potentially susceptible to role-playing.

Looking at *Magic: The Gathering*, *Spymaster*, and *Ingress* as role-playing games through Drachen's and Hitchen's comparative definition, it is clear that they contain similarities with role-playing games in excess of it being mere chance, but also that if compared to, say, *Dungeons & Dragons*, they would lie somewhere outside the boundaries of a "typical" role-playing game.

They all contain characters of sorts: a player position that is not entirely removed from the everyday self of the player but not without fictional dimensions either. This position is not only a social role but also a unique developing construct within the game's systems that changes in tune with the player's progress in the game. It is, then, both socially and game mechanically developing. At the same time, however, this character state is not particularly enforced. Instead, players are positioned to adopt it, to create them almost as by-products of playing the game. *Spymaster* and *Ingress* create what could be called a *ludified everyday* where the game and the

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[98]   *Ingress* does this very concretely: it links the players' Google or Facebook profile with the game. Not only is the player associated with the game through their own actions – of playing it and interacting with other players – but a good deal of their online and mobile presence is subjected to a form of datafication: systemic surveillance acted out by – and directly benefitting – Google, for example (See Hulsey and Reeves 2014).

player's in-game identity mesh with the everyday reality in small and non-intrusive ways, creating in-between spaces that are meaningful as defined – demarcated – backdrops for play but which are also transparent and seamlessly interlock with the reality outside of the game. The shift to playing an agent in *Ingress* is sometimes signaled by the opening of the scanner application, but just as often the role is visited only briefly, in a passing thought about some statue probably being a point of strategic significance, and evaluating whether to capture it or not, or in being alert for other agents in particularly active urban locations.

In conclusion, each of these games contains a system acting as a game master, a developing character position acknowledged by other players and used by participants to weave episodes of narrative that coalesce in great story arcs. The players go about this by employing a rather wide range of configurative options for interaction with the game world, in large part because the game world in each of these games is not entirely defined and instead is under constant negotiation and social construction by the players through their roles.

The distinction to be drawn in all these examples that resemble role-playing games is one of purity versus practice; what is not purely something might very well resemble it – or loan something from it – in practice. Much like *Magic: The Gathering* is not a role-playing game but is still "closer to roleplaying than any other card or board game" (Garfield 2005, 549), *Pokémon* too loans much from the history and conventions of role-playing games and invites role-playing without demanding active construction of roles or role-playing in the same way as, for example, tabletop role-playing games do.

To return to Heliö's arguments about role-playing being a state of mind, we can see how *Pokémon*, *Ingress*, *Spymaster*, and *Magic: The Gathering* function on exactly this logic: as game systems to which role-playing can be, and often is, attached to. From the perspective of the activity of role-playing, what these products all have in common with traditional forms of role-play and role-playing games is a cultivation of a participatory sort of engagement where individuals construct their cultural and social identities – as fans, players, and characters – through appropriative play, negotiating ready-made or barely existing storyworlds into their own playgrounds and taking part in a porous social setting that includes relations with entities both imagined and real.

Looking at definitions of role-playing and role-playing games, *Pokémon*, like *Magic: The Gathering*, *Spymaster,* and *Ingress*, are an uneasy fit if one indeed attempts to pin them strictly into those categories, as games meant primarily for role-playing of the classic sort. Examining these games through theories, practices, and historical progressions of role-playing games, however, reveals aspects central for them that would likely be missed were their roots in role-playing and role-playing games forgotten.

3.2.3   Remediated role-play in JRPGs

My argument about *Pokémon* and its player position as sites of pervasive and ontologically complex role-play builds on the synthesis of two veins of playful make-believe: firstly, role-playing games as a historically distinct group of play products and structured activity, and secondly, JRPGs – here understood as the assemblage of history, culture, and practice of Japanese console role-playing games – as a particular form of this wider set of role-playing games. I view *Pokémon* as connected to both the conventions of Japanese console role-playing games and the heritage of more general role-playing in them, and I argue that through the cultural history of the JRPG, *Pokémon* tapped into conventions of role-playing but has taken them significantly beyond most other console role-playing games.

The acronym JRPG stands for "Japanese Role-Playing Game" and describes a particular subset of videogames – or, more precisely, a discursive understanding of a particular subset of videogames – that (usually) originate from Japan.[99] This acronym is often intuitively understood, but much like all genre monikers, such as FPS, RTS or MOBA, it is a distillation of a long and constantly evolving history of happenstance, conventions, and contested meanings. Understanding what it stands for requires knowledge and context. In examining *Pokémon* as a role-playing game, it is useful to examine it as a Japanese role-playing game, or JRPG, with the layers of history and particularities that this entails, and the connections to role-playing and role-playing games that come with it.

Instead of attempting to demarcate genres or specify what counts as belonging to which genre, I adopt a more general approach here. I accept that genres are not constant and are not considered stable by audiences (Apperley 2006, 9): a genre rarely accommodates uniform definitions and one common step in the development of new games is the challenging and renewing of the genre the game is connected to (if any). Genres are built on earlier games, and new games redefine and challenge that, and in doing so shape games to come. There are no stable genres that are shared across the board but instead a sea of more or less similar takes that vary in nuance depending on whether they are formed, for example, by fans, critics, or developers.

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[99]   In general – and in this section especially – it is good to bear in mind that all genre typologies are socially constructed, reductive, tied to temporal contexts, and, at best, only partially descriptive. One needs only to look at prior attempts at videogame genre construction (see Wolf 2005) – or indeed even this thesis – to see how arbitrary the building of genre typologies can be and how idiosyncratic the typologies can get especially over time, even when meticulously built. For a general discussion on this topic, see Mortensen (2009, 48–49). For more information on JRPG, see Pelletier-Gagnon (2018).

As such, game genres are "dynamic, dialogic and historical" (Burn and Carr 2006, 19).

Genre as an overall concept, then, is not approached critically here (for such approaches, see Apperley 2006; Aarseth 2004; Arsenault 2009), but instead as a descriptive and historically formed (ongoing) concept of organization, as an instrument "to mark some of the major distinctions between types of games" (King and Krzywinska 2002, 26). JRPG, for example, is understood here to be a shared and, to a degree, commonly understood term in videogame culture. Far from uniformly defined, it nevertheless has practical purchase as "a distinct subcategory" among those who partake in videogame culture, designers and players alike (Boone 2015, 63).

Such a general approach would not be possible if the aim was to challenge genre boundaries or to critically examine the process of genre formation. Instead, I am more interested in tracing some of the cultural flows that role-playing has followed throughout the history of contemporary videogames, especially in areas relatively rarely covered such as Japanese console role-playing games. For that purpose, it is sufficiently accurate to say that the JRPG – much like the FPS, RTS, and MOBA – are established to a degree, even if not unambiguously defined. In this, I follow Arsenault (2009) in understanding genre as communication: a means for developers to signal certain intentions through visual aesthetics and game mechanics, and for the players to expect certain kinds of functionality, conventions, and experiences in interacting with these signals.

3.2.3.1   From computer role-playing games to Japanese role-playing games

Although JRPGs are far removed from the practices of tabletop and live action role-playing games, they nevertheless belong to a shared lineage through the intermediary of computer role-playing games.

Computer role-playing games are often seen as new forms or new representations of older forms of role-playing games (see Apperley 2006, 17–19) as well as just another form of role-playing in general (Hitchens and Drachen 2008), while JRPGs are a derivative – and later concomitantly developed – form of computer role-playing games.

I place computer role-playing games (CRPGs) and Japanese console role-playing games (JRPGs) under the wider category of digital role-playing games (DRPGs), which is wielded mostly as a rhetorical tool to distinguish console and computer role-playing games from forms of role-playing that precede them. DRPG is a relatively rarely used term in popular parlance and is here employed for the sake of clarity and

family resemblance (for similar use, see Voorhees et al. 2012, 13; Costikyan 2007, 9).

CRPGs, at their inception in the 1970s, were not only greatly influenced by early tabletop role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) but also shared many of their influences. In addition to tabletop role-playing games, CRPGs drew from strategy wargaming, simulation games, speculative fiction, and the nascent field of early computer adventure games like *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Crowther 1976 and Woods 1977) (Barton and Stacks 2019, 21; Peterson 2018; Schules, Peterson, and Picard 2018). Early (mostly mainframe-operated) computer role-playing games such as *Moria* (Duncombe et al. 1978), *Avatar* (Maggs et al. 1979) and *Rogue* (Toy and Wichman 1980) established the foundations of CRPGs, including many elements familiar from *D&D* such as character statistics, progression levels, dungeons, and a variety of monster that players encounter, randomly or otherwise. Gaining popularity along with tabletop role-playing games, they were soon joined by a growing number of commercial single-player home computer role-playing games such as the *Temple of Apshai* (Freeman 1979).

In Japan, the advent of computer and console role-playing games followed a different path. Tabletop role-playing games arrived in Japan by and large as imports. *Dungeons & Dragons, Tunnels & Trolls* (St. Andre 1975)*,* and *Traveller* (Miller 1977) were all translated to Japanese in the mid-1980s. Instead of becoming the sort of pop (sub)culture hit they were in the West, however, role-playing games remained more a curiosity for a long time. Eventually, they started attracting more subcultural traction through the support of other media.

Starting in 1988, the early role-playing media mix franchise *Record of Lodoss War* did a great deal to introduce the concepts of role-playing and role-playing games to Japanese audiences: essentially a *Dungeons & Dragons* replay akin to the *Dragonlance* franchise in the US, the *Record of Lodoss War* functioned as an exemplary role-playing adventure and an illustration of the kinds of adventures players could expect in tabletop role-playing games. Through its media mix of anime, manga, and novels, *Record of Lodoss War* paved way for Japanese-made role-playing games such as *Sword World RPG* (Mizuno 1989) and propelled role-playing to new heights of popularity in Japan (Kamm 2019, 624, 628–629). Even so, tabletop role-playing games remained confined within a relatively small audience.

As noted by Kamm, role-playing in Japan evolved in a unique direction[100] with the late 1980s and 1990s seeing the rise of game types and mechanics that favored small campaigns or one-shot sessions and quick play (Kamm 2011, 56–57; see also

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[100]   Such is the case elsewhere too, of course. For example, in the Nordic countries, the "Nordic larp" scene links itself to the socio-geographical origins and traditions of a particular form of roleplaying (see, for example, Stenros and Montola 2010).

Kamm 2019). Additionally, larps in Japan remain a niche phenomenon within the already-niche role-playing scene. Larp-like activities exist in the form of escape room puzzles, highly structured indoor role-playing experiences (ibid., 57; 2019) and, arguably, some forms of cosplay parallel to role-playing (Lamerichs 2015, 110–111; Ogonoski 2014, 1.5, 1.6, 3.1).

Role-playing games found purchase as a more widely received phenomenon in Japan only after being remediated by videogames. Although not the first Japanese role-playing videogame,[101] *Dragon Quest* (Chunsoft 1986) was the first console role-playing game to gain wider recognition and served to popularize a baseline for a whole aesthetic tradition of videogames to follow (Boone 2015, 38–39). While containing a new take on digital role-playing games, the *Dragon Quest* series comprised initially of "transitional works" (Koyama 2022, 31), strongly influenced by Western computer role-playing games, *Wizardry* (Sir-Tech 1981) in particular (Kalata 2008a), with some aspects of the *Ultima* series mixed in (Barton and Stacks 2019, 239).

The influence of Western CRPGs remained significant on Japanese game development, but developers aiming for the nascent Japanese console role-playing game market also picked up on *Dragon Quest's* design aesthetic, both to reproduce it as well as to distinguish their games from it (Koyama 2022). One can see an early JRPG culture starting to form when *Dragon Quest* was followed by games and products that were clearly inspired by it. Titles like *Madara* – identified by Marc Steinberg (2015) as one of the first true media mixes in the style of Kadokawa Tsuguhiko – were not uniformly role-playing games or even straightforwardly inspired by Western (computer and tabletop) role-playing games, but instead were broader pop cultural media franchises that used the already transnational imagery and conventions of console role-playing games as a milieu. *Madara*, for example, began as a manga keyed into role-playing games through a game designer who supplied a set of rules for how the world of the comic books operates. Eventually, the manga with its rules and conventions was turned into an actual console role-

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[101] That place is sometimes reserved for *The Black Onyx* (Bullet-Proof Software 1984), a computer role-playing game developed by Henk Rogers and Bullet-Proof Software. Rogers was a fan of *Dungeons & Dragons* and CRPGs like *Wizardry*, and wished to introduce CRPGs to Japan as well. His efforts were successful, but mostly Rogers and his game gained fame for being the heralds of the soon-to-come *Dragon Quest* franchise that was inspired, in part, by Rogers's game (Donovan 2010, 158). Although a well-known and commercially successful example of early Japanese CRPGs, *Black Onyx* was preceded by several pioneering domestic entries such as Koei's *Dragon & Princess* (Koei 1982), *Dungeon* (Koei 1983), and Falcom's *Panorama Island* (Kiya 1983), suggesting that *The Black Onyx's* notability was mostly due to Rogers's active campaigning and marketing in (and at) Japanese games press (Donovan 2010, 158), rather than in being, in any sense, the first Japanese CRPG.

playing game. As these media mix franchises and early console role-playing games found traction, they started to self-reflexively show a cultural understanding of genre and deployed this through conventions and clichés to evoke meanings connected to what was already solidifying as the JRPG genre.

In Japan, then, digital role-playing games have built upon a tradition greatly influenced by, but nevertheless slightly unmoored from, the long history of tabletop (and live action) role-playing games, accessed primarily through the form of CRPGs. Due to this, in Japan, the acronym "RPG" for role-playing game is often understood to mean *digital* role-playing games (Huber 2009, 378; Kamm 2011, 55) – and mostly console role-playing games at that – as opposed to, for example, the US-dominant cultural context where digital variants of role-playing games such as JRPGs and CRPGs, and indeed often tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) as well, are denoted with an additional prefix.[102] It remains clear, however, that JRPGs were influenced by Western practices of role-playing – digital and otherwise – and that the Japanese game industry shaped these influences to new directions. Furthermore, the effect JRPGs had on the later development of Western computer role-playing games and the general understanding of role-playing games as a broader field can hardly be overstated.

In understanding this push and pull of genres and influences between cultural domains, Consalvo's notions of the hybridity and technoregionality of the videogame industry are useful. Drawing on Timothy Luke's ideas of informational modes of production creating post-national spaces that emerge to augment and replace nation-states (Luke 1995), Consalvo uses the concept of a technoregion to describe the transnational videogame industry as "it's own sphere of influence" (Consalvo 2006, 133), a place of hybrid influences and a sense of whole unmoored from the geographical and cultural borders of the world. The influence of, for example, Japanese games on Western developers (and vice versa) continue to blur the distinctions between local contexts and creates what, for Consalvo, is a sort of commercial configuration of global flows of culture into a new whole.

Still, Consalvo points out that despite this process of hybridization and transgression of national and cultural borders, the local is not wholly left behind. Regionalism continues to play a part in how game releases and localizations are controlled through region locks, release dates, and decisions to import or export. Furthermore, in a more abstract sense, the local is inevitably present in these games

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[102] Although I try to follow Japanese naming conventions in this thesis, here I adopt the mostly Western acronym JRPG instead of RPG to describe console role-playing games. This, like adopting the use of DRPG, is largely a practical choice aimed at clarifying the discussion. As the latter part of this section shows, the aim here is not to attempt differentiating forms but conversely to understand them as parts of a greater whole.

by way of culture and intentional as well as imagined representations of it. As Hutchinson notes, Japanese videogames – and perhaps a global player base keen to experience Japanese cultural texts – package Japan "as a cultural object […] for consumption at home and abroad" (Hutchinson 2019, 253). In this way, cultural and national conventions, themes, and narrative particularities remain identifiable even though the industry itself has become a hybrid technoregion; regardless of the largely global nature of these games and the industry creating them, the cultural history of production and consumption leads players to interpret JRPGs as Japanese and as representative of some forms of "japaneseness" (Grau 2014, 15), as well as the developers to follow certain – in part local, in part global – conventions and influences. Thus, JRPGs as games and as sites of Japanese cultural production are a "discursive field, pointing to a textual formation made up of prior texts" (Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson 2022, 5) in terms of their ludic but also cultural components, and moreover it can be argued that this translocal interplay of local and global influences is an integral trait of Japanese videogames and their sense of Japaneseness in general (Fiadotau 2021). As the transnational flows highlighted by Consalvo show, digital role-playing games contain a type of developmental globalism, where Japanese games in their local contexts are transnationally influenced by Western products and vice versa, in a historical process of mixing localities, creative exchanges, and influences.

3.2.3.2   Remediating role-playing games

In their influential take on new media, Bolter and Grusin define medium as "that which remediates" (2000, 65) and as "the formal, social, and material network of practices that generates a logic by which additional instances are repeated or remediated, such as photography, film, or television" (ibid., 273). For them, no medium exists in isolation; new media build on top of the old – bringing the old with them to new contexts "in order to critique and refashion them" (ibid., 53) – and old media likewise refashion themselves in response to the new. Media are always in a process of remediation, of striving to overthrow the limits of representation and achieve the real.[103] Bolter and Grusin apply remediation as a term to "express the way in which one medium is seen by our culture as reforming or improving upon another" (ibid., 59) in a succession – or almost rather a network – of causes and effects, the result of which is the development of media and forms of texts in them as an extensively intertextual whole. This, of course, can be seen as a reductive and

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[103]   "Real" in this case refers to the audience's *experience*: "it is that which would evoke an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 53).

needlessly teleological take on understanding the cultural and social history of media, but for the specific task of charting out – and arguing for – particular genealogies of development, it offers a useful theoretical grounding to work from.

Under this broad rubric we can understand videogames as a medium and DRPGs as a further media category within the medium of videogames. Following Bolter and Grusin, role-playing games, too, constitute a form of media (ibid., 89).[104] Role-playing games – digital and otherwise – constantly loan modalities and conventions of older (and in some cases newer) media and repurpose them in a wide network of remediating acts and settings. Here, JRPGs can be seen as an extension of the computer role-playing game. In that sense, they are role-playing games that are remediated into computer role-playing games and shifted into Japanese role-playing games.[105] In this, they appear as examples of "mediation of mediation" (ibid., 55); they are a remediated medium (or part of a medium) that depends on any number of preceding and subsequent mediations, in constant competition, dialogue, and affiliation with other media.

JRPGs owe their history to role-playing games and computer role-playing games. Through the remediating act of appropriating their practices and combining that to the demands, expectations, and ideas of a new market – followed by their own historical progression – they also contain departures from these earlier forms of role-playing. This can make it difficult (and indeed sometimes analytically impossible) to explore JRPGs as role-playing games, well illustrated in the popular debate on whether JRPGs are (or even can be) role-playing games at all.

In order to better understand the relationship between *Pokémon*, computer role-playing games, Japanese console role-playing games, and role-playing, we can examine the changes and procedures taking place in the remediation of JRPGs. It allows us to view *Pokémon* and its affects – what sort of acts it suggests for its players, what sort of acts it directs at them, and the affective contacts arising from this – in the context of JRPGs as well as opens up space to read it as a role-playing

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[104] Whether role-playing games are a medium is a contested topic. Following Bolter and Grusin's broad definition, however, they can at least be examined as one. Similarly, echoing Bogost, a medium can be viewed as all-inclusive, fractal, and non-hierarchical (2011), something that can simultaneously stand on its own and be part of a greater whole. Epistemically this approach "both opens and closes different perspectives for analysis" and puts emphasis on "choosing what we choose to pay attention to as a medium, and then making good on that choice." (ibid.). That is, I am not as interested in arguing whether role-playing games are a medium as I am in seeing what can be learned when they are addressed as such.

[105] The term JRPG is not meant to invoke here – or even in popular parlance – all role-playing videogames that originate from Japan. It is, however, a useful moniker for the type of videogame *Pokémon* largely originates from, and hence relevant for a closer look.

game connected to the same historical continuum as other forms of role-playing. This helps in understanding how players and the text of *Pokémon* come together and produce affective encounters – the acts and being-acted-upons suggested in *Pokémon's* media mix.

Since there is no consensus on the definition of the JRPG (see Pelletier-Gagnon 2018; Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson 2022), one based on prior research, journalistic works, and my own close readings is sketched here. Following Consalvo as well as Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson, this is an attempt to draw from the "shared history" (Consalvo 2016, 96) of these games, and to take heed of the "common pool of resources" (ibid.) that function as the original sociocultural foundation of many JRPGs; to identify from the overall discursive field of JRPGs (Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson 2022, 5) some core concepts that are often associated with Japanese console role-playing games and their affective as well as narrative styles.

Typical attributes of JRPGs[106] include linearity (in particular as a means for the developers to maintain greater control over the story and thus deliver what is often argued to be more dramatic narratives), distinct spatiotemporal conventions, particular visual aesthetics, and (compared to the whole gamut of DRPGs) streamlined mechanics and characters (Barton and Stacks 2019, 233–234; Boone 2015, 17–18; Schules 2015; Chen 2011, 119; Kalata 2008b; Schules, Peterson, and Picard 2018, 114). Also, beyond the game artifacts, JRPGs are also frequent sites of intertextuality and have a proclivity towards integration to media mix supersystems (Glasspool 2013, 2.3).

Apart from being observable in the games themselves and discussions surrounding them, these traits can also be culled from the criticism leveraged at JRPGs, as many of these elements are often also seen as shortcomings by those used to different paradigms (see Barton and Stacks 2019, 233; Filipowich 2012; Plunkett 2009). It is a valid point that the conventions of JRPGs are different from those of CRPGs, an observation apparent in the upkeep of differing genre signs amongst DRPGs. Before moving on to examine role-play in *Pokémon* and its media mix more broadly, I will briefly examine and expand on the basic aspects of JRPGs in order to better understand *Pokémon's* design heritage.

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[106]   JRPG tends to be a sort of umbrella term that contains other, more descriptive genre monikers such as "tactical RPG" and "action RPG", as noted by Stenström and Björk (2013). Their paper reflects the trouble that arises when starting to draw hard borders around different game types. Although resulting in a lack of descriptive accuracy, here JRPG is viewed as a general concept that includes various subcategories.

While Western computer role-playing games tend to emulate the freeform aesthetics of tabletop role-playing games[107] and reflect this in their ambition (if not always in their execution) to grant the player significant agency in directing the narrative, JRPGs more commonly take a more linear approach. One apogee of this design philosophy is *Final Fantasy XIII* (Square Enix 2009), which faced criticism for being too linear even for a JRPG (see Peckham 2012, Kohler 2010, Quijano-Cruz 2011). It funnels the player down straightforward roads without much possibility to explore beyond the boundaries of the narrow path. But as Simon Ferrari notes in his essay "Hills and Lines: Final Fantasy XIII", while *Final Fantasy XIII* presented extreme linearity, it nevertheless "makes one realize something that was true of Final Fantasy games all along: we've always been running in a straight line" (Ferrari 2011). Ferrari's observation implicitly positions the almost rhizomatic (Murray 1997, 132–134) structure of Western computer role-playing games that reflect the freedom of tabletop role-playing games against the more maze-like (ibid. 130–132) JRPGs and their emphasis on a pre-defined plot progression (accompanied by an equally linear progression through the gameworld) with the occasional tangents here and there.

A useful concept here is the notion of "soft rails" and "hard rails", as used by Jenkins and Squire (2002): games with hard rails structure the player's movement and agency to create a predetermined outcome, while games with soft rails allow for an experience that is "multidirectional and multilinear" (Jenkins and Squire 2002, 69). Although the rigidity varies, both structure experience with at least some amount of pre-installed control. This implies that there is very little pure freeform play in videogames (which is not to say videogames could not be *used* for freeform play, but that their basic structure cannot really be designed to account for it), as even the most freeform of videogames deploy elements of structuring – rails – of *some* rigidity.

With both Western and Japanese DRPGs being more or less linear with variance introduced mostly through the rigidity of rails that confine the experience, the linearity of JRPGs is most clearly seen in the strong predefined nature of their characters (Grau 2014, 10). While games such as *Final Fantasy XII* (Square Enix 2006) and *Persona 3* (Atlus 2006) allow for a wide range of freedom in terms of developing the skills and attributes of player characters, in a narrative sense, the characters still remain tightly bound to predefined molds, following the twists and turns of the plot as intended by the developers.

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[107] The illusion of freedom is a staple aspect of all role-playing games in general. It should, then, be understood more as a scale of subjective feelings of freedom and agency instead of set levels of freedom emblematic to different genres, mediums, and design heritages. A tabletop role-playing game is often (but not always) experienced as more freeform than CRPGs, which in turn are often seen as more freeform than JRPGs, but all involve managing player freedom.

Characters are augmented using game mechanics (such as core loops of battles yielding advancements in characters' strength and enabling them to take on bigger foes and net more advancements) and the player sometimes has a say in the direction to which this progress leads, but the characters' place in a game's story is largely set in advance; *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997), for example, allows for changes in character development through an equipment system, but the primary attributes – which character excels in which role – is largely predetermined, and the characters' position within the game's story is strictly bound. As Burn and Carr note, they "remain much the same throughout the game, at least in terms of their function in the game system" (Burn and Carr 2006, 25). This does not mean that the characters are inert, however, as character development and story are common characteristics of a JRPG (Schules 2012, 93). The linearity of both the story and the characters can be seen as taking a strong authorial control over the characters (see Schules, Peterson, and Picard 2018, 114). Instead of extending their agency in the gameworld, the player is directed down pre-defined storylines where limited agency is – at least in theory – offset by a richer, more focused story and the chance to play a role in the narrower possibility space that this affords.

Following Blom (2022), however, we can see how JRPGs, given the forms of production behind them, often subscribe to a different sort of nonlinearity. As they are often produced as parts of media mixes, what is popularly understood as linearity in JRPGs might in fact be an artifact of authoring media mix characters that are designed and experienced in a setting more fluid and transmedial than the immediate narrative of a single videogame. Indeed, this strong authoring of – and sometimes fragmentary access to – characters in JRPGs combined with the players' agency to influence their stories and connect them to experiences of a wider transmedia network presents a form of linearity that neither corresponds to a linear/nonlinear dichotomy with Western CRPGs nor remains particularly one-dimensional in terms of narrative and game mechanical progress. As Blom argues, "JRPGs should not simply be defined as a closed text as such, but rather, should be understood from the agency of the player and their engagement with the characters both in and beyond the games" (Blom 2022, 90).

Instead of portraying the discussion on linearity in JRPGs as a matter of (character) agency and story progression, though, we can look closer at the spatial conventions of these games. For this, I turn to William Huber's theoretical concept of *epic spatialities*, in light of which JRPGs such as the *Final Fantasy* series – Huber's own example – can be approached from vectors beyond linearity (Huber 2009), offering both a more complex take on what it means for a JRPG to be "linear" and how JRPGs are structured in general.

Space as a navigable plane and a more theoretical experiential configuration has been suggested as grounds for analysis for videogames in earlier seminal works

(Murray 1997, 79–83; Aarseth 2001b). And indeed, sidelining the notion of linearity and the temporal track of the games' story progression and instead examining games as engines of experiential space-production – as phenomenological worldbuilders – we can see how many JRPG worlds open up, their narratives weaving complex graphical, conceptual, and affective spaces (Huber 2009, 382). This matrix of spatialities opens up different ways of examining space in JRPGs – from physics and environmental graphics to topological changes in scale or scope in different parts of a game, and from different kinds of map and navigation displays to the gameworld as an object of contemplation and a site of personal and collective memories – and offers support to Huber's assertion that the modalities of these games are tied to ways of representing space and telling stories that go beyond the simplistic notion of a story progressing on a single linear and temporal track.

At its simplest, this idea can be seen to manifest in how JRPGs tend to share between them conventions of representing space. For example, one of the more common archetypes Huber mentions is the shifting and relative nature of representations caused by the games' material space. That is, the game spaces are represented within (and through) the material constraints of its software and hardware, which has led to particular conventions and archetypes (ibid., 378). JRPGs – especially of the foundational period of the late 1980s and early to mid-1990s – often divide the game world into particular types of reproductions based on utility. Battle screens zoom in to specific areas and form arenas for battles, town or dungeon screens allow for a slightly zoomed-out look on the world so players can concentrate on exploring space, and overworld screens function as interactive maps, zooming even further out to show traversable geography on the scale of countries, cities, mountain ranges. Over time, the material space of these games has expanded to include 3D graphics and processing units capable of seamless transitions between different world levels. Despite this, conventions established in the decades-old material space have stuck. This is evident in, for example, *Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch* (Level-5 and Studio Ghibli 2011), which replicates the aforementioned classic structuring of space.

Spatiality is crucial for the core designs of JRPGs also in how temporality links to it. As Huber notes, "inverting the customary relationship between time and space, it is the passage through geographic space that creates the tempo for the passage of fictional/historical time [in *Final Fantasy* games]" (Huber 2009, 380). The common occurrence of this in JRPGs is how story-critical events trigger only when the player arrives at specific locations in the game world. A subset of time's dependency of space – further illustrating Huber's argument – is seen in how, for example, *Dragon Quest V's* (Chunsoft 1992) days and nights cycle only if the player is actively moving in the overworld, and how in *Final Fantasy IX* (Square 2000) night only sets in proximity of particular cities, as a function of position and distance instead of time.

As Huber shows, even as we acknowledge their historically linear designs, examining JRPGs as spatial worlds offers a shift in what we can learn from the construction of experience in JRPGs. Going further than the technological (re)presentation of the world, in examining the spatial aspects of JRPGs we can approach their spaces of representation: the experienced gameworld that – through play – becomes an affective play space committed to memory and contemplation.

It is noteworthy in this context that the aforementioned critical defense of *Final Fantasy XIII's* design by Simon Ferrari (2011) takes spatiality and spatial metaphor as its core: the hills and lines of game design and play experience Ferrari identifies are plotted on similar grounds as Huber's spatial matrix. For Ferrari, foregoing temporal linearity helped him examine the game and its pleasures from a different angle. Ferrari, like Huber, does not claim that *Final Fantasy XIII* is not linear; on the contrary, he, again like Huber, sees the spatial dimension as an additional frame of interpretation, alongside, and affiliated with, the temporal (and hence linear) organization of experience. As Huber writes, "some impasses in critical approaches to video games might be resolved by taking a spatial turn" (ibid., 383), and this seems especially pertinent in the case of JRPGs, particularly when combined with an understanding of linearity as an effect of authorial inertia that gives game characters a push into a media mix network wherein players ultimately construct their own stories and interpretations of characters, based on strong characterizations and supporting game mechanical frameworks that control access to them.

Moving on to visual aesthetics, JRPGs tend to be tied to other Japanese popular visual arts such as anime and manga (Schules, Peterson, and Picard, 114; Barton and Stacks 2019, 233–234). Building on Thomas Lamarre's arguments on image and Japanese popular culture, David Surman suggests that *visual style* is a central concept in understanding Japanese videogames. He sees the "widespread sensitivity to style in the otaku reception of manga, anime and videogames" (Surman 2009, 163) identified by Lamarre as a call to pay closer attention to the visual fields of Japanese media, both in terms of producers and consumers.

All videogames have their own style, with artistic choices and influences acting in innumerable different configurations in each work. There is, however, a certain overarching sensibility – what Surman calls "intertextuality of style" (ibid.) – that permeates products and codes them as connected to certain histories, aesthetics, and genres for both production and consumption.[108] Izawa Eri has characterized this as a

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[108]   Aside from theory, this has also been identified in practice. Susan Napier notes the significance of "the 'look' of anime" that many fans of anime and manga emphasize (2007, 137). Although there is no exact look to anime, there are conventions and visual traditions that lead to certain kinds of aesthetics and interpretations in anime and manga, as well as in Japanese videogames.

wide cultural field of "anime media", a multi-media sphere of influences consisting of manga, anime and videogames alike, all "tied together by their reliance on a characteristic, animation-style art" (Izawa 2000, 139).

This link between the aesthetics of anime, manga, and JRPGs was forged early on. Although the graphical capabilities of home consoles in the 1980s were modest, the developers of *Dragon Quest* – the first truly widespread JRPG – employed the skills and pre-existing fame of cartoonist Toriyama Akira (known at the time for his influential manga titles *Dr. Slump* and *Dragon Ball*) in the game's artwork. Toriyama's cover art and assorted imagery offered expanded characterization to the otherwise graphically simple world of *Dragon Quest*. It is noteworthy that a great number of the early Japanese DRPGs predating *Dragon Quest* employed a visual style reminiscent of their Western influences. Although not a singular occurrence, *Dragon Quest's* distinctly familiar intertextual visual style was certainly one of the first widespread deployments of the aesthetic link between anime, manga, and JRPGs.

In line with the overall sense of stylized visuals and straightforward characters discussed earlier, JRPGs also bear connotations of streamlined game mechanics. For example, Barton and Stacks (2019, 233) note that JRPGs have commonly appeared simpler in their game mechanics than their Western counterparts. Likewise, Burn and Carr, reflecting the ideas of developers and players alike, illustrate how DRPGs as a whole are a highly adaptive and mutable genre, and present (or perhaps even caricaturize) the advent of the Japanese console role-playing game as "something that prioritizes storytelling [as opposed to the 'complex rules and economies' of CRPGs] while enshrining imagery of popular pleasure and anxiety" (2006, 28).

These accounts show how – although owing their early mechanics to Western games – JRPGs tend to be (or at least are often thought of as) straightforward and less opaque. This is not to say that they are trivial or simple, but that in their presentation there is a sense of clarity and simplicity, meaning that they can at least be *experienced* as streamlined and simple. JRPGs often employ a linear structure and largely pre-made characters paired with a system that might be computationally complex[109], but that mostly appears to players as straightforward chains of simple causality. This is a design approach that mirrors the very beginnings of the genre, with *Dragon Quest* developers choosing to forgo some of the complex systems of *Wizardry* and *Ultima* for the sake of accessibility (Boone 2015, 52), while still employing a rather complex set of algorithms hidden from the player.

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[109]   A look into the algorithms governing many JRPGs reveals how much calculation and mathematical dynamics goes on under the hood, while the players are rarely informed about them beyond the most simplistic levels. For a rundown of the seemingly simple *Final Fantasy VI's* (Square 1994) algorithms, see Terii senshi (2001).

A lot of this is related to hardware (as hinted earlier in Huber's material space). Trailblazed by *Dragon Quest*, home consoles – the Nintendo's Famicom first and foremost – became the de facto platform over desktop computers for JRPGs. The significance of a simpler controller, more straightforward program architecture, greater emphasis on visuals and sound, and the pre-existing conventions of consoles as sites of more casual forms of play all likely contributed to JRPGs leaning on a more laid-back approach than their Western (or earlier Japanese CRPG) counterparts. Of course, platform-specific separation has been challenged more and more over time (and was challenged relatively early on with releases of console games on home computers), so platform maintains a somewhat arbitrary position as a marker of genre. Still, conventions and affordances of home computers, home consoles, and their respective marketing and cultures of production and consumption have shaped the different strains of digital role-playing games, with – at least superficially – the JRPG leaning towards a more visual and straightforward form and the desktop-computer-driven CRPGs retaining much of their hereditary flair of complexity and opaqueness.

As discussed earlier in the context of linearity in JRPG narratives and how that is only one dimension of a more transmedial totality of experience, JRPGs are oftentimes situated in intertextual junctions as parts of media mixes. This takes various forms depending on the origins and development of the videogames and their surrounding structures. Sometimes videogames act as central points in wider media mixes (such as in *Final Fantasy VII*) and sometimes as subsequent parts of a pre-established non-gameic media mixes (like *SD Gundam G Generation* series of strategy role-playing games), and at times they are more or less equal contributions to media mixes that contain many kinds of media (for example, the *.hack* media mix franchise).

Explicating this, Glasspool (2013) traces the manifold webs of intertextuality in *Final Fantasy VII*. Sketching out a rather extreme end of this intertextuality, she describes how the prequel game *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII* (Square Enix 2007) incorporated the likeness and voice of the Japanese pop star Gackt – often remarked by fans as resembling *Final Fantasy VII's* protagonist Cloud – into *Crisis Core's* main antagonist. After the game's release, Gackt made public appearances dressed as the antagonist character, conducting a sort of marketing-inspired professional cosplay (Glasspool 2013, 2.5). This brief strip of marketing and storytelling is a concise example of how character images and transmedia concepts travel fluidly within the intertextual landscape of Japanese pop culture production.

Likewise, Glasspool discusses *Advent Children*, an animated film and a sequel to *Final Fantasy VII*, as an intertextual work that requires extensive knowledge of the original game to make sense. Just as with the trail of references following Gackt's transformation into a symbolic (and then literal) *Final Fantasy* character, there is

very little enjoyment or even sense to be derived from the movie unless one can access the larger narrative behind it. Additionally, the movie itself – albeit a derivative work – garnered its own intertextual extension in the form of a swathe of spin-off products (ibid., 2.4), all of which also further contribute to the intertextual and transmedial mix of *Final Fantasy VII*.

This is a prime example of not only how JRPGs utilize serialization in long-running videogame series but also how they mesh with popular culture and other media well beyond videogames and videogame culture, following the contours of media mix production and consumption. Often, of course, the media mix of a JRPG is slightly less intensive, and instead of cosplaying pop stars and cascades of secondary media mixes, transmediality and intertextuality are achieved through interconnected videogames, tie-in comics, animated series, assorted character goods, and a varying degree of participatory activities (Lamerichs 2014, 216) such as fan art, dōjinshi and cosplay, all contributing to an additive comprehension that constantly recontextualizes the understanding that audiences have of the whole media mix (Blom 2022; see also Jenkins 2006b).

Such actions are of course not unique to JRPGs, seeing as how building sprawling media mixes is a commercial and narrative practice of Japanese popular culture in general. Just as with the similarity in visual style between anime, manga, and videogames, these can be seen as conventions of Japanese popular culture rather than something specific to a particular genre or media. As such, however, they reflect a media cultural background in which JRPGs are (and have been) developed and against the backdrop of which their reception takes place.

In summary, JRPGs are linked to conventions of earlier forms or role-playing and role-playing games, with widely acknowledged particularities that contribute to a family resemblance of sorts. These include general linearity made more complex by the spatial and temporal totality it creates, visual style that often signals Japanese origins through close relation to adjacent popular media, overall straightforwardness of game mechanics and story elements that both mask potential depths behind a façade of simplicity, and a position as a part of the intertextual and transmedial media mix production of Japanese popular culture. Perhaps owing to the origins of the JRPG in various console platforms and their possibilities, limitations, and intended uses and audiences, all of these core properties aim at an air of lightness: of easy approachability and clear presentation, where the more obtuse elements come from deeper cuts into the systems as well as from intricacies of spatiotemporal structures and media mix production.

All in all, JRPG as a loosely identified genre makes sense mostly in relation to its own ongoing genealogy, and the related forms and media adjacent in that history. In such a way, JRPGs form into postmodern hybrid networks: they are nodes in a collection of relations as well as their collapses into interpretive melting pots of

influences, encounters, and references (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 56–58) that exemplify how "there is nothing prior to or outside the act of mediation" (ibid., 58). The JRPG as a category is identifiable but ultimately also dependent on its own heritage: on the sources and destinations of its mediating and remediating acts, and the historical development of entertainment media that this network of relations has become. This is not to suggest a formal definition but – as mentioned before – an identification of a sort of shared history (Consalvo 2016, 96) or discursive field (Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson 2022, 5) of JRPGs, against which most JRPGs are viewed and in contrast to which, for example, Western digital role-playing games are positioned. In this way, *Pokémon* appears as a clear progeny of Japanese console role-playing games, belonging to a larger family of role-playing media, and – as will be discussed next – a site for novel expansions and developments within these genres and contexts.

3.2.4   Pokémon role-play

Having gone through the particularities and common properties of JRPGs, we can now ask how *Pokémon* slots into the remediated role-play of JRPGs and, perhaps, which parts of it go beyond the conventions of the genre. There are genre tensions and transgressions of style in any text, no less so in *Pokémon*, and, as argued here, in the long history and complex structure of the *Pokémon* media mix, these distinctions become particularly significant. They suggest strong connections to the heritage of role-playing and its remediations beyond the conventional form of JRPGs. Simultaneously, by discussing them, I argue that there is significant merit in researching JRPGs – particularly in the context of the media mix – through the theories and concepts of role-playing and role-playing games. In this way, re-forging linkages between the history of role-playing games and its remediation in Japanese console role-playing games and their media systems offers a way to expand how we understand both the JRPG as well as role-playing games more broadly.

The graphics and overall operation of *Pokémon* are arguably some of the more conformist of *Pokémon's* JRPG-aligned formal aspects. The early graphics of *Pokémon* are influenced by the somewhat first-person battles and zoomed out third-person adventure view of the preceding *Dragon Quest* series, making the early *Pokémon* games very evocative of the JRPGs of their time. The newer games – released on new platforms with more graphical capability – improved on the graphics and positioned *Pokémon* games even more squarely within the visual milieu of the overall anime media ecology (Izawa 2000; Lamarre 2018), with the games' graphics closely resembling the animated style and movement of the *Pokémon* anime co-adaptations.

As with the graphics, the overall operation of *Pokémon* videogames embodies a style of design pioneered by *Dragon Quest*: a simplified system that nevertheless utilizes some extensive calculation and dynamics under the hood. Rather than keeping it that way, though, *Pokémon* games offer players some access to both levels, with the core gameplay and design aesthetics wholly graspable on the surface level – i.e., it is clear what the player is supposed to do and how things are done – but with a deeper layer of systems accessible to those who wish to delve deeper. The full game mechanics of the Pokémon creatures, for example, reveal complex systems such as IVs, EV training, breeding, hidden powers, and countless spreadsheets' worth of algorithms. This separation of the games' different layers is, according to the frequent emphasis of the developers, wholly intentional. The aim of this approach is to make the games playable by everyone regardless of age, skill, or level of experience (Nutt 2013; Haywald 2009; DeVries 2009; Grimm 2009; Masuda 2004a). In practice, new players are not swamped with 20 years' worth of legacy mechanics while more experienced players are rewarded for their expertise.

Likewise, *Pokémon* videogames draw on the perceived linearity of JRPGs. In all but the latest versions[110] of the core series games, the player and their avatar are guided down strictly bounded paths (roads, tunnels, and waterways, each usually named or numbered, following a taxonomy almost as meticulous as the Pokémon themselves) where no plot-related event takes place out of step. Only the player arriving at particular locations triggers story progression, and as such, the basic gameplay enables players to control the game's progress and focus on catching Pokémon to their heart's content on the limited number of areas they have access to. There is variance in the rigidity of rails between games and generations, with *Pokémon Black* and *Pokémon White* (Game Freak 2011) being more linear than, for example, *Pokémon Ruby* and *Sapphire*[111] (Game Freak 2003), but even then, it is a matter of shifts in freedom between strictly gated events.

This, however, only applies to the first part of each *Pokémon* videogame. Once the player has finished the game's story, *Pokémon* videogames shift to a mode of ongoing role-play, allowing players to wield the agency of the Pokémon Trainer. At

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[110]   The latest games, *Pokémon Scarlet* and *Pokémon Violet* (Game Freak 2022a) are set in an open gameworld, in a clear departure from all the earlier core series games. Rather than distancing them from the JRPG genre, however, this likely reflects the change in the genre more broadly, with JRPG heavyweights like *Final Fantasy XV* (Square Enix Business Division 2 2016) and *Dragon Quest XI* (Square Enix 2017) exploring a combination of an open gameworld and linear story progression.

[111]   The games' classic linearity in this case is observable in the number of areas and activities therein accessible to the player at any one time. In *Black* and *White*, the player is mostly set to progress on a straightforward path, whereas *Ruby* and *Sapphire* let (and indeed expect) the player to follow a more diverging route.

this stage, they show how they are as much stories as they are a toolbox of systems, connections, and abilities belonging to a Pokémon Trainer. Starting with the first games, *Pokémon* lets players continue playing after finishing the main storyline to catch more *Pokémon* and to keep battling and trading with other players; the games open up to what basically amounts to free roaming. In the 2nd generation games and onwards, the post-story game was expanded even further: previously inaccessible areas become accessible, new Pokémon become available, and preparing for competitive play becomes fully possible. The videogames, combined with the wider media mix, function as settings for continuous existence in the mode of *Pokémon* play, where different parts of the media mix leverage off one another.

The endgame, or post-story game, brings *Pokémon's* world – with all its ties to the media mix – to the forefront. For many, this is where the true *Pokémon* experience starts. Throughout the story, the player is familiarized with the world and any new game mechanics introduced in each generation, and by the time they reach the endgame, they are fully versed in the game's systems. From there, they can move on to do whatever they want to do within the confines of the game and the storyworld. If they see a cute Pokémon in the television series, they can go and catch it for themselves in the game. If they want to battle, they are on a level pegging resource-wise with anyone else. If they wish to build a particular team, they can. If they wish to explore the geography of the gameworld, they are free to do so. They, essentially, have the full agency of a Pokémon Trainer: a license to exist fully in the central transmedia reality created by the videogame and reinforced by other players inhabiting the same playful frame.

In this way, unlike most JRPGs (and DRPGs), *Pokémon* games never end. If anything, they open up even more to the *Pokémon* storyworld and its media mix connections. Respectively, the *Pokémon* franchise on the whole does not rely on a sequence of products that are accessed and consumed in a particular order, but rather on an overlapping network of products that all partake in the same storyworld and which do not really ever operate on the logic of beginnings and ends but on an ongoing adventure of connections within a larger framing.

Right from the very first games, *Pokémon*'s designers have created worlds that invite players to explore – and themselves build – wide spaces of story and experience. *Pocket Monsters Red* and *Green* (Game Freak 1996a) were both almost identical, but through small intentionally designed differences, they allowed players to explore both of them in order to see what was lying in the same world but on the other side of the looking glass. *Pocket Monsters Blue* (Game Freak 1996b), released a while after *Pocket Monsters Red* and *Green*, invited players to return to the same world but introduced some changes to the visual aesthetics and geography. Likewise, the Western releases of *Pokémon Red* and *Blue* (Game Freak 1999/1998) were trailed

by *Pokémon Yellow* (Game Freak 2000/1998), which had its graphics and narrative tailored to better slot in with the growing media mix of *Pokémon*.

From here, the expansion and engagement with the videogame worlds of *Pokémon* has taken place in successive iterations and nostalgic loops that encode the notion of *Pokémon* never truly ending into the franchise's central products and their release cycles. Ever since *Pokémon Yellow* in 1998 in Japan, publication of videogames in the core series has followed this pattern of revisiting older parts of *Pokémon's* storyworld along the introduction of new games. Two main titles like *Pokémon Gold* and *Pokémon Silver* (Game Freak 2001a) in generation 2 or *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y* (Game Freak 2013) in generation 6 expand the storyworld already established by older games. These mainline game duos are then followed by additional follow-up games such as *Pokémon Crystal* (Game Freak 2001b) or *The Isle of Armor* and *The Crown Tundra* (Game Freak 2020) downloadable expansion packs that augment the world of the dyadic opening games of each generation. Additionally, many generations also include remakes of older *Pokémon* games, updated with compatibility with the current generation, such as *Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire* (Game Freak 2014) that present a generation 6 remake of the generation 3 games *Pokémon Ruby* and *Pokémon Sapphire* (Game Freak 2003).

The back-and-forth worlds of *Pokémon* videogames and the 20 years of careful iteration they have gone through have been closely mirrored by changes in other products within the media mix. The different products of the franchise share a common world, so, for example, a viewer of the television series will find familiarity in the trappings of the videogames. Furthermore, the relatively conservative changes in the franchise's core elements throughout the years mean that all the games, comics, and animated series appear as connected to a singular whole. The language, aesthetics, and logic of *Pokémon* has remained constant, making the whole world of *Pokémon* – multifaceted, transmedial, and complex as it is – one continuous space of representation (Huber 2009), divided into generations and media platforms, but united by a constant, ever-changing yet familiar world that extends as an affective space into the lives of players. The totality of *Pokémon* is a familiar space for its players, and even more so when the franchise revisits locations established in earlier generations, thus relying on a production of a fictive collective memory and experience that challenges the straightforward assumption of linearity in JRPGs (ibid. 382).

By utilizing the conventional design language of 1990s console role-playing games but extending it beyond the usual, *Pokémon* games retain the proverbial cake and eat it too: at the core of the franchise is a linear JRPG series vested in its own long history as well as that of JRPGs in general, but which also opens up to a wider and more freeform experience through the media mix supersystem, a decades-long amalgamation of experiences and worldbuilding arising from – and still revolving

around – the franchise's videogames, and a core ludic experience that centers on the role of a Pokémon Trainer.

3.2.4.1   Pokémon as a hybrid role-playing object

On the scale of single *Pokémon* videogames, what begins as a maze with the player finding their way through a story eventually turns into a rhizome shaped by the Trainer's full agency and the possibilities for the player to wield it. Likewise, on the scale of the franchise's history, *Pokémon* has grown from its first videogames into a transmedia giant where individual products and players find themselves set at a perpetual crossroad of limitless directions, kept together by the grand narrative or sociocultural database of the underlying media mix and the players as experiencing this through the role of the Trainer. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari, "a rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*" (1987, 25, emphasis in original). Just so, the franchise's multiple installments, released at clockwork pace, keep on collapsing on the audience in different configurations, always offering something new (as well as something old), and reasserting that the world of *Pokémon* keeps on going, as relations between products and experiences; a rhizomatic playworld without ends. Spurred on by these exchanges between rule-bound linear videogames and their opening into a more open playspace of experience and history, *Pokémon's* worlds stage a continuous spatial, temporal, social, and affective space for players to engage with through the role of a Pokémon Trainer.

With its remediated historical association with role-playing games and a proclivity towards play with worlds and roles therein, it is not much of a stretch to apply theory of role-playing and role-playing games to *Pokémon* in order to understand it better. As with other borderline cases (such as *Magic: The Gathering* or *Ingress* discussed earlier), this shows *Pokémon* in a different – and, acknowledging its historical ties, more accurate – light.

As a remediated hybrid role-playing object, imbued with the legacy of older role-playing games, but exhibiting a totality of something else, *Pokémon* connects to the tradition of role-play and role-playing games but defies clear distinctions. Hence, if we look at Montola's definition of role-playing, *Pokémon* is characterized not by one endogenous rule (a rule that distinguishes different types of role-playing from one another) but by multiple rules; *Pokémon* videogames are, hereditarily and through their design, virtual role-playing games where "a computational virtual reality" is used "as a foundation in defining the game world" (Montola 2008, 24). However, taking into account the effect of the media mix with its reaches into physical space and the portability of the videogames creating ludic pockets of interaction between players, *Pokémon* would also appear to be close to the rule describing larps: "the

game is superimposed on physical world, which is used as a foundation in defining the game world" (ibid.). After all, the world of *Pokémon* is not only an immaterial one, analogous to virtual and oral play, but physical as well.

In a move seemingly straight out of a larpwright's playbook, the Pokémon Center stores of our world are fashioned after the fictional locations in the *Pokémon* world, the geographical details of the gameworld are crafted after real-life locations, the toys and character goods like figurines, soft toys, gym badges and Poké Balls invite to blend the role of a Trainer with the role of a fan, and several game mechanics in the franchise – many of them eventually epitomized in the mobile game *Pokémon GO* (Niantic and The Pokémon Company 2016) – function to highlight linkages between the everyday reality of the player and the fantastic world of *Pokémon*. These are all manifestations of the media mix's fiction reaching into the everyday reality and everyday reality shaping the fiction experienced in the storyworld, creating situations reminiscent of larps and pervasive games.[112] Much like in larps, players and audiences in *Pokémon* must negotiate what to regard as existing within the magic circle of the game and what to leave outside of it, and also when to access the playful realm. These are actions as much solitary as social. Furthermore, as an extension of this, the rules and particularities of the playworld are under constant negotiation in local contexts. The world is essentially the same for everyone, but it also changes in the acts of play and communication between participants (see, for example, Brougère 2004; Giddings 2014, 79–85).

The key to understanding the sort of role-playing taking place in *Pokémon* is to look at its worlds to see how affordances in them are forwarded on many fronts, originating from – and often coordinated by – the videogames but ultimately forming into a larger playful whole. This means that although Hitchens and Drachen identify restrictions and predefined borders of exploration as something distinguishing DRPGs from other forms of role-playing games (2008, 11–12), and although *Pokémon* videogames subscribe to this, *Pokémon* also clearly allows for a wider experience, more akin to Montola's world rule of role-playing: that role-playing is a process of defining an imaginary gameworld, acknowledged by players (Montola 2008, 23), but irrespective of the boundaries of physical and digital. In this way, the world of *Pokémon* is created, altered, and negotiated between producers and participants, in the design and actualization of role-play acts taking place in variations of the digital and the analog. Through these paths, *Pokémon* takes a step outside the conventional domain of DRPGs and approaches something akin to tabletop role-playing games, larps, and pervasive games where, as identified by Hitchens and Drachen, players are more freely able to interact with the game world

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[112]   These aspects and their effects are discussed further in Section 3.5.

(2008, 10) and where "boundaries [between worlds] are much weaker or even essentially non-existent" (ibid., 12).

Beyond the structure of *Pokémon's* worlds, much of its role-playing conventions are intimately related to the hybrid positioning of the player and player-character in *Pokémon* videogames and their worlds, as well as in a wider sense to the consumer's role in *Pokémon's* media mix. *Pokémon* videogames are a foundational part of a larger narrative – the grand narrative of the media mix – and offer players game-length episodes within this greater framework. What makes these videogames into a single larger whole is not only their integration to the media mix in a general sense, however, but also the specific way players are situated within the media mix through the videogames. Although all *Pokémon* videogames contain separate player characters, the player's position is always the same. Instead of playing a defined character in the game, players let the game envelop them in a porous frame of interaction, where the game and the surrounding gameic media mix (that operates on the logic of the game) provide them with a character identity – that of a Pokémon Trainer.

Every *Pokémon* videogame has a pre-defined player character, but this is only a nominal role. The player character does have a set persona with some relevance to the videogame's story, such as being the son or daughter of a famous gym leader in *Pokémon Ruby* and *Sapphire* (Game Freak 2003), but beyond that the player is left to fill in the blanks with their own personality and whichever character implementations they wish. The premade character has no game mechanically relevant statistics and no personality other than what the player casts on it. There is no pre-defined role to role-play other than that of a generic Pokémon Trainer. The player character in *Pokémon*, then, is more of a symbol of the player's role as someone dealing with Pokémon – a Pokémon Trainer in the abstract, defined by what they can do rather than who they are. It is a role, waiting for the player to fill it in.

This duality shows how the franchise operates on a logic of two character levels; that of the player character (the diegetic character in the gameworld the player controls and through which the player exerts agency within the videogame) and that of the player as a character (the player as themselves but augmented by diegetic affordances of, and accrued personal histories with, the *Pokémon* videogames and media mix), both connected to a media mix world existing not solely within a game nor outside of it, but equally in both.

The games ask players to position themselves as Trainers, into the position of a lightly characterized template, and to develop a character that is not quite you but not quite fictional either – a you empowered by the fiction. This is the stem of the logic of two character levels: in *Pokémon* games, and indeed in the media mix of *Pokémon* more broadly as well, there is the layer of the fictional characters (a young Trainer sets out for an adventure and leaves their home behind) and the audience

fulfilling the role of such a character (mirroring the story of the player character, the audience as players embark on a journey in *Pokémon's* playworld, collect Pokémon, bond with them, and take part in the media mix as they wish, filtered through the role of a Trainer). Even as they control the player-character, players are also guided to regard not just their digital characters but themselves as Trainers; participants in *Pokémon's* storyworld.

Pokémon, then, sets up the role of the Trainer that the player then uses to participate in and shape their interpretation and knowledge of the media mix supersystem. Just like the world of *Pokémon* is not quite confined to a single medium or only on one ontological layer of fiction but exists somewhere in between, the Trainer role is not confined within the videogames, but rather has expanded from them and their succession of player-characters to the media mix on the whole. Today, viewers of the animated series or players of the trading card game, for example, can use those media as their entry points to the franchise and adopt the same – or at least indistinguishable – Trainer role as the one that was originally the player position in the videogames: an enthusiast and expert of this playful world who collects knowledge, experience, and Pokémon. Likewise, they retain this role regardless of which part of the media mix they access, as the position is ubiquitous throughout it, regardless of media.

The role of the Pokémon Trainer, then, has become the default audience position across the media mix, a sort of character role existing as much in the spaces between media as within them, at an intersection of the fictional world of *Pokémon* and the everyday reality surrounding it. To paraphrase, it is the concept of a magic circle shaped into an identity – a personal (and oftentimes also social) pervasive mode of portable playfulness that contextualizes things in their relation to *Pokémon*.

In role-playing games, characters are the vessels through which players usually wield their agency to affect the game world (Hitchens and Drachen 2008, 12; Montola 2008, 24), but they are also player-created personas maintained through play. As Hakkarainen and Stenros put it, "a character is a framework of roles through which the player interacts within the game, and for which she constructs an illusion of a continuous and fixed identity, a fictional 'story of self' binding the separate, disconnected roles together" (Stenros and Hakkarainen 2003, 57). This dual function of being narrative and mechanical vessels of agency within the game system and player-created assemblages of roles introduces an inherently mixed ontology into characters in role-playing games. As Hakkarainen and Stenros explicate in their 2010 foreword to the article, they set out to challenge the view that players and characters were separate (Stenros and Hakkarainen 2010). Waskul forwards a similar argument in his article about fantasy role-playing games and the ludic self in everyday life where he sums player characters in role-playing as "a marginal and hyphenated role that is situated in the liminal boundaries of more than one frame of reality" (Waskul

2006, 19). In traditional fantasy role-playing, for Waskul, the separation of the player and the character is important, but he also makes it clear that in the practice of play and games – and indeed in everyday life too – this distinction is not easy to draw (Waskul 2006, 34).

In tabletop role-playing games, players commonly traverse the boundary between their selves and their characters (Fine 1983). This can be seen, for example, in the way players tap into properties of their characters in life outside of game situations (Mello 2006). Moreover, the "bleed effect" (Waern 2011, Montola 2010, 2) and role-blending sensations similar to it (Waskul and Lust 2004) indicate that players and their characters are – either voluntarily or subconsciously, depending on the situation – interdependent.

The role of a Pokémon Trainer offers a sense of lasting identity within a fictional world, and also a portal for accessing and interfacing with the world as fiction and as a collection of media mix products. It is true on the micro level of single *Pokémon* videogames where the player is represented by the Pokémon Trainer player character as well as on the macro level of several games and wider participation in the media mix, where the player takes the role of a character themselves – the player as a Pokémon Trainer. *Pokémon*, here, is grounded in both the digital and the physical realms, with instances of role-playing taking place just as well in the world of the games as well as in the everyday interactions of the player: a mixed form of play where the game – digital and material – meshes with the everyday and vice versa.

In examining the relation of role-play in states of play and everyday life, Mortensen divides "everyday role-playing" (us as teachers, students, mothers, and other social roles) from "game role-playing" (us as characters in games) (Mortensen 2007, 300–301). Everyday life is filled with "mundane ambivalence" (ibid., 302), while an online role-playing game is "more exaggerated and flamboyant" (ibid.). Furthermore, what differentiates our everyday role-taking from that of role-playing such as it happens in games is, for Mortensen, that the mundane roles of our lives oppose – what she derives from Huizinga – the nature of play. For Mortensen, the two are wholly incompatible even if largely similar.

I forward *Pokémon* as the third position in this. Like *Magic: The Gathering*, *Ingress*, and many forms of pervasive games, *Pokémon* offers a gentle, hybrid form of role-playing, where the fun is, in part, in the mixing of mundane ambivalence with flamboyant gameworlds. One does not need to take out their smartphone to access the role of an agent in *Ingress* any more than one needs to take out their wallet to access the role of a person in charge of the week's groceries; and nevertheless, one's mindset shifts as a result of this mental action. It is the same with *Pokémon*. What else are the little effigies of Pokémon on my desk but reminders of a more playful mode of being, and of my companions – Pokémon and Trainer, imagined and real – that await me whenever I open up my handheld console, come into contact with

the wider media mix of *Pokémon*, or dip into the part of me concerned with my current adventures in the worlds of *Pokémon*? They are a constant reminder of my Trainer identity, a concrete opening into the ludic mode of being and its affects offered by the *Pokémon* media mix.

Reflections of this observation are found – but not explicitly identified – in previous research and media. In a thread often picked up by Allison (quoted in Allison 2009a, 184; 2006a, 219), she calls this "play that goes beyond the world of the game itself". Allison describes it as something her informants regard as creating a "space of their own" (2003, 389), an ontological state apart but not removed from the tumble of everyday. Also, for example, McCrea's observations about how *Pokémon HeartGold* and *SoulSilver* (Game Freak 2010a) create "their sense of playing in public" (McCrea 2011, 396) and Giddings's (2014, 32) notions about how the practice of playing games – including *Pokémon* – makes for complex traversals between virtual and real in popular digital technoculture both show that the authors have identified the effects of this transontological Trainer position cultivated by *Pokémon* without actually engaging with it.

Games like *Pokémon*, *Magic: The Gathering*, and *Ingress* are not role-playing games in that they'd be confused for *Dungeons & Dragons* or in that they would offer an identical experience to "traditional" tabletop role-playing games (such as world-creation exclusively through constant social construction between players). They do, however, through their history, participate in the greater network effect that connects role-playing games far and wide (Street 2013, 168), and furthermore invite to play at, and with, role-playing: to construct worlds out of a commercial structure shared with others who participate in play. Although a distinction between "real" role-playing games and derivative works such as *Pokémon* can be suggested, following Waskul (2006), I argue that they all participate in a greater mix of roles, imagination, and sociocultural play, far more interconnected than what drawing borders between distinct forms of game and the mundane would let on.

To tie in the loose ends of this role-playing nature in *Pokémon's* media mix that seems to travel somewhere between physical and digital worlds, real and fictional engagements, traditional and avant-garde role-playing, and designed as well as spontaneous experiences, we can turn to the Japanese transmedia marketing and storytelling practice of media mixes as sites of – and structures for – role-playing.

3.2.4.2   Role-playing in a media mix

The way *Pokémon* situates its worlds, characters in those worlds, and the player's position in relation to them creates what is essentially the archetypical media mix narrative. In the media mix of *Pokémon*, the character positions – the iconic Pokémon themselves as well as the dual protagonist structure of the Trainer character

in the fiction and the player as a Trainer themselves – work to unify interaction with *Pokémon's* media mix into one coherent whole, where experiences can track from the animated series to the game, from the manga to the figurines, and where they can last for years all the while compounding into a grand narrative filled with the affective spaces of history, nostalgia, and meaning. When the media mix of *Pokémon* is experienced in this way – from the position of an active[113] consumer constructing their own experience – the noise created by expositions to singular aspects of a wide transmedia system turns into a harmonious collection: a world to exist in and a place to connect with.

In defining tabletop role-playing games, Mackay notes that narratively they are often characterized by storytelling of an episodic nature. In Mackay's definition, role-playing is "episodic and participatory" and takes place in "sessions that, together, form episodes or adventures in the lives of the fictional characters" (Mackay 2001, 4–5). This "complex narrative" in which players "can continue to play the same character through many role-playing game sessions" (Mackay 2001, 7) eventually results in a "grand story" he refers to as the "role-playing game narrative" (ibid., 5). This does not apply to all tabletop role-playing games, of course (cf. Hitchens and Drachen 2008, 8), but is common enough an element in tabletop role-playing that it has migrated to larps and digital role-playing games as well. Game sessions are often linked to form longer character arcs and campaigns, and even when sessions remain contained as singular stories, they usually still partake in the grand narrative of a continuous and shared gameworld: in the games, there is usually a world larger than what the individual adventures and characters let on, and the act of playing a role-playing game is in part the act of exploring and defining this world. Such notions of character–world relations are also echoed in Montola's definition of role-playing. As discussed earlier, for Montola, role-playing is defining and redefining the state of a gameworld (the world rule), with the power to do so being distributed to the participants (power rule), and the process of defining the world taking place through characters (character rule) (Montola 2008, 23–24).

This bears a striking resemblance to the logic of anime media mixes as described by Steinberg (2012), based in great part on the writings of Ōtsuka Eiji, in which: (1) narrative fragments connect to a grand narrative, (2) characters are the loci that act

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113 "Active" is used here in the sense that consumers can be seen as building their experiences in media mixes through commercial participation alone. Active, then, does not mean proactively aiming at building a certain kind of total experience – although it *can* mean that too – but that participants in *Pokémon* invariably end up structuring their experience through their actions regardless of their explicit efforts to do so. They are not an active audience as opposed to a passive one but active in the sense that this is what consuming in a media mix inevitably entails.

as access points to the narrative and maintain coherency as well as consistency across the sprawl of a media mix world, and (3) the consumption of media texts is, in itself, a form of participation that spurs further participatory behavior in consumers, leading to the exploration and shaping of the fictional world (Steinberg 2012, 182–183; Ōtsuka 2010). The resemblance is not coincidental given that key developments of the contemporary media mix were undertaken as informed by the US tabletop role-playing industry (discussed in 2.4).

In media mixes, there exists (or at least it is implied to the audience that there exists) a grand narrative: the often abstract and hidden totality of the fictional world which Ōtsuka (2010, 107) compares to the concept of "worldview" used in animation production or the programming of a videogame. In both instances, the grand narrative is the practical background of all individual diegetic actions related to the product as well as the abstract possibility space of what *could* happen within them. The practical forays into the grand narrative in media mixes take the form of "small narratives" (ibid. 109) comprised of, for example, individual episodes of an anime or a single playthrough of a game. These are singular forays into a larger world, and the more you accumulate (or "consume", which is the word Ōtsuka uses) these small narratives, the more you can infer from the world behind them – the more you can *build* or *reconstruct* the worldview behind these small narratives.

Pokémon's media mix lets participants access these small narratives in a pre-designed as well as spontaneous fashion. The audience is free to choose which small narratives to access, but that very space for choice is, in turn, created for them. What is revealed of the grand narrative is in the hands of the producers just as the act of decoding and remixing it is in the hands of the consumers. This is the point of the whole franchise and its manifold access points. The lucrative postmodern business model of *Pokémon* is that of selling world-defining agency to audiences invested in the world through their identities as Trainers. This is, basically, the sort of activity Mackay and Montola call role-playing, only mapped to an escalated commercial context.

In this light, *Pokémon's* affinity with role-playing and the ludic logic of the media mix makes sense. Taken to the level of narrative creation and consumption in practice, what is strikingly similar in role-playing games and *Pokémon* as a media mix grand narrative (and between role-playing games and media mixes in general) is the very foundation of their ergodic structure. In both, players and audiences traverse textual landscapes of non-trivial effort and eventually smooth their experience – gathered from a multitude of interactions, sources, and media – over into a coherent aesthetic object. Neither role-playing nor media mixes allow for a straightforward approach where the grand narrative or story would just wash over the participants with minimal effort. On the contrary, both the media mix and the role-playing game require – and are designed for – active participation that calls for

the participants to use their powers of interpretation and world-creation (as well as money) for their worlds to make any meaningful sense.

Oftentimes, the process of creating a unified narrative out of a collection of game states, play sessions, and ludic acts shows in role-playing games as player-created paratexts such as game reports and debriefing discussions which work to canonize "what really happened". Mackay (2001) engages with the idea in a broader aesthetic sense: the very experience of the role-playing situation smooths over into a coherent and constructed whole – an aesthetic object – even if the act of its creation is anything but that.

Such acts of molding the ergodic and fragmentary experiences into a more unitary form can also be seen in *Pokémon*. In the media mix of *Pokémon*, players make sense of various transmedia experiences by reflecting them on a world larger than any singular experience of it. It is a form of co-creation in a participatory culture where playing with and within the text is an act of creating as well as interpreting it (Koski 2015). Just as in role-playing games, the actual aesthetic object in *Pokémon* is not (only) an individual episode of play but what is done with a collection of them: the paramount experience of the participants, formed by accessing different parts of the media mix and recombining them into an ever-expanding storyworld and a personal narrative of engaging with it.

Furthermore, all of this is enhanced by positioning the participants as characters through which the playful content is filtered. This position is "you as a Trainer", with the affects – the acts and being-acted-upons – of the experience stemming from the fiction but wholly aimed to be directly engaged with by the participant. The player as a Trainer is not a fictional character, but, on the level of both fiction and its affects, not someone entirely different either. They are, essentially, a player playing themselves as a character: a version of themselves as captured and produced by the consumerist identity-building tools of the media mix. Players build an identity, deployed like a character role in a role-playing game, and through it they gather the manifold experiences created in play into a more or less unified story. In the context of role-playing games, Heliö calls this the *narrative desire*, the drive players (hopefully) possess to connect the proverbial dots of the narrative and to construct meaning in the form of a plot or story from an assortment of elements (2004, 68–69) that are often fragmentary. In the Ōtsukan tradition, this would be phrased as a consumption of small character-centric narratives in the desire to experience not only them but also the grand narrative behind – and simultaneously built from – them, which is in many ways the fundamental operational and economic logic of the contemporary media mix.

In this sense, *Pokémon* and its media mix take up positions close to role-playing games, as something that tap onto parallel – and oftentimes the same – flows of culture. Leaning on Aarseth, Mackay suggests that videogames and role-playing

games, with their common history, might well be understood as different displays of a new kind of emerging narrative art form – one that was, and possibly still is, in early stages of development (Mackay 2001, 159). It seems that gameic media mixes in the constellation as they appear in *Pokémon* could be added to that same group: not only are computer and console role-playing games marketed through gameic media mixes, but they also become role-playing games of sorts – world-building activities conducted by participants through characters and *as characters* – themselves.[114] They are at least derivative of this same process, if not equal in sharing conceptual family resemblance.

Pokémon, then, is best understood not as a role-playing game or as a media mix, but as the product of these two – largely converging – fields. From that perspective, arguing that the whole business model of *Pokémon* is grounded on a sort of episodic and participatory storyworld in tune with role-playing games appears not only possible but also downright essential for understanding it.

Characters and worlds, the core components of a media mix, become personal and personified through *Pokémon's* role-playing modalities. As the role of a Pokémon Trainer is enforced not only on the player character but also on the player, and as this logic – originating from the videogames – proliferated across the franchise early on, the whole phenomenon became built on this character and player positioning. Just as role-playing games and media mixes, *Pokémon* is a participatory world of many narratives, centered on the role-taking players who actively construct their own interpretations and adventures from a larger whole in their interactions with the media mix, with the owners of the media mix extracting economic value from this selfsame process.

So far, I have established *Pokémon* in relation to several discourses on role-playing and role-playing games. I have argued that by being a link in the long chain of role-playing phenomena, *Pokémon* is a remediated form of role-playing games, by way of tabletop role-playing games, larps, computer role-playing games, and Japanese console role-playing games. I have also argued that as a remediated form of role-playing games, *Pokémon* is closely connected to a wide variety of other derivative or familial forms of games that dip into the same culture as role-playing games and benefit from being examined in part as such, but that are not necessarily traditional role-playing games themselves. To these aspects I connected an examination of the media mix of *Pokémon*, noting how the ludic logic in it frames all interactions with the franchise through role-playing in an act of becoming and being a Pokémon Trainer. This led to the examination of *Pokémon* as a gameic media mix which structures the creation and reception of *Pokémon's* storyworld to

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[114] Cf. *Madara* (Steinberg 2015) or *Yu-gi-ō* (Ito 2008, 406) for examples beyond *Pokémon*

resemble that of more traditional forms of role-playing games, from where much of the role-playing modalities of *Pokémon* stem.

From these different discourses, my argument for the role-playing nature of *Pokémon* can be broken down into four intertwining key points:

1) *Pokémon's* JRPG heritage is historically attached to role-playing games.
2) *Pokémon* can be identified as part of a wider set of hybrid and derivative works that have moved beyond strictly defined role-playing games yet still owe much of their designs to them.
3) *Pokémon's* media mix frames players as Trainers, a porous identity that is designed to be simultaneously a fictional character position and a factual consumer position.
4) *Pokémon's* Trainer identity is an economic-affective way to turn the media mix into a transontological experience where buying *Pokémon* merchandize can be as much an act of role-playing as, for example, playing the videogames.

Depending on the viewpoint, *Pokémon* can be seen pushing the boundaries of JRPGs and role-playing games alike. Being a sort of intermediary between the two, it leverages this ambivalence into something that was – and to a degree still is – unique. Not quite a typical role-playing game nor a typical JRPG, *Pokémon* is close to both but ultimately cannot be contained within neither. It is a commercial storyworld with over two decades of accumulated worldbuilding headed by a corporate game master and participated in by people who adopt playful identities as players and consumers in their journey to discover, build, and restructure their shared and personal narratives. This role-playing logic of *Pokémon* – formed through its core videogames and their remediated role-play – of course surfaces in different ways in different products of the media mix, from the direct role-play of being a Trainer in the core series videogames to the more abstract potential for role-playing with stuffed toys or other character merchandizing, and less interactional media such as the movies and comic books.

What remains constant throughout the media mix is the distinct overlap of consumer identity and fictional identity as well the conflation of acts of consuming and partaking in fiction. While there may be very little role-play evident in a fan buying a Pokémon keychain, it is still done under the overall framing of being a Trainer. This is not to say that every person that has contact with the franchise would relate to it in terms of role-play, of course, but rather vice versa, that the franchise does so with all relations it has with people, as a function of its fundamental logic and the affects it suggests. In other words, economically, affectively, and ludically, *Pokémon* is built for Trainers – and each participant takes that as far as they wish.

At the same time, *Pokémon*'s decades of success have shaped the field of JRPGs in ways yet unknown. While direct clones are rare, owing perhaps to the complexity of the media mix, *Pokémon* has certainly influenced the design and reception of role-playing videogames, observable in the past around games like *Jade Cocoon: Story of the Tamamayu* (Genki 1998) and more currently in the *Yōkai Watch* franchise. As such, the twists and turns of *Pokémon's* history offer an interesting example of the direction in which JRPGs have evolved, and will continue to evolve, as they explore their hereditary roots in role-playing.

Informed by the long history of role-playing games, being role-play in a very literal sense of the word, *Pokémon* is built as a world of complex ontologies and affective intensities, where what is real and what is imagined is secondary to a hybrid reality where everything is a blend of both; interconnected and accessible to those who are positioned as Trainers. Acknowledging the idiosyncrasy of role-playing games, it is safe to say that while *Pokémon* is not a typical example of role-playing games, it is, nevertheless, identifiable as their progeny – a property that holds a crucial role in understanding the ludic logic of the whole media mix and the affective relationships forged within it.

3.3 The Trainer's toil: Affective labor in Pokémon

I have now laid the groundwork for what Pokémon are and examined the player position and its orientations in *Pokémon's* media mix. Having done so, in this section I look at what they become together; when the player's role and abilities as a Trainer and the Pokémon as objects of the Trainers' actions and as complex assemblages of data and interaction are joined together in the franchise's core play motif of Pokémon training. I view this combination as a site for *making affect*: as produced opportunities for the creation and circulation of affective energy in encounters between players and Pokémon. In such a way, affect in *Pokémon* is positioned not in the players, characters, individual media or the collective and co-produced media mix, but in between these, as relations brought forth by the fundamental playful forms designed to, and felt in, *Pokémon,* and operationalized in the franchise's insistence on training as playful and affectively charged labor.

A recurring theme in this work has been effort. Players embark on laborious journeys to master the role of Pokémon Trainer, as framed overall by the franchise's insistence on "catching 'em all". In this, Pokémon creatures act as concrete representations of the progress of their Trainers as well as themselves. The character images of Pokémon directly reflect the effort that has gone to capturing and caring for them, with evolved and rare Pokémon being hallmarks of time and effort spent. The taxonomic data of Pokémon is acquired and learned through effort by reading paratextual guides and discourse as well as by capturing new Pokémon and training them, thus revealing more entries in the Pokédex and learning new things about the creatures and their world. And, of course, the individual data of Pokémon is manipulated through effort and training, in changing the stats, levels, and moves of the Pokémon and employing affective stickiness in affixing it with histories and meanings. Every layer of Pokémon creatures, then, calls for the players to extend attention, care, time, and effort on the characters, and on each of those layers these selfsame traits are permanently inscribed and displayed.

This is predicated on the requirements and designs of the *Pokémon* videogames. As series director Masuda Junichi points out:

> The basic concept of *Pokémon* is trading, so how could we make the trading more attractive? If you have a different Pokémon in your game, that's a different kind of Pokémon you can collect.

> You can finish collecting all of the Pokémon based on the Pokedex. What kind of abilities can that Pokémon have? What kind of an attractive character can you create? (Nutt 2009)

Because trading – or at least the possibility of trading – is one of the ideas at the ideological core of the franchise, there has to be inroads for affectivity and personal investment in the gameplay process in order to make the characters interesting enough to collect and desire. This is achieved through both a wide variety of Pokémon species and the chance to spend time in personalizing members of these species. As long-time designer of the game franchise Kawachimaru Takeshi alludes, "Pokemon has many features that make players feel their Pokemon are their own", underlining how a sense of ownership and personal investment is fundamental for the series (Harris 2009).[115]

Players are acutely aware of this overarching theme of personal investment and effort as well. On a thread capitulating a particularly intense outpour of affect in Reddit's popular *Pokémon* board, a player laments their stolen gaming system and the *Pokémon* game cartridge that was lost with it:

> Yes, I know, Pokemon are 'just' bits of data but anyone who has played these games for an extended period of time will know just how much they mean to you. These are the guys that have been by my side through numerous games. (Anonymous 2014)

Another chimes in, "Just bits of data? Fuck that, those were literally most likely weeks upon weeks of actual effort and work put into them, despite whatever it is, the time spent on it still makes it a damn shame" (ShortchangeParamecia 2014). And a third offers a passionate summary of their work and shared years with Pokémon, worth quoting at length:

> Dont even dare call it bits of data, my Arcanine has been in my pokewalker since the release of SS. I took it from Fire Red sent it to Pearl traded it to SS and here it is. My other pokemon went from SS onto BW/ BW2 and when i have free time they will be in Y. I am 24 years old and have followed pokemon since day 1 and you form a bond like anyother. OP I can relate to you, I lost my level 98 Charizard that I raised as a little Charmander when my cartridge was stolen while i ws in college. The only pokemon I didnt send over to pearl. I have another charizard now but its still not the same as the old "band". I am saddened to hear

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[115] As an interesting additional bit of context, in the quote, Kawachimaru is talking about the reason *Pokémon* was born and has remained on portable game systems: the idea of personalization and making things feel like one's own is so fundamental that it permeates not only the software design but the logic of the hardware as well. *Pokémon* has stayed on portable devices in part because they are more personal than computers and stationary game consoles.

you lost all your hard work, but I promise as you begin to recover I can breed some of my pokemon such as the starters from other gens and trade them to you. If I come across any additional legendaries theyre yours too. (PrinceVegeta_SSJ2 2014)

What these players are discussing are some of the results of the "many features" of personal attachment designed into *Pokémon* that Kawachimaru mentioned. They acknowledge both the time and effort spent with their Pokémon as well as allude to the strong bonds generated through these histories. This, I argue, can be understood as the processes and outcomes of affective labor spent with and towards Pokémon characters.

The connection of emotion and labor in *Pokémon* has been noted in some prior works as well. Most notably, Allison points out that brands in general are sites of immaterial and affective labor (2009b, 94, 96), where affection is created by producers and emerges as a function of audiences engaging with brands and commodities. Her analysis approaches this thematic through postindustrial and postmodern precarity in Japan and other major global economies. In this way, her work addresses social and economic issues of affection and labor in a wider sense, but overlooks the eruptions and entwinements of affective labor in *Pokémon play:* the accumulated time spent with Pokémon, operationalized through play and effort. Likewise, Salter, Stanfill, and Sullivan (2019) utilize the adjacent theories of reproductive labor and emotional labor as analytical frameworks to understand the design of *Pokémon: Let's Go, Eevee!* and *Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu!* (Game Freak 2018) and the way some players felt they reconfigured the videogame series towards a more casual mode of play. Guided by data collected from Metacritic user reviews, they construct a juxtaposition between caretaking and grinding: through connecting casual gameplay with elements of reproductive labor in *Pokémon* and contrasting that with hardcore gameplay in repetitive actions and violent play in the series, they create an elegant analysis that helps explain some of the player reactions to recent *Pokémon* videogames and products (such as *Pokémon GO, Pokémon: Let's Go, Eevee!*, and *Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu!).* This, however, compartmentalizes the affectionate affective elements to one extreme of a dichotomy and thus leaves the underlying wider affective strata untouched. That is, it helps explain why those looking for "hardcore gameplay" would be put off by the new *Pokémon* games, but misses the mediated intimacies present in the media mix outside the casual–hardcore dichotomy; a sense of affection and intimacy arising from varied attachments to the franchise, its worlds, and its creatures, resulting from a broader set of contacts – and ways of entering into contacts – with the videogame and the media mix.

As such, this section launches off from the observation of developers and players alike that personalization – making Pokémon one's own – plays an important role in

the affective economy of *Pokémon*, as well as from Allison's conclusion that effort and labor are key structures of popular culture in the global flows of contemporary capitalism and its emphases on immaterial labor. I approach this topic from the perspective of *Pokémon's* ludic and ergodic side: as playful labor and as affects produced in the creation and reception of *Pokémon,* where Trainers traverse its media mix and playfully engage with Pokémon characters in many different ways. In doing so, I suggest a reading that highlights a ubiquitous atmosphere of affection around the Trainer role, the modes of being in *Pokémon's* media mix, and the affective labor conducted through them.

3.3.1   Affective labor and videogames

Immaterial and affective labor are themes and conceptual devices that intersect in the contemporary pre- and post-millennial economic and affective landscapes. Much like affect, immaterial and affective labor are broad concepts that have been discussed in a variety of ways and under many nomenclatures (for some of the more influential takes, see Hochschild 2012; Grusin 2010; Zelizer 2005; Terranova 2000; Lazzarato 1996; Hardt 1999; Negri 1999). Common to them is an engagement with the world through an understanding that global capitalism has transformed itself as well as the world in the past 30 years or so, leading to "qualitative change in the nature, form and organization of labour" (Dowling, Nunes, and Trott 2007), a series of ruptures not only in how work is conducted but also in how the very concept of work has expanded to new domains – challenged, transformed, and changed by the wider paradigm shifts of information technology, networking, and rise of global precarity.

For a seminal introduction to immaterial and affective labor, we can turn to Hardt and Negri.[116] Taking note of how, for example, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) addressed the tumultuous paths of capitalistic development (Hardt and Negri 2001, 48) and examining how sociopolitical and cultural flows panned out in the postmodern climate at the turn of the millennia, they set out to deconstruct the historical progress of globalized capitalism. Building off of Marxist traditions and Maurizio Lazzarato's work in particular, they discuss forms of labor in the post-Fordist era. For them, a significant factor in the increasingly computerized and digitalized world is the shift of labor towards immaterial forms, in which it becomes

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[116]   It is worth pointing out that here, as well as in studies of affect and affective phenomena in general, feminist scholars and scholars researching stereotypically feminine domains such as the service and nursing industries have conducted groundbreaking work (see, for example, Hochschild 2012; James 1989) that often goes unmentioned. For a critical summary, see Fortunati (2007).

"labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication" (Hardt and Negri 2001, 290; Hardt and Negri 2004, 108; see also Lazzarato 1996). A particular subset of immaterial labor, for them, is affective labor: a form of immaterial labor that aims at the "creation and manipulation of affect" (Hardt and Negri 2001, 293). Essentially, they see it as a form of communication and production revolving around human contact, either literally, as in the context of service industries, or figuratively (virtually, as they phrase it), as in the context of the entertainment industry. While highlighting the human component in such relations, they speak of immaterial labor broadly as interaction and cooperation through linguistic, communicational, and affective networks (ibid., 294), where the particularities of the affective other are less relevant than the overall affective mode of networked presence.

In terms of Hardt and Negri's two principal forms of immaterial labor, game design is a creative mode of work in the vein of "intellectual or linguistic [labor], such as problem solving, symbolic and analytical tasks, and linguistic expressions," that produce "ideas, symbols, codes, texts, linguistic figures, images, and other such products" (Hardt and Negri 2004, 108). Moreover, it aims at affective ends by being work that both produces and manipulates affects (ibid.; see also Hardt and Negri 2001, 293). Making videogames is work that involves crafting playable media texts and manipulating their affect-producing range to particular wavelengths, all encased in a media culture grounded in material as well as immaterial forms. In this respect, game development can be seen as a paradigmatic example of 21st century post-industrial work that, as Hardt and Negri point out, combines immaterial and affective elements but also links to material forms of labor (2004, 108–109).

Immaterial and affective forms of labor are also present in the use and reception of media texts. In discussing online platforms and their business models, Hillis, Paasonen, and Petit (2015, 7–8) note how the attention and experience economy these platforms are predicated on hinges on immaterial and affective labor, billing the use of these platforms as "*immaterial labor of usage* – acts that are hardly experienced as labor even as they are frequently engaged in at the expense of routine work tasks" (7, emphasis added). In practice, for example social media users generate lucrative data for online service providers in exchange for access to popular platforms to which (and to the contents of which) they are affectively tied (ibid. 8; Jarrett 2015; Karppi 2015).

Being a form of this immaterial labor of usage where the lines between producing, consuming, and authorship blur, in the study of ergodic media such as videogames the broad rubric of immaterial and affective labor is often invoked in the context of playbor (Kücklich 2005; see also de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2005); of designed or emergent aspects of games that encourage players not only to play the games but to play *with* them as well. It refers to work ensuing from a videogame,

directed at creating new or derivative works and instances of labor that spring from the original text but alter, rework, or depart from it in some way (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, 23).[117] Examples of such acts include microdevelopment (small-scale independent game development bordering between a hobby and a commercial venture), machinima, and modding (ibid.). It can also refer to player actions that take place within play worlds but aim at or result in work-like activities, such as political activism in the form of demonstrations within gameworlds, guiding other players, or providing social content.

More than modding, these activities engender the uneasy differentiation between play and work: the players in these examples deploy their in-game agencies and affordances to ends that are not entirely diegetic but, as they take place within the conceptual realm of the videogame, are not removed from it, either. In de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford's example of a "peasant revolt" (2009, 25–26) organized in *Ultima Online* (Origin Systems 1997), the event could just as easily have been conducted (and portrayed) as a player revolt, and instead of mass demonstrations within the game, it could have been an email campaign or a petition drive. Instead, it was a peasant revolt in the realm of *Ultima Online*, bleeding back and forth the threshold of fiction. It was about players and their characters rising against the developers, a protest in two worlds as one. Furthermore, as de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford note, MMOs (massively multiplayer online games) sell social contact as content (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, 26). In MMOs, as in many other genres as well, the product is not only made by the game developers but also consists of the players' presence within the game. After all, what would *World of Warcraft* be without the potential of encountering other players in-game or sharing one's experiences with other enthusiasts in the game or outside of it? In this way, games sell the players' own interactions and even presence as content, turning the players into a participatory proletariat of co-authors.

Expenditure of work as play and play as work within a game's world constitutes co-operation on a scale that undermines clear producer-consumer roles (ibid., 25–26; see also Sihvonen 2009, 295; Sotamaa 2009, 101). Much like the users of social media platforms engaging in mutual co-created forms of affective and immaterial labor when they use a social media service, fill it with their own creative output, and allow the service provider to capture, sell, and re-use their works as well as their potential continued usage, videogames, too, operate on a similar basis with producers building frameworks of experience, cultivating fan engagement and paratexts, tolerating or even encouraging modding, and, through all of that, engaging players as a labor force to spend their leisure time in varying intensities of co-creation (Prax

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[117] These themes are, in many ways, present in *Pokémon*, too. For a closer analysis, see Koski (2015).

2016), at once play and work. As Pearce suggests, play and games are not, as often claimed, unproductive, but on the contrary tend to blur the boundaries between work and leisure, play and production (Pearce 2006, 18), highlighting how the affective labor of usage is an integral part of games and play.

Of course, aside from producing new content or new commodifiable aspects, different modes of work are part and parcel of the very essence of many videogames and the experience of playing them in general. Most games rely on mental and physical effort motivated by the possibility of attaining particular results, be it winning the game, enjoying the tactile sense of controlling a game piece, or learning about the systems and mechanics of the game through playing. The very core elements of games draw from the thematic of exchanging effort for payoffs. Taking after Suits, after all, playing games is fundamentally about encountering and attempting to overcome artificial obstacles (Suits 2014, 43). Indeed, this is in essence what the ergodicity of texts refers to: effort in traversal of the text exchanged for the ability to continue reading the text. Player effort is part of games and a significant factor in the players' attachment to the outcome of the game (Aarseth 1997; Juul 2005, 40; see also 2.3.2). If players can influence the flow and outcome of a game through spending effort on it, indeed as the procedural and participatory nature of videogames and digital environments often allow (Murray 1997, 71), they will likely have some form of attachment or at least *an orientation* towards the results.

In a more straightforward discussion of this thematic, Juul suggests that some games are wholly founded on the concept of labor (2013, 75). He notes that digital role-playing games in particular are connected to labor as a chief form of difficulty and shaper of experience, citing *World of Warcraft* as a primary example (ibid., 77). Although not connecting his observation to theories of labor more broadly, the argument is similar to that of de Peuter's and Dyer-Witheford's discussed above: games in general and some games in particular rely on labor as a form of engagement. Games that rely particularly on labor, such as many MMOs and digital role-playing games, focus on providing relatively easy tasks with little to no fail states, depending on challenge more through effort than skill or chance alone.[118]

What these approaches to affective labor all forward is the modulation of affect toward particular ends; as effort to propel subjects to act and react in desired ways. In this way, affective labor can be understood as a quality of making as well as

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[118] It bears mentioning that there are significant skill elements and methods of cutting or negating labor in most games. Therefore, Juul's observation is fruitful not in categorizing games but in understanding parts of them, such as being able to identify grinding and incremental stat growth – which are common elements of, for example, MMOs and digital role-playing games – as labor-dependent systems, making these games markedly more centered on effort and labor than many others.

playing games, and, more widely, as one of the forms affect takes in videogames. Although not operationalizing his arguments through the thematic of affective labor, this is one reflection of what Jenkins discusses more broadly as "affective economics", where boundaries between producers and consumers are blurring and where brands are built to engender communities through affective participation (2006b, 20). Likewise, Ahmed's theory of affective economies draws parallels between the totalities of production, consumption, and accruing of wealth in economies (as understood through a Marxist lens) and the way affects mirror these processes. For Ahmed, "the movement between signs or objects converts into affect" (Ahmed 2014, 45) much like the movement or circulation of commodities and money converts into capital. For Ahmed, "affect […] is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value)" (ibid). Both Jenkins and Ahmed, as well as theorists of videogames and labor, have identified manifestations of a particular affective form of contemporary capitalism that not only acknowledges the centrality of affective elements in commerce but furthermore combines them into a more unitary concept of economic and intimate relations (cf. Zelizer 2005), with labor as a key mode in its organization and operation.

That is to say, brands and franchises are no longer merely marketed as slotting into the consumers' everyday, but are intentionally designed as such, with participatory mechanisms leveraged at active audiences who, in turn, also modify and appropriate products to their own ends. This production and consumption of product-feelings speaks of a media culture where producers, products, and audiences partake in mutual and shared management of circulating and accumulating affect; a field of immaterial and affective labor attached to brands and experiences alike.

3.3.2   Training labor

A good example of participatory affect-modulation in commercial franchises and videogames in particular is *Neopets* (Neopets Inc.), the virtual pet website that Pybus (2007) discusses as an assemblage where multimedia properties and their fans engage in a mutual cycle of immaterial and affective labor, producing, consuming, and perpetuating brands while also conducting identity work through them.

Neopets is a gamelike online platform that relies on content created by its users. Furthermore, the users are only one segment of *Neopets'* customer base, as its users are basically an asset the producers of *Neopets* sell to advertisers, offering companies the opportunity to conduct what *Neopets's* producers call "immersive advertising", advertising through diegetic items and content. Pybus notes:

> Thus at the heart of [Neopets.com] is the way in which subjects are being
> rearticulated through the immaterial labour that they are (un)knowingly engaged

in. And it is through this labour that, corporations such as Viacom, can become
that much more adept at producing more authentic mechanism for "generating
the love". (Pybus 2007)

In the affective economy of *Neopets*, users connect to the website to care for their
pet and to participate in the social side of discussing and bartering with other Neopet-
enthusiasts. Despite Pybus adding the conditional "(un)" to "knowingly", I would
argue users of *Neopets* are actually at least somewhat aware of the presence of labor
structures.[119] After all, the whole platform is founded around pets that users take care
of and bring up. While the aspect of being sold to other companies as a ready-made
audience might be less clear to the users, the notion of them logging in to *Neopets* in
order to conduct labor – to spend time and effort in order to take care of a commercial
and affective entity in the form of a Neopet, in the commercially predicated culture
of *Neopets* (Grimes and Shade 2005, 181–182, 194–195) – seems understood and
unquestioned. Conducting work as part of the gameworld constitutes some of the
draw of Neopets rather than being a devious scheme hidden into it.

In the discourse of affective and immaterial labor, as Hardt and Negri point out,
various forms of "caring labor" (2001, 274, 292–293) are foregrounded as forms of
labor that aim to manage affects and to conduct caretaking. This is a frequent
tendency of digital (and oftentimes material) technological pets: they function as
sites of affective and immaterial labor, connecting the commercial aspect of the
products to the users' participatory – albeit often illusory – position as an active
custodian for these products and characters. For example, *Kinectimals* (Frontier
Developments 2010) functions in part through capitalizing on the work users spend
on their virtual animals and in caring for them in particular (Apperley and Heber
2015, 149–150). Likewise, *Faunasphere* (Big Fish Games 2009) operated on this
logic too (Consalvo and Begy 2015, 112), as do *Tamagotchi* (Yokoi and Maita 1997)
and *Nintendogs* (Nintendo EAD 2005) products (Ruckenstein 2010, 507; 2013, 13).
The immaterial and affective labor of usage that audiences and players undertake is
clearly communicated in each of these products: they frame interaction with them
and their symbolic animals as an interdependency of a pet and a caretaker, set within
a social setting where users can connect to each other as caretakers. The affective
labor of the user and player is directed at a digital character and its state, as well as
the world that it and other player characters inhabit.

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[119]   The practical ethics of injecting commercial messages to a website ostensibly about
        something entirely different as well as accumulating and then selling the attention of
        users is, of course, a wholly different matter (see Grimes and Shade 2005) – and hardly
        limited to children's play products.

In that sense, these play products all utilize the overall thematic of affective and immaterial labor of usage, and the work-like core grind of games (as discussed above). Furthermore, they foreground emotional labor as a key value of production and consumption. In these videogames and play franchises, labor is turned into a selling point and explicitly advertised: "play this game and do the work of X", where X can be anything from a dog owner to *Tamagotchi* custodian, all wrapped within the theme of caretaking. This is one of the core methods these games deploy to "mobilize an affective response" (Pybus 2007), to modulate the affective tone of the play experience into a particular state through careful positioning of the player, the product (including its digital characters), and the affects produced in their encounters.

3.3.3   The Trainer's work as affective labor

When creating *Pokémon*, its characters, intended interactions, and player positions, its creators have undertaken affective labor – work the aim of which is to modulate affects. Equally, players and audiences engage with these creations through the affective labor of a Trainer, as co-workers in finalizing the product. Players, through their own independent affective labor, undertake the time- and effort-intensive process of engaging with the videogames, building Pokémon characters, showing them off to the world, and achieving affective investment and accumulation. In practice, they coordinate their own affective experience with the framework established by the developers and produce social content for other players as well as for themselves.

In line with the core metaphor about trainers and pets, the developers of *Pokémon* discuss the affective labor of the player in terms of caretaking (Nintendo 2000a; see also Nutt 2009 and Harris 2009 quoted at the start of this section). Explaining motivations behind design decisions in the first *Pokémon* games, they highlight themes such as raising Pokémon and having to make choices regarding their progress as being important. This is so that the Pokémon would, through effort and individuality, feel like they'd belong to the player and also so that there would be some kinship between the players and their Pokémon[120] (ibid.). Linked to a wish that this would foster sentimental value and thus bring a special quality to collecting and trading Pokémon, the developers stress how the Trainer–Pokémon relationship is one built in particular on personalization and customization (Nutt 2012). As producer Masuda Junichi summarizes in his blog, "Players raise their Pokemon from its infant level so that it becomes more different from any other Pokemon. […] Looked from the informational viewpoint, almost every Pokemon is different from others"

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[120]   The developers actually argue that they wanted to go beyond portraying Pokémon as pets, instead aiming to portray them more as friends and companions (Nintendo 2000a), although in practice the boundary is ambiguous.

(Masuda 2007a). There seems, therefore, to be a clear design intent for the recurring theme of raising Pokémon, training them, and molding them into something the player feels connected to, as well as a corresponding resonation to this design from players (see Allison 2006a, 204, 193).

In order to better understand the impact the Trainer's labor has on the mediated intimacy of *Pokémon*, a brief description of what I call training is warranted. In short, training is what players do – and are intended to do – in *Pokémon's* core gameplay. Going beyond the videogames, it subsequently spread to other types of media in *Pokémon's* media mix, describing the central mode of Trainers' – that is, of fans' and characters' alike – being and acting. It is the sum total of *Pokémon's* designed player agency and portrayed narrative heart as they relate to the caretaking metaphor discussed above, manifesting in interactions with Pokémon creatures, the wider storyworld, and other players.

The most immediate examples of the affective quality of the Trainer's labor are the numerous straightforward training and caretaking mechanisms in *Pokémon* videogames. The first of these was introduced to the series in *Pokémon Yellow* (Game Freak 2000/1998), the last game in the first generation, where the game tracked Pikachu's affection towards the player's character. This system, tracking the level of *friendship* (なつき度, *amount of emotional attachment*) that signifies the closeness of a Pokémon and its Trainer, became a mainstay in the later games as well. Friendship accumulates when a Pokémon is, for example, leveled up, healed, or taken to specific enjoyable locations in the game world. Conversely, it drops if the Pokémon is not cared for, that is, if the player lets it faint in battle, revives it in the middle of battle rather than taking it to a medical facility afterwards, fails to attend to a poisoned Pokémon before it succumbs to its ailment, or unsuccessfully fields it against an overwhelmingly strong opposing Pokémon. Although not represented as transparently as the general taxonomic and individual data of a Pokémon, friendship nevertheless often shows in practice, for example, in certain Pokémon that evolve only after liking their Trainer enough and in some battle moves that are more efficient as a function of the Pokémon's attachment.

In *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y* (Game Freak 2013), friendship was joined by the *affection* mechanism (なかよし, *intimate friendship*) that shows how much a Pokémon likes its Trainer. While thematically similar to friendship, affection does not accumulate as a collateral effect of the core gameplay but instead can only be increased in specific game modes (*Pokémon Amie* in generation 6 and *Pokémon Refresh* in generation 7) that let Trainers feed, groom, and pet their Pokémon. Unlike friendship, affection has frequent and highly visible effects in battle, such as affectionate Pokémon automatically recovering from status ailments or evading attacks.

Friendship and affection mechanics attempt to reflect the bond that is intended to grow between Trainers and Pokémon and, crucially, inform players of the

existence and status of this relationship. Friendship in particular seems to be an attempt to integrate this bond into a part of the games' overall mechanics (Nintendo 2013) by allowing players to directly exchange caretaking effort to battle prowess.

While these two mechanisms are the immediate and clearly communicated systems of affection in *Pokémon*, affective labor goes beyond this surface level. It describes the more base actions and interactions players have with Pokémon characters, only part of which are instrumentalized through the friendship and affection stats and the game mechanical effects they have.

As discussed in Section 3.1, Pokémon characters consist of character image, taxonomic data, and individual data. The labor a Trainer exerts is, in essence, the manipulation of, and interaction with, these elements as they compile into characters. This is what Masuda means by the design behind trading and character-creation being motivated by the idea of "what kind of an attractive character can you create?" (Nutt 2009). That is, the intended work of Trainers is the shaping of Pokémon into particular characters in order to fuel affection, affective value, and trading in the affect-driven economy of the franchise.

This work has been present in the franchise since the opening moments of the very first *Pokémon* products, the original *Pocket Monsters Red* and *Green* in 1996. The moment is also recreated in every subsequent core series *Pokémon* videogame since then. Each of these games opens with a scene where the player is prompted to pick one of three Pokémon as their companion. This marks the player becoming a Trainer, someone tasked with the ownership and raising of Pokémon. From there on, the player fulfills this task by exploring the game world, encountering new Pokémon, learning and recording their taxonomic data, and, should the player capture these Pokémon, also establishing and shaping their personal data.

In practice, most of these Trainer tasks are linked to Pokémon battles.[121] Crucially, Pokémon battles function as the stage for catching wild Pokémon, for

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[121] This leads back to *Pokémon's* JRPG heritage. Typical for JRPGs – and indeed for most mainstream videogames – their gameplay is exceedingly often tied to the mechanics of fighting, regardless of which other themes and topics they focus on. That is to say, even though *Pokémon* forwards affection and intimacy as a prominent aesthetic, it is done in tandem with, and often directly through, different levels of strife and conflict. Depending on one's reading, this can be presented as an incongruity in *Pokémon's* procedural rhetoric, or an artifact of the history of its genre and medium that is perhaps slowly fading out (see Salter, Stanfill, and Sullivan 2019). As I am interested in *Pokémon's* mediated intimacies, I acknowledge the centrality of violence in *Pokémon's* core thematics but address it as adjacent and secondary to my primary interest in the franchise's aesthetics of affection. It is also important to mention that although the disparity between affection and violence is acknowledged by developers and in fan cultures, it appears more as a curiosity rather than a point of serious dissonance – likely due to how ubiquitous and taken for granted battle mechanics in JRPGs are.

improving one's existing Pokémon, and for competing against other Trainers – players and NPCs alike. Battles in *Pokémon* videogames are conducted using a design that has, for the most part, remained unchanged from its original roots in 1990s console role-playing games. The battle is conducted in turns, with the order of action resolved by priority (items are used before battle moves, for example) as well as the speed of the battling Pokémon. At the start of a turn, the player uses a text menu to issue commands for their Pokémon (such as which move to use next), pick another Pokémon to field, use an item, throw a Poké Ball in order to catch the other Pokémon, or run away from the battle. Once the player has selected their action from the menu, the player's as well as their opponent's (which can be another Trainer and their Pokémon or a wild, Trainerless, Pokémon) choices play out, and unless the battle ends (if the other Pokémon is caught, either Trainer runs out of usable Pokémon or the player chooses to run away from the battle, for example), a new turn begins and the player again chooses a command.

Through repeated battles, the player's Pokémon gain experience points, which leads to stereotypical DRPG progress: characters becoming more powerful and learning new ways to interact with the game world. In this way, Pokémon level up and gain higher stats as guided by the Pokémon's effort values and nature (see 3.1 on individual data). As Pokémon level up, they can be taught new battle moves or they might even evolve into their more advanced evolutionary forms, all highlighting the idea that battles are the central training device for Pokémon, functioning as the motivation for training stronger Pokémon as well as the method for doing so.

In this way, *Pokémon* videogames are not only about collecting new Pokémon but also about training those already collected. Most Pokémon are only encountered by advancing in the game through story-related and geographical progress, which requires developing stronger Pokémon to survive the increasingly difficult environments and battles. Also, when Pokémon are developed to become stronger, they often also evolve (or are evolved) into their advanced forms, enabling the player access to new rungs of the taxonomical ladder of the Pokédex. *Pokémon* is marketed as a being about collecting, but here we see how the fundamental basis of collecting is, in the videogames, dependent on the player successfully adopting the role and affects of a Trainer; of becoming a caretaker of Pokémon, exerting effort in the form of repetitive and laborious tasks associated with training Pokémon.

Laying out this dynamic between collecting, training, and battling Pokémon as I just did, however, conceals the degree to which they overlap and merge into the overall process of playing *Pokémon,* as well as the degree it often requires and rewards effort. An illustrative example of this assemblage of labor and affection was the time I – upon taking a liking to how they looked – wished to add Buneary and its evolved form Lopunny to my party in *Pokémon SoulSilver* (Game Freak 2010a).

Figure 5. Buneary from *Pokémon Legends: Arceus* (Game Freak 2022b).

The process began with research. I perused a wealth of paratexts: wikis, guides, and forums to figure out where I could find a Buneary and how I could evolve it into a Lopunny. It turned out that in this game, Buneary appeared only in an area available after completing the main story of the game. So, I set out to quickly finish the story and then began working my way towards the newly accessible Route 25, the area where Buneary were available. Alas, the road there was so perilous that I had to strengthen my existing Pokémon team a great deal along the way before I could reach Route 25. This process alone had taken up several hours of playtime.

Then I had to wait for a "swarm"[122] of Buneary to be announced on Professor Oak's talk show on the in-game radio. The talk show's report on Pokémon swarms updates once each day, cycling between 20 or so Pokémon species, meaning that even when all other conditions were met, I still had to wait several days for Buneary to appear in the wild before I could even attempt to catch one.

Although essentially a similar process regardless of the Pokémon being caught, actually catching a Buneary nevertheless added one more layer of labor to the process, especially since the preceding steps took significant effort and as such cast affective weight on the outcome of the battle. In practice, I had to make sure I had

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[122] Swarms are a game mechanic introduced in *Pokémon Gold* and *Silver*, and also found in different formulations in several later game generations – including the 2009 remakes *Pokémon HeartGold* and *Pokémon SoulSilver*. Common to the mechanic is that at times, the player is notified of rare or otherwise hard to obtain Pokémon having become available in specific locations of the gameworld for a limited time.

enough Poké Balls and healing items in case the battle took longer than expected, and I also needed to adjust my pre-existing team of Pokémon and their assortment of moves so that I could decrease Buneary's hit points enough to capture it but not so much as to end the battle with a knockout blow. This was made more difficult by my team having been specifically designed and trained to get me through any obstacles on the way to Buneary – for winning battles rather than capturing Pokémon, that is – so now I needed Pokémon and moves of a somewhat gentler disposition. Having done all that, I eventually caught the wild Buneary. Finally, I spent several hours of active gameplay fielding the Buneary in battles, accumulating particular items, and visiting certain locations in the gameworld in order to fulfill the prerequisites for triggering its evolution into Lopunny, thus accomplishing my original desire.

These two Pokémon took close to two weeks of planning, accumulated knowledge, and play time to obtain. As a result, they are so affectively resonant that they were not only the best but also the first (even if by far not the only) example I thought of when searching my research diaries for moments illustrating the Trainer's labor and the potential for affective registers within it. In order to catch Buneary and Lopunny, I went through a multi-stage process of learning, perseverance, and skill, combining training, battling, collecting, and the wider social mechanics of the *Pokémon* videogames into a single memorable narrative, recorded on the bodies of these two Pokémon, me as a Trainer, and our various encounters in play. Crucially, although I highlight my experience with Buneary and Lopunny in *Pokémon SoulSilver*, a variation of this story – expenditure of effort to secure a desirable Pokémon – has played out in various ways through the basic dynamics of *Pokémon's* game mechanics throughout the franchise's history.

Besides catching new Pokémon through battles and evolution – as in the previous example – there are also other means for Trainers to encounter and collect new Pokémon, such as trading with NPCs and other players, breeding new Pokémon, and receiving event-specific or promotional Pokémon. Much like battles and evolutions, all of these methods are also structured as requiring non-trivial labor and effort. For example, receiving Pokémon through trading hinges on realizing contacts with other Trainers (NPCs or other players) whether in-game, over the game's online social functionality or in everyday physical settings, and Pokémon caught from a retail store such as a Pokémon Center or via a promotional campaign requires the player to physically access shops and to stay up to date with the media mix's news and events.

Furthermore, breeding – that is, creating a new Pokémon based on the traits of two pre-existing Pokémon in a process that takes after the biological and cultural acts of procreation and rearing – requires mutually compatible Pokémon, accessing specific locations in the gameworld, and a fair bit of time. The time it takes for

Pokémon to produce an egg and for that egg to hatch is dependent not on time as such, but rather on the steps the player character takes and the time spent taking those steps. That is, merely waiting is not an option; the Trainer has to either do something else while waiting for the egg to appear and hatch, or they have to deliberately waste time by pacing back and forth to fill the required amount of time-as-steps. Furthermore, the Trainer must first wait for the egg to appear, then collect it, and then accumulate more steps for it to hatch. This is in stark contrast to many other games with similar breeding mechanisms, such as games in the *Shin Megami Tensei* and *Persona* series, where (though without the procedural metaphor of breeding as a biocultural process) combining creatures in hopes of obtaining new and potentially more powerful characters is instantaneous, achievable through a few button presses, or *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997) where breeding Chocobos bears many resemblances to *Pokémon,* but requires less waiting.[123]

In breeding, trading, and special events, players must go through the process of accessing particular areas, meeting particular people – whether real, fictional, or something in between – and following particular procedures in order to be able to receive new Pokémon. The fundamental operation of collecting and developing Pokémon, then, takes place only through effort. Everything from the initial acquiring of a Pokémon to the practical raising of them requires work. This work is recorded on, and reflected off of, the digital body of the creatures, retained there by character permanence. That is, the basic activities of a Trainer – the core component of *Pokémon* videogames – are embedded into Pokémon characters through chains of dynamics that depend on interlocking expenditure of effort.

Training, however, is not always a clearly distinct thing. It is generally not something a Trainer sets out to do, but rather the necessary result of taking part in the worlds of the *Pokémon* videogames. It is, by and large, the implied core action of the whole media mix; training is what one invariably does by virtue of taking part in the game and its surrounding media structure.

Although not reducible to a straightforward consecutive process, *Pokémon* gameplay tends to follow the overlapping rhythms of collecting (acquiring Pokémon), raising (developing the acquired Pokémon), and battling (fielding the Pokémon to enable further collecting and raising), with player effort spent at every step. The cycle that usually begins in collecting a Pokémon is preceded by battle, which, in turn, hinges on raising (or on the implication of raising if, as in at the start

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[123] It is worth emphasizing, however, that in a broader sense there are familiar elements of labor present in all the aforementioned games, suggesting important as well as shared design lineages of creature creation. For more details on Chocobos, *Shin Megami Tensei,* and *Persona*, see for example Hutchinson (2018), Sapach (2017), and Harper (2011).

of a game, no evolving, strengthening or configuration of a Pokémon has yet been done), which, again, requires collecting for there to be something to raise. They form the tri-partite dynamic of labor that forms the ideological and ludic center of *Pokémon* that I call training: expenditure of effort as a means to obtain and develop characters and affective formations.

They stem from the franchise's framing of the player as a Trainer, someone who not only fields but also necessarily trains Pokémon. The procedural metaphor of Pokémon as electric animals frames this interaction cycle as one of caretaking effort, and so the work of being a Trainer is fundamentally forwarded as affective labor: it is about learning to take care of Pokémon and simultaneously putting this knowledge into practice, raising Pokémon and spending time with them. Players might do this for affectionate or instrumental reasons – and in the way *Pokémon* treats its creatures as instrumental and affective, this relation is often both – it is a form of voluntary but often unseen or unrecognized affective labor. The framing the player settles in is that of a caring Trainer and the actions the player conducts are, for the most part, always about improving one's wards and spending time with them.

Pokémon's immaterial and affective labor shows in its designed and evident outcome of making Pokémon feel personal and meaningful and the operationalization of these feelings (among others) into motivating players into participation with the franchise's media mix and other Trainers. It is about extending effort in order to modulate one's own affects and affective experience, but it is also about players being ludic and diegetic content for each other. That I am a Trainer means that someone else might have a meaningful experience in *Pokémon* by, for example, challenging me to a battle, trading Pokémon with me, or talking with me Trainer to Trainer.

In that sense, this is not as much a question of labor and effort as such, but rather of work as it is reflected in permanent characters and the social framing of players who engage in the training of these characters. This is what it means to be able to create and raise Pokémon as Masuda suggests, and likewise what it means to encode all that work into characters that stay with you year after year, as the quotes at the start of this section by ShortchangeParamecia (2014) and PrinceVegeta (2014) attest to.

Effort, then, is crucial in *Pokémon*. Games and play can be characterized as products and actions that aim to bring about particular results through artificial hindrances (Suits 2014, 36, 43; Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 80), and in *Pokémon* videogames, this thematic has been elevated as the *pièce de résistance* of the entire ludic storyworld. In these videogames and their expanded commercial media mix, labor and the notion of difficulty through effort suggests proximity to Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry:

> Entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism. It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again. At the same time, however, mechanization has such power over leisure and its happiness, determines so thoroughly the fabrication of entertainment commodities, that the off-duty worker can experience nothing but after-images of the work process itself. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 109)

After all, what is playing *Pokémon* but a postmodern afterimage of a work process, mirroring choirs the Trainers in the fictional world undertake; a series of laborious tasks set forth by the producers of the franchise, communicated through the mercantile media mix's fiction, and adopted by the player-Trainers.

Pokémon is play captured in the images, functions, and products of 21st century labor. Affective labor in *Pokémon* is not merely work towards feelings (by both producers and consumers) but more fundamentally, and more in line with Hardt and Negri, *Pokémon's* affective labor is precisely about the affective registers of the player put to work in the service of a commercial franchise, to achieve further sales. It is a sort of willful acceptance of the logic of capitalism as part of play and its affects. As the work of a Trainer is embedded into the logic of the franchise, the affective labor of caretaking receives a dual function of modulating feelings as well as driving sales.

But as Sicart (2011) notes, focusing only on the procedurality, systems, and rules of games can blind us to the lived experience of playing games.[124] For Sicart, Adorno and Horkheimer are correct in their pessimistic assessment insofar as it is linked with, for example, videogames as a form in general, but not as it pertains to the more personal and subversive individual practice of actually playing them. To play anything, including *Pokémon* games, is, to quote Sicart's formulation of play, "appropriation, creation, expression, and to a certain extent submission to the rules of a game", far from the labor and rationality of systems and rules inherent in the industrial product of a commercial videogame.

To push Sicart's argument further, those systems and rules with their reflections of the late capitalistic hegemony of labor and commodification, are, unquestionably, structuring participants in the experience of gameplay, as even Sicart admits (ibid.). In *Pokémon*, then, the capitalistic culture industry of Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) does manifest as a sad vignette of play as work, but as it takes the form of play, it is also keyed to genuine acts of playfulness and self-expression. In such a way, the

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[124] This is, of course, sometimes beneficial. In this thesis, for example, procedurality and rule systems are engaged as a way to examine the game elements of *Pokémon*, to be better able to link this understanding to pre-existing research that deals more with the social and practical effects of the franchise, i.e., the played experience of its audience.

diegetic profession of a Pokémon Trainer becomes the actual – if voluntary and playful – profession of the *Pokémon* player; a perhaps troubling signifier of life under global capitalism but also an enjoyable and relatively free form of play and expression of self, mirrored on the bodies of *Pokémon's* media mix animals and enacted in between the media mix and its audiences.

3.3.4   Affective labor in media mixes and media mix characters

In discussing objects that hold special meaning for their owners, Donald Norman notes that these material-affective relationships tend to operate on sustained interaction (2004, 46) and furthermore that our relations toward objects tend to "reflect out personal experiences, associations, and memories" (ibid., 47). Relationships to objects are dependent not only on our initial encounters or immediate reactions (although they play a part too), but instead build off of a longer history. As Norman continues, "our attachment is really not to the thing, it is to the relationship, to the meanings and feelings the thing represents" (ibid., 48). His observation, made from the perspective of design, captures the practical end of Ahmed's overall notion that affects often depend on personal history and past associations (Ahmed 2014, 6–8, 13).

The whole *Pokémon* franchise is an affective economy (Ahmed 2014, 44–45). It is a collection of media where meanings circulate between the storyworld and its Trainer-participants, affixing particular elements of this economy with stickiness (ibid., 74, 84, 89–92) as they accumulate histories and associations. That is, the affective labor that *Pokémon* and its media mix enable allows the audience to deepen and configure their affective engagement with the franchise and its characters.[125] It is, in essence, the commercialization of affective stickiness. Of course, rather than being unique to *Pokémon,* this is, in various intensities, the mechanism of the media mix form in general. The expenditure of effort to learn about a storyworld and to bond with its characters means that "consumption itself becomes a kind of work within post-Fordism, in which the act of looking itself produces value" (Steinberg 2012, 168).[126] In a commodified character culture, coming into contact with a

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[125]   On a more general level, this is what Ito discusses when she suggests the concepts of "personalization" and "remixing" as integral elements in media mixes (2008).

[126]   Although making an argument about media mixes in particular, Steinberg connects his observation to the works of Hardt, Negri, Terranova, and Lazzarato, thus linking the media mix to a wider development of immaterial and affective labor in contemporary media and technoculture. Such tendencies of participatory consumerism also form the core of Jenkins's seminal notion of *media convergence* and the work and play consumers conduct in a media system in the age of convergence (Jenkins 2006b, 3).

character image and its associated small narratives, audiences are invited to do work within the commodity's textual frame, "working to follow and produce connections, organizing their relations to media-commodities, and thereby extending the life of the character and its narrative" (ibid.), enabling these signs to accumulate affective potential, that is, to become sticky, through exposure and propagation in the media mix.

The affection-generating potential of the Trainer's labor in a media mix as mapped onto characters can be further accessed through Itō Gō's theories of character-being. Itō notes that by 1980s, manga production reached a historically wide berth of representation and expression, and furthermore was set in production practices that put emphasis on the proliferation of character images in media other than comics (Itō 2006, 107). This, in turn, "diversified the ways in which readers recognised characters" (ibid.). A core distinction in this economy of circulating and transmedial character images is, according to Itō, the duality of characters as *characters* and *kyara* (the latter being an abbreviation of the English-derived Japanese form for character, キャラクター, *kyarakutaa*) (Itō 2005, 94–95, in Lamarre 2011, 128–129; Itō 2006), a paradigm shift required to understand manga historically as well as in its contemporary constellations that are heavily dependent on media mixes.[127]

In this formulation, *kyara* – also translated as *character icon* (Saitō 2005) and *proto-character* (Itō 2006, translated by Shimauchi Tetsuro) – is an iconic and simplified character that "imparts a 'sense of existence' (*sonzaikan*) and 'sense of life' (*seimeikan*)" (Itō 2005, 94–95, in Lamarre 2011, 129). Primarily shaped by iconic visuality (Itō 2006, 107), often conducted with simple strokes and shapes (ibid. 107–108), character icons are simplified but mimetically strong independent concepts that can exist in various settings and be inserted into different contexts while still retaining their identities.[128] The character Hello Kitty, for example, can turn up mostly anywhere while still retaining its own brand and sense of uniqueness; in this way, it is a recognizable character on its own, yet at the same time it is ambivalent to the degree that its use and contexts have very few limitations (for more on this, see Lunning 2015). *Kyara* are transforming but recognizable, iconic to the degree that they are identifiable across different media and in derivative works. In this way, they have "versatile transformative nature" (Saitō 2005). As Lamarre notes, "the pared-down design of *kyara* allows it not only to move across different narrative

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[127] For more on Itō's work on *kyara* and characters as well as its applications in research, see Blom (2020, 73–77).

[128] In this sense, the foundations of Itō's *kyara* are reminiscent of Azuma's *chara-moe*, the conceptual database of affective aspects (*moe*) found in popular anime, manga, and videogame characters (Azuma 2009, 36).

worlds but also to generate new worlds wherever its users see fit", taking on "a life of its own" as an independent sign (Lamarre 2011, 129).

Contrasted to *kyara*, *characters* are set within particular narratives, thus having a "certain sense of realism" (Lamarre 2011, 129) to them, rising from detailed representation and depth of personality (Roth 2013, 250). Most importantly, they are shaped by narrative action (Itō 2006, 107), being more like components of a story rather than *kyara*-like circulating semi-autonomous icons that, in themselves, contain hints of stories. As Saitō puts it, "character icons are realistic as fiction but not in the sense that they are familiar characters in real life" (Saitō 2005). *Kyara,* or character icons, feel alive as fictional entities, in that they exist seemingly on their own, propping up here and there in the common everyday, having existence outside of any particular stories. Characters, on the other hand, portray aliveness as representations of living non-fictional beings (Saitō 2005). A character, thus, is a fictional entity that, by being bound to a story, strives for a sort of escape from its diegesis, whereas a character icon is a fictional entity that escapes its fiction precisely by embracing its fictional status. Both are attempts at reaching out to audiences by ascribing to different veins of lifelikeness and reality as well as by appearing through different methods of circulation. Itō seems to suggest that part of the enjoyment and power of Japanese popular culture, manga in particular, is found in the blending of the two (Itō 2006), when the fictional real and the audience's unmediated real seem to blend into each other, and where the audience can exist – or feel that they exist – side by side with characters and character icons.

In the early days of media mix production, the use of stickers to advertise Tezuka's *Tetsuwan Atomu* offers a singular early glimpse at this duality. Atomu, the lead character of the series, was certainly a character, with weekly storylines and accumulating experiences, yet the series was marketed with tie-in stickers that exhibited the *kyara* side of Atomu: as a *kyara* Atomu could exist as a separate simplified agent, pictured in the stickers in dramatic and iconic poses familiar from the TV series, turning anything and everything the stickers were affixed to into parts of – or at least gateways into – the storyworld. As Steinberg notes, in this way, "the pleasures of consuming the character of Atomu and the pleasures of the Atomu world were similarly temporally and spatially diffused" (Steinberg 2012, 79).

It is easy to read into Itō's theory an implication of a hierarchy as indeed Lamarre does by stressing that for Itō, *kyara* are "ontologically prior to *kyarakutaa*" (Lamarre 2011, 129). Furthermore, Itō points out that manga characters do not exist without having a foundational layer of this proto-characterization (Itō 2006, 112–113) of *kyara* to build on. With *kyara* being a simplified base made primarily of visual character images, and characters proper being these icons set to function in particular story instances, there is, indeed, ontological ordering at play. However, taking into account Japanese pop-cultural characters' reliance on the iconic visuality and easy

circulation of *kyara*, it seems more fruitful to conceptualize *kyara* and character not as distinct but overlapping, with *kyara* often referring back to more rounded characters (such as Atomu stickers referring to the narrative entity of Atomu in the TV series) and characters tending to circulate through iconic profuseness (Atomu stickers being mere images yet containing great quantities of characterization by proxy), as Itō himself also suggest (2006, 108). The two, then, are parallel, both crucial in understanding the current climate of popular culture production in Japan.

Although focusing on manga in particular, the strategies Itō highlights are part of the contemporary media mix in general. In popular vernacular, unrelated to Itō's theories but nevertheless illustrating them, *kyara* functions as a general term for characters as transmedial and free-moving objects, (seemingly) unrelated to specific stories or narratives (Lamarre 2011, 129, 131–132). In noting this tendency (though without mentioning Itō), Steinberg identifies a dual mode of characters embedded in media mixes that functions in a startlingly similar fashion as Itō's. For Steinberg, characters are at once material products and free-ranging icons, which enables them to act as the linchpins of media mixes, as "network-forming agents" (2010b, 211; see also Steinberg 2012, 195), essentially mirroring Itō's *kyara* as a transmedial sign and character as a specific collapse of this character icon into stories, narratives, and forms.[129]

Indeed, Itō's whole project starts from the definition of a crisis of theory: namely that what he sees as the *de rigueur* of theoretical writing on manga at the turn of the millennium is largely unable – or the authors unwilling – to discuss the expansive media systems of contemporary manga such as *One Piece* (Itō 2011, 71) or the typically transmedial publishing platform of Gangan comics, both of which engender paradigms of production and circulation characteristic for their time. Itō notes that Gangan Comics, for example, publishes material whose contents and production designs are often based on videogames (ibid. 76–77) and which exist in the intertwined mediascape of anime, manga, and videogames (ibid. 77). What Itō set out to do was to try and develop a critical language able to account for this environment and the character representations in it: a theory of manga, yes, but also of characters and media mixes, as imbricated in production and reception of media more widely.

In a sense, Pokémon are archetypal *kyara*. Much of their being is communicated through clear visual designs meant for circulation and commodification. Likewise,

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[129] This similarity is perhaps not all too surprising given how both Itō and Steinberg reach their conclusions through linking Osamu Tezuka's career and works to advances in media mix production as well as to the rise of character goods in Japan, with Steinberg focusing on Tezuka as the originator of the media mix and Itō on the poetics of manga as grounded in Tezuka's works.

the surface layer of Pokémon characters has little to no narrative depth, instead relying on ubiquity and *laissez-faire* presence within a media mix to generate lasting impressions (i.e., affective stickiness). Even Pikachu, the Pokémon most entangled with the media mix's canonic stories, functions largely as a visual signifier and mascot for the franchise, able to appear in a wide variety of products without necessarily implying any connection to *the* Pikachu that travelled with Ash in the animated series and starred in *Pokémon Yellow*. In this way, individual Pokémon can exist as pure character icons, without a specific identity of their own: as evocative images hinting at characters but not striving to actually be ones.

However, when Trainers engage and traverse the ergodic and playful texts of *Pokémon*, they undertake actions in the designed space of the media mix, coming into contact with its core aesthetic objective of engendering affection. Through the procedural metaphor of Pokémon as animals and the media mix's positioning of the audience as Trainers, the traversal of *Pokémon's* texts takes the form of affective labor in which, as described earlier, the effort of Trainers is turned into affective value attached to Pokémon as well as particularity for *Pokémon's* character icons. Even in an instrumental approach to *Pokémon* – that is, if one that treats the characters only as game pieces that enable competitive play, akin to chess pieces – the players must undergo the process of training Pokémon, ensuring participation in the cycles of affective labor intended for all Trainers.

Through the core dynamics of the videogames that position Pokémon as assemblages of character image, taxonomic data, individual data, and the manipulation of all three by Trainers, in expending effort towards a Pokémon a player makes it more specific. Individuation starts at the event of catching; as the Pokémon changes from a generic character icon to a particular Pokémon – "my Pokémon" – it receives a layer of individual data. Once individuated, the process continues by configuring this individual data layer through expenditure of effort in training. As a laborious process connected to the character permanence of Pokémon creatures, this stage of Pokémon ownership and training also allows for long-standing personal histories to grow with the Pokémon, all coalescing as the accumulation of digital and experiential individual data of a Pokémon.

Although a random Pokémon – say, a gloomy bird Pokémon Murkrow – is, potentially, a pure character icon, once I have caught it, that Murkrow becomes particular. I have perhaps named it something funny and trained it to be particularly fast, with a moveset intended to get the most of out its taxonomical status as a flying and dark type Pokémon. It might be part of the team of Pokémon that gets me through the game, or it could be the ace in my multiplayer lineup. That is, I have labored to change its individual data, turning it into something particular that stands apart from the rest of Murkrows. This particular Murkrow has become more than a circulating sign: it is my particular Murkrow, the one that no one else has, the one that I affix

particular meaning and histories to, and something of a testament to my skill and patience as a Trainer.

In this way, and using Itō's terms, affective labor turns Pokémon's *kyara* to *characters*. It turns them into particular instantiations of general signs, with accumulated history and personal meaning. As noted earlier, however, although there is an ontological order between character icons and characters, these two modes also switch back and forth within single characters. Once turned into fictionally stable and narrativized characters, Pokémon also bleed back into the more ubiquitous and circulating character icon. Associations and histories attached to a particular character blend into the more ubiquitous *kyara* such as Pokémon soft toys or generic character images in posters, for example, and the ubiquity of those *kyara* likewise link up with characters, turning generic character images into personally resonant reminders of particular experiences, histories, and contacts. In this way, Pokémon creatures can be mapped simultaneously as shared and generic in *kyara*, and personal and individual in characters, as well as – and closer to the actual lived experience of a Trainer – something in between, where the circulating signs collect personal meaning and specificity just like the individualized characters connect with their generic character images.[130]

In a wider sense, this process describes how affective labor – defined here as the work and effort of developers and audiences to create affective sensations – within the context of a media mix is a way of striving closer to the Ōtsukan grand narrative (2010). Through the work of popcultural collecting (Jones 2008, 47) and effort of participation (Steinberg 2012, 168), audiences uncover pieces of the grand narrative while also carving out their own space and own stories into it. Through effort, Trainers uncover taxonomic data, learn about the storyworld and its rules, and spend time turning character icons into characters (and vice versa). In this way, the vague fragments of a worldview implied and referenced in *kyara* build up towards a more detailed grand narrative realized through the franchise's characters and continued interaction with them.

To relate this to the example above, I feel as though even the generic Murkrows of *Pokémon* are relevant to me. Even if I see a totally generic Murkrow figurine, it nevertheless feels personal. I know it, I know stories of it, and most importantly, I

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[130] A particularly prolific example of this can be found in how the early *Pokémon* videogames adjusted the limited graphics of the Game Boy by coupling them with more detailed and colorful representations in the generic character icons circulating in other media products of the franchise (see Schell 2008, 302). Trainers could gain a higher fidelity of visual detail through the franchise's circulating *kyara*, which in turn helped flesh out the procedurally complex but visually sparse characters in the Game Boy games. Although they functioned well on their own, part of the draw of *Pokémon's* media mix was – and still is – in the linkage between both.

have shared experiences with it through the stories I helped to make. Not only have I learned about the grand narrative of the franchise, but in a limited way I have also inserted myself as parts of it; defined these worlds through personal experiences and participation.

There is a sense of intimacy that glues players and audiences, me included, to these fragments – a personal narrative set into the frame of the grand narrative, emerging all the while the grand narrative itself is revealed the more one engages with the franchise. Not only does affective labor turn Pokémon from *kyara* to characters and back again, it also turns them sticky in the process. Aside from the particular Murkrow characters I have trained, even the generic Murkrow are, for me, evocative objects that affect me in ways other Pokémon do not. In the mass-market profuseness of *Pokémon* and in the endless number of potential – and, on the surface level, identical – Pokémon to encounter, affective stickiness both channels power from these circulating signs and subverts their generality through grounding individual characters from the generic *kyara.* As Ahmed writes, stickiness can be understood as

> … an effect of surfacing, as an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs. To relate stickiness with historicity is not to say that some things and objects are not 'sticky' in the present. Rather, it is to say that stickiness is an effect. That is, stickiness depends on histories of contact that have already impressed upon the surface of the object. (Ahmed 2014, 90)

In essence, then, the affective design of *Pokémon* is an attempt to create sticky signs and to encourage further accumulation of affect on these sticky signs in the contact zones of mediated intimacy between audiences and the media mix. The procedural metaphor of Pokémon as companions and the framing of the player as a Trainer that necessarily has to take care of – and at the very least train – these creatures, works to affix this affective linkage, to make the character icons of *Pokémon* – along with the affective economy of the whole franchise – into a collection of objects players and audiences must care for, desire, and spend time and effort on, in order to engage with the text.

3.3.5   "Just bits of data?"

As discussed in this section, affective labor is a form of immaterial labor that aims at the "creation and manipulation of affect" (Hardt and Negri 2001, 293), which in *Pokémon* I have established as being evident in the structures made by the developers as well as in the textual traversals undertaken by the player-Trainers within this structure. In totality, this affective labor exists not as something done simply by the

developers or the Trainers, but as a phenomenon residing in the field of affects that stretches between the developers, the players, and the videogame, reaching to the wider social context of the media mix and the everyday beyond it. Affective labor is perceivable in the Trainer position as well as in the authorial intent behind it, but it actualizes when these come together in the operationalized aesthetic of *Pokémon* and its mediated intimacy.

What players do in *Pokémon* videogames is what a Trainer does in the framing of *Pokémon's* storyworld: affective labor directed at Pokémon. Much of *Pokémon's* affection-building on the level of the videogames' systems comes from the simple equation of labor over time, as player-Trainers exert effort, framed as training, in order to carry on playing. Furthermore, through the basic logic of character permanence (see 3.1), this effort affixes to, and remains affixed to, individual Pokémon and, by proxy, has an effect on their generic character image as well.

Together these systems form an affective qualitative shift from generalized signs to particular signs where character icons and individual characters develop stickiness as their affective quality, primed for accumulating even more affective charge through this intimate closeness. The draw of Pokémon creatures is thus mapped onto a process of characterization stemming from lived history structured by ludic procedures, resulting in a formation of affects between the player, general character images of Pokémon, and particular individualized characters. In this way, Pokémon are not "just bits of data" (ShortchangeParamecia 2014), as noted by the fans quoted at the start of this section, but the results of time, effort, and accumulated emotional investment. They are sticky signs filled with memories, histories, and feelings, created through a shared past with that particular character and upheld through the games' mechanisms of permanence as well as the media mix's ubiquitous character images. In this way, *kyara* and particularized characters function as copies and originals, blurring, combining, and separating through the Baudrillardian logics of Japan's hyperreal media product ecology.

While this structure does not describe the experience of every Pokémon Trainer, it closes in on the overall interaction space of *Pokémon* videogames and the logics of play proliferating from it to the franchise at large. The affective labor of the Trainer, then, describes the overall affective tonality of *Pokémon*. Like the hero of an FPS game running with their gun out, with shooting as the players' primary means of interaction with the world, a *Pokémon* player can't help but engage with the world of *Pokémon* through the eyes and mind of a Trainer, primed for affective labor. There are innumerable ways of playing *Pokémon* videogames and taking part in *Pokémon's* media mix. Most of them, however, include affective labor as framed through the identity and metaphor of the Trainer. Regardless of whether it is someone playing a *Pokémon* videogame, drawing pictures of Pokémon, visiting a Pokémon Center store, training a Pokémon for competitive videogame play, or watching the animated

series, the media mix encourages to expend effort to spend time with and learn about characters and character icons, and to collect experiences and memories of contacts with them. To be a Trainer is to come into contact with bodies and worlds in a particular way: with actions designed to instill stickiness in Pokémon in particular.

This space of interaction – that is, the collection of rules, interactions, and representational elements that make up *Pokémon* videogames and their subsequent media mix – is akin to the hydraulic door closer of Latour (2009, 158) that extracts the energy it needs to fulfill its designed purpose from anyone opening the door; the affective qualities of Pokémon are activated in Trainers by their basic act of playing the videogame and participating in the media mix. In the modalities of training and caretaking as expressed in the franchise's forms of mediated intimacy, *Pokémon's* media mix is designed in such a way that what charges the psychological momentum of affect is the very act of participation itself.

3.4 The social and environmental dimensions of affection in Pokémon

So far, I have discussed how affective surfaces come into being in *Pokémon* through the core structures of the characters, the positioning of the players as Trainers, and the affective labor of the producers and Trainers in the media mix, all priming the affective aesthetic of *Pokémon* towards affection and desire. In this section, I examine how these surfaces come into contact with each other as a function of *Pokémon's* overall social dimension.

Functionally, Pokémon characters are data that is circulated socially and technologically. Likewise, much of the affective labor conducted as a Trainer happens in a social setting with other Trainers. Battles, trades, learning about the grand narrative of the storyworld, and participating in the definition and creation of the media mix supersystem in general are social – or as argued in this section, *potentially social* – acts that all take place in relation to the players as Trainers and Pokémon as procedural and symbolic data animals.

In this way, *Pokémon's* text facilitates encounters with and through characters, and, in the affective toning of those contacts, enables intimacy to exist and proliferate not only as a solitary form of joy but a shared one as well. These contacts, through the notion of *Pokémon* as a *potential multiplayer game*, are always varying between potential and actualized; events that might happen and affective sensations that might be felt as much as events that do happen and sensations that are felt.

3.4.1 Techno-social mobility

The importance of social elements for *Pokémon's* design is not particularly surprising given the prominence of portability, mobility, and social components in Japanese technoculture in general (Ito 2005; Hjorth and Khoo 2015). In their prominence and proliferation, the success stories of portable technology such as *keitai* phones, *Tamagotchi* toys, and Game Boy consoles have become everyday parts of the whole Japanese technoculture and its exports. This interweaved nature of life and technology is an important focus in researching the intersections of social, mobile, and technological aspects of Japanese media products. As Kim (2015) argues, the Japanese technological social space ought to be understood, first and foremost, through the everydayness of its devices, device use, and communication. Not only are mobile media and its technological platforms more or less materially ubiquitous, they are also socially so dispersed that they slot into the everyday as nearly invisible components of social interaction (Kim 2015, 589–590), and indeed, this is the mode they appear in *Pokémon's* social elements as well.

In their everyday use, these social technologies contain a discourse of intimacy, play, and personal attachments (Ito 2005, 14), where communication tools are used to

relay messages but also to do personal identity work and to stay in touch just as much with business contacts as with family members. Always carried on one's person as material objects and as tools for digitized communication, portable technologies engender sociality in registers that are at once intimate and dispersed, taking place in mediated online spaces as well as in physically (co-)present situations.

Japanese game cultures reflect this wider shift in society towards mobile technological everyday. As Consalvo notes, the Japanese gaming landscape is almost an inverse of the North American one in terms of devices, with portable consoles being a strong part of the local gaming culture rather than an additional derivative form of home consoles and computers (Consalvo 2016, 158). In this sense, Japanese game culture is, to an understated degree, a portable game culture.

To offer analytical clarity to the developmental intersection of videogames, mobility, and social contexts, McCrea (using two Japanese games as an example case) introduces an argument to distinguish between *mobile* gaming and *portable* gaming (2011). While in theory describing the same phenomenon – using small devices to engage in videogame play in locations that are spontaneous or removed from distinct places in a way home consoles and computers are not – McCrea stresses that there are crucial differences. A portable game or game platform such as the Nintendo DS does not limit the player to playing at home; however, the games on the DS platform are generally not mobile to the extent that they would eschew place and space. One typically has to set up a play session, sit down, and concentrate on playing. In contrast, playing on mobile devices such as smartphones generally offers more fleeting and also more mobile experiences (ibid., 392; cf. Anable 2018, viii–ix, 71). Handheld consoles and mobile phones all fall under the broad rubric of mobile technology, of course, but in McCrea's argument, there is a general qualitative difference:

> The players of the Nintendo DS sitting on stairwells and hiding in rooms together to play Mario Kart or Pokémon are seeking a highly focused, and certainly longer period of play than the distracted engagement of the mobile game player, even if they often retreat to the same space to do – ostensibly – the same thing. (McCrea 2011, 394)

McCrea's observation is valuable in the creation of critical vocabulary and increasing the granularity of analyses. However, the juxtaposition his argument suggests, while useful, is also risky. Mobile games are not cursory glitz and portable games are not deep efforts even if they are often depicted – and played – in that way.[131] *Pokémon* can

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[131] It should be pointed out that McCrea does not make a reductive argument such as this. My worry is merely that his dichotomous approach, while nuanced, nevertheless lends itself to such stereotyping under the guise of platform and genre studies, if read in that way.

be played "mobile-like", as a shallow system offering brief distractions, just as a player of the decidedly laid-back mobile cat-collecting game *Neko Atsume* (Hit-Point 2014) can spend a long stationary play session dismantling the rules and interaction patterns of the game, optimizing the kibble input and fish output.[132]

Beyond anything, these devices are "personalized technology" (Hjorth 2009; 2011, 69): portable for some, mobile for others, intimate and personal for all, with their use being dictated more by preference and circumstance than genre, platform, or media paradigms. The strength of McCrea's observation is, therefore, not in the separation of portable media from mobile media as distinct platforms but in making it possible to regard these two as distinct and overlapping modes of play and design.

There is a sense of intimacy and personal space-ness here, as this technology allows for individually relevant device use as well as social and shared experiences. They transform spaces into personal places of temporary interaction, where players communicate with, and in, the game itself or with other players under the social framing of the game. Of course, this does not mean that portability and sociality in game culture would straightforwardly translate to players roaming about city streets, having meaningful mediated interactions with each other through their shared play sessions. Based on various studies, Chan notes that while all of the above is possible, at least up until 2008 the reality has been that people in Japan are more likely to play portable and mobile games at home (Chan 2008, 23; for international industry perspective, see Boatman 2011). This would suggest that portable and mobile games offer moments of play not in any particular location or situation, but rather allow for that moment to actualize when the player wishes, regardless (to an extent) of location. These games and technologies are often wielded in the leisure and comfort of the home but also on the go and with other players, with this potential for extended spatiotemporal use being crucial to the devices, games, and their players (for more discussion, see Tobin 2013).

This sort of interpellation of intimacy, sociality, and everyday – particularly in the Japanese technoculture – shows in contemporary media mixes too. Tracing the developmental lines of culture and technology in the intensification of life as Japan transitioned to postmodernism, Lamarre points out how mobility, commuting, and the circulation of media products in those logistical contexts have become central themes in the production and consumption of popcultural goods (Lamarre 2009, xvi–xvii). Media mixes are constructed to scaffold these developments, with their

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[132] Furthermore, the dichotomy has also undoubtedly gone through some significant changes brought about by the increasing convergence of the mobile, console, and PC game markets, with the same games being published and played on smartphones as well as desktop computers, for example.

products produced and consumed in the context of the mobile reality of life and labor in contemporary Japan.

In this way, personal portable technology and on-the-go media are a perfect joint platform for *Pokémon*, as they enable *Pokémon's* media mix to extend its affective ties beyond the domain of games and playing, occupying everyday social interactions as well as potentially any idle moments anywhere, turning unmediated spaces into stages for *Pokémon* play, but also encouraging personal and intimate visits to the storyworld at the audience's leisure, be it within the confines of their home or in the collective bustle of a local Pokémon Center retail store. Here, ubiquity of networks and digital services as well as the everydayness of their use have indeed met with mass produced media commodities, with this assemblage expressed in the videogames, figurines, and interactive companions of the *Pokémon* franchise. *Pokémon* products are the result of the reorganization of everyday space into the affects and affordances of the current technoculture (Thrift 2003, 400) where technology and its use are – as discussed above – intimate, personal, and mobile, but also networked, social, and increasingly convergent.

3.4.2 Social and shared affects

The bodies focused on in affect theory can be, and often are, anything from horses and racecars to textual constructs. In the context of sociality, however, the bodies in question are frequently human: here, this involves players being social with each other and developers attempting to project their ideas onto the players. At the interface of these two in *Pokémon*, we find the more metaphysical bodies of characters, exerting a designed fantasy of intimacy towards players, taking part in social situations as agentic others and as objects of communication. In this way, the mediated intimacy of *Pokémon* is not only read in contact with the text but also actualized in contact between players as contributors to – or parts of – the text. Intimacy of the mediated game world is extended as intimacy in the less mediated real, with *Pokémon* (and Pokémon) acting as a social frame of reference within which approaching others is, as the social imperative of the games suggests, made easy.

As Ahmed argues, how we are affected by something is dependent on our contacts with that something and the affects of that encounter (2014, 6–7, 194). For Ahmed, objects acquire (emotional) value through contact with bodies (2010a, 23). Indeed, while this section is presented as a distinctly identifiable part of the greater whole of *Pokémon's* mediated intimacy, I must stress that the sociality of *Pokémon* as well as the sociality of affect are not distinct or isolatable elements of *Pokémon,* but rather part and parcel of its affects to begin with. As Ahmed writes about the sociality of emotions and affects, they are not "'in' either the individual or the social,

but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow all kinds of objects to be delineated" (Ahmed 2014, 10). Existing on the interface between a body and a world, affect is the boundary-forming medium that allows us to see these borders in the first place. Any body – or our impression of any body – is predicated on past contact with others that enables it to have a particular identity and us to be able to demarcate it through that identity. Affect, among other things, is the result of a process of particularization and individualization (as well as that process itself) that is as social as it is personal, as psychological as it is materially relational. Affects, then, structure social and bodily space (ibid., 209) as well as material relations of the world (Ash 2015).

A central point of an Ahmedian approach to affect is to sideline the circulation of affect in favor of the circulation of its objects (Ahmed 2014, 211), that is, to look at the people, things, and concepts shaped by affect; to see how affect forms as entwined in relations between bodies, creating social reality as well as being shaped by it.[133] As such, the analysis of affect should not to be limited to the level of individual bodies, but should also take into account the conditions and relations of those bodies as broader collectives. In Ben Anderson's terms, "affects become the *environment within which people dwell*" (Anderson 2014, 105, emphasis added). Affects, as participants in the encounters of everyday life, are not only about body-to-body encounters, and the capacities to act and be acted upon therein, but also form into more widely disseminated and shared social settings or public ambiences in which feelings are birthed and circulated: "affective conditions that mediate how encounters take place" (ibid., 161). In this sense, a useful aspect of affect theory is its sensitivity to different layers of the social, seen in the tension between affects as personal (or pre-personal, depending on the theorist) and affects as transpersonal, "collective in the sense that they are forged in and through the encounters that make up the realm of everyday life" (ibid.,102; see also Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 8).

While often a solitary form of play, *Pokémon* contains socially shared affect-environments in its designs and everyday practices of communication. *Pokémon*, for its own part, utilizes and cultivates affects of its design – and resulting from its design – to aim at particular social, bodily, and material configurations. In this way, *Pokémon's* affective tone is visible in its social aspects as well. The games and the media mix are designed in such a way as to facilitate what McGlotten, in his work

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[133] This inevitably leads to – and derives from – the circulation of affect. In that sense, the Ahmedian approach does not shun from attending to the circulation of affect. On the contrary, the central concept of stickiness, for example, is as much about the circulation of affect as it is about the circulation of its objects. In this way, this is a question of emphasis and priority in choosing what to attend to rather than of inclusion and exclusion on a more general level.

on *World of Warcraft*, calls instrumental intimacy (McGlotten 2013, 40, 47). According to McGlotten, *World of Warcraft* utilizes social mechanics to a great extent: "intimacy, rather than extinguished by the game, is actually central to the experience of play. The game design [of *WoW*] in fact effectively requires that players play with one another to succeed; intimacy becomes transactional and instrumental, a necessary means to an end" (ibid., 13).

With their communication features, emphasis on trading, and an overall design that opens up to interactions between players as well as between players and characters, this sort of instrumental sociality is part of *Pokémon* videogames, and from there extended to the rest of the media mix too. It manifests as commoditized and monetized sociality where participation in the media mix through consumption also brings potential social encounters and social capital as well as enables interaction with other fans in a shared paratextual system. Allison discusses Pokémon characters as instrumentalized in that they are equally a form of currency and a collection of affable creatures (2006a, 217, 228, 266), but it seems that in the *Pokémon* franchise, the instrumentalization of intimacy is not limited only to the Pokémon. Indeed, this potential for instrumental intimacy informs much of what players do in the videogames and in the ludic structures of the franchise's media mix overall, turning the whole setting into a social game and game-like sociality anchored in Pokémon creatures but performed through the role of a Trainer, all in service of encouraging – and commodifying – encounters Trainer-to-Trainer and between Trainers and Pokémon.

3.4.3 Pokémon as a potential multiplayer game

As discussed earlier, stickiness as a function of individuation and emotional investment in Pokémon, and affective labor as the actualization and creation of stickiness are crucial in the mediated intimacy of *Pokémon*. In this dynamic, however, training Pokémon is not always done solitarily or only for personal reasons. Instead, while largely an individual process, it is set in the wider sociality of *Pokémon* in a way that is here suggested as constituting a *potential multiplayer game,* taking place in the social play framing of the overall media mix. In this way, the whole *Pokémon* media mix is established as a social site that derives much of its affective intensities from the voluntary flexible movements between social and solitary domains available to Trainers at all levels of play.

Pokémon's original lead designer Tajiri Satoshi's childhood bug collection hobby is often cited as the key inspiration for *Pokémon's* conception (see Allison 2006a, 201; Bainbridge 2014; Giddings 2014, 6; Keogh 2017), owing to Tajiri himself often mentioning it in interviews (for example, Larimer 1999; Fuji Television 2004; Nakazawa 2019). However, scholarly focus on this particular

authorial influence often comes at the expense of another influence, also commonly mentioned by Tajiri: the Game Boy's *Game Link Cable* (Larimer 1999; Fuji Television 2004; Nakazawa 2019, 82–83). That is, catching insects and the overall theme of collecting (living) things from nature are topics that arose from the functionality of the link cable and Tajiri's wish to somehow utilize its social affordance in a videogame. Developed at the height of Japan's economic crisis in the early 1990s, the link cable no doubt also offered a way for Tajiri to connect the motif of nature with his wishes for a gentler and communal pastime (Allison 2006a, 201–203) that would alleviate the blows of the urban society's socio-economic tumult, in line with the popular healing rhetoric of cultural and consumer products of the time (Roquet 2016; 2009).

Social play with the link cable depended on a reason for players to actually use the cable; for example, something to collect, trade, and desire. In such a way, the underlying core of *Pokémon* that consists of communication, networking, and social interaction is inextricably entwined with the conception of the Pokémon characters in the first place. As noted by the developers, Pokémon creatures are designed as affective and game mechanically meaningful in order to facilitate collecting and trading (Nutt 2012). Their character image, taxonomic data, individual data, and the affective labor of a Trainer all act as individuating and affection-generating processes, cultivated in service of the affective markets of Pokémon exchanges: for sustaining interest in, and desire for, trading, accumulating, and exhibiting Pokémon.

Pokémon creatures, then, are means to an end. A communicative end that the developers, Tajiri and beyond, hail as the point of the whole media mix. Collecting, trading, and the Pokémon themselves are, of course, integral to the franchise even as a solo play experience, but the official reasoning, offered by producer Masuda Junichi, behind the primacy of communication is that "trading is a lot more fun when you do it with people, so that's how the communication aspect came into play. So you're not just trading within the game world, but also outside of the game world, communicating with other people and trading with them" (Nutt 2012).[134]

Related to social communication are also portability and the social potential it brings. The reason *Pokémon* videogames were (and still are) designed as portable – and released chiefly on portable and mobile platforms – is to facilitate trading Pokémon, but also to encourage the role-play aspects of *Pokémon*. Portability

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[134] Of course, like the oft-repeated origin story about the idea for *Pokémon* stemming from catching insects, this emphasis on communication is likely as much branding and marketing as it is genuine design intention. Although obvious in the design and use of *Pokémon*, it is nevertheless also the angle the producers of the franchise are happy to forward. Indeed, as argued in this thesis, it certainly seems to be a significant part of *Pokémon* – but not the solely important one.

enables players to meet other players within the mutual magic circle of *Pokémon*, enabling a feeling of being a Trainer while also meeting other Trainers (Harris 2009), and in this way maintaining a role-playing frame of mind. *Pokémon*, then, is meant to encourage social contact between people as Trainers. This is a role-play superposition of players and characters existing as one. As game designer Masuda points out, "the core idea of Pokemon, communicating and trading with friends and other trainers, is best represented by being able to go anywhere and bring the system with you" (Grimm 2009; see also r_pad 2009).

In a setting like this, Pokémon are not outright avatars or player characters, but player-controlled characters in a potentially multiplayer setting. Accordingly, the players' Trainer position functions as an avatar – that is, as a portrayal of the player and their agency in the digital storyworld – but also as a role played in the media mix's social structure; in the videogames, one is a Trainer with particular capabilities and histories, but in the potential (and social) multiplayer setting of *Pokémon*, those in-game traits are also attached to the physical bodies of players. On the screen, my Pokémon Trainer is a gentle goofball who collects catlike Pokémon, but when a student of mine challenges me to a multiplayer battle, they not only challenge the cat-loving Trainer in my videogame but me as myself and as that character. Here, the franchise's potential multiplayer setting functions on the logic of a mixed reality where players play as characters but also as their own selves, and where the realities of the games and the players are invited to deliberately mix on the level of characters and identities. To borrow Fine's (1983) term, it is a scaffolding of shared fantasy that joins me and the in-game Trainer character into an assemblage of a Trainer, in line with *Pokémon's* logic of two character layers (see 3.2).

Many of the features of *Pokémon* videogames make most sense in the context of a multiplayer setting. For example, the core gameplay loops of trading and battling, while often done with NPCs, are foundationally social acts, prominently available in interactions with other live Trainers.[135] Likewise, structuring the game in such a way that the player encounters social functionalities (see, for example, the Pokémon Center Wi-Fi lobbies below), even if they do not need to engage with them, and the formation of paratextual structures such as fan communities around trading Pokémon[136] are all examples and manifestations of *Pokémon's* encouragement for potential social competition and cooperation.

Of course, the Pokémon themselves also contain game mechanical incentives towards social play. For example, traded Pokémon receive more experience points per battle compared to regular Pokémon and thus are easier to train. Likewise, many

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[135]　The playful social dimension of *Pokémon* was further explored and expanded on in *Pokémon GO* (see, for example, Koskinen and Meriläinen 2021).

[136]　For example, https://www.reddit.com/r/relaxedpokemontrades/

moves Pokémon can learn require human opponents to be truly useful. The dark type movepool in particular utilizes moves dependent on the opponent's actions and as such are more useful against a human opponent. For example, the move "Knock Off" removes an opposing Pokémon's held item (which is mainly useful against human opponents who rely on items to achieve particular Pokémon builds) and Pursuit doubles the attack's power if used on a Pokémon that is being switched out of battle (which NPC Trainers rarely do). Neither move is particularly useful against computer opponents, but they become powerful against live Trainers.

Furthermore, this potential sociality is embedded in the geography of *Pokémon's* gameworlds. From the first games in 1996 up until the fifth generation in 2010, all multiplayer communication in *Pokémon* such as trading, battling, and assorted communication through chats and microphones required the player to enter any of the games' Pokémon Centers – normally sites for healing and storing Pokémon – and access a room that enables device-to-device communication. That is, it is not only the player who must connect their portable device to another Trainer's device, but both must also attend to the situation in the videogame, on the level of their digital characters. In this way, the communication takes place in a hybrid space of overlapping modes of character and world, following the aforementioned logic of two character layers (player as Trainer and the players' character as Trainer). Importantly, however, nothing forces a player to use these communication features. They are literally compartmentalized; accessible within the social and digital geography of *Pokémon* but not intruding on the core single player experience.

In *Pokémon* videogames post-2010, these digital communicational spaces have been replaced with an element of ambient sociality that is integrated into the user interface rather than within the gameworld's geography. For example, the diegetic "C-Gear" device in *Pokémon Black* and *Pokémon White* (2011) enables players to talk to each other as well as initiate battles and trades within the Nintendo DS's wireless range. In *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y* (2013), the Player Search System shows a ceaseless stream of messages from random Trainers as well as registered friends around the world and, should the player so wish, makes it possible to initiate trades and battles with them at any time. Both of these functions integrate communication features into the interface itself, shifting the emphasis from the gameworld into augmenting the players' unmediated world with *Pokémon's* communication.

These are all outright social features intended to facilitate communication between players. Nevertheless, despite the developers' emphasis on communication, none of them are mandatory or even truly prominent. And therein lies the reason why *Pokémon*, rather than being a single player game or a multiplayer game, is arguably a potential multiplayer game: through the fiction's framing and the mechanics of the videogame, *Pokémon* suggests itself as being a social game meant for any number

of players greater than one, but in fact does not require anyone to follow through with this implied sociality. *Pokémon* videogames are entirely playable from start to finish without ever having to have contact with another player – even if the potential and possibility of a social encounter is always present. *Pokémon*, then, is a single player game built on a foundation of sociality, enabling it to be equally a solo multiplayer game and a multiplayer solo game.

Even when played alone, Pokémon function as a form of shared cultural capital. I do not need to show my meticulously bred perfect-IV Pokémon – the results of days upon days of solitary effort – to anyone, or wield them in battle against other Trainers, to know that they would be regarded as special. It is beside the point if I ever *would* show them to others since the knowledge that I *could* do it permeates every step of the arduous training of these perfect Pokémon. It is not the act of being social that builds the communal scaffolding of *Pokémon* videogames but more precisely the potential as well as the realized acts of being social. The same goes for obtaining other rare or limited Pokémon; their value is based not only on their scarcity but also on the social worth that scarcity holds within the social context of *Pokémon* – regardless of whether one engages with that context or not. Likewise, the complexity of *Pokémon's* systems encourages sharing knowledge between Trainers, supporting the creation of a sort of information-based community. Even when forgoing direct contact in favor of online guides, one is beset with the social structure of the franchise. These knowledge resources such as wikis, message boards, and FAQs are artifacts of a player culture whose existence is the prerequisite for those in-depth guides and crowdsourced reverse-engineered accounts of the games' systems to exist to begin with. Here, the implied and potential sociality is, again, just as present as it is in Pokémon training. Both the knowledge economy and the labor of collecting and training are tangentially attached to the social elements of *Pokémon* even when conducted solitarily. In such a way, *Pokémon* is built as a multiplayer game as well as a potential multiplayer game.

This of course raises the question of what constitutes a single player game today anyway. Even the most resolutely solitary single player games such as *Desert Golfing* (Smith 2014) come with online leaderboards, and even obscure games see fan communities spring around them in online spaces.[137] Play is communication (Bateson 1987, 183), but it is also communicated *about*, now perhaps more than ever (Zimmerman 2015). With the convergence of phenomena such as streaming, online leaderboards, fan wikis, mobile data transfer, and social media, most games today are, in some ways, technologically communicative multiplayer games. In this sense, *Pokémon* with its design towards communication and community building through

[137]   As an amusing aside, *Desert Golfing* eventually shed leaderboards, but still retains a cult following online.

game mechanics and encouragement towards tackling the games' complex systems as a shared social project was ahead of its time. Now, of course, it slots right into the contemporary social game cultural climate.

Therefore, it makes sense to acknowledge *Pokémon* as a potentially multiplayer game, and understand its affects as grounded in contexts at once social, individual, and potentially both.[138] That is, accounts of *Pokémon* must incorporate this uneasy superposition that is at the heart of its series of videogames and, arguably, the wider media mix.

The media mix's framing of audiences as Trainers is a way to uphold the videogames' role-play framing and to extend their potential multiplayer dynamic into an extraludic[139] context where audience members are singular people but also Trainers among other Trainers, in a shared storyworld and role structure. Watching the *Pokémon* animated series or playing with *Pokémon* toys can (and often is) a solitary affair, but it also connects to the wider *Pokémon* phenomenon and always hints at the audience's identity as Trainers, signifying fanhood, agencies, and potential vectors for expanded sociality within the media mix and with other Trainers. Accumulating a shared language and knowledge of Pokémon allows entry into the wider community of Trainers (Ito 2008, 8; Elza 2009, 70; Neiburger 2011), and likewise donning *Pokémon's* character goods – such as a *Pokémon*-themed binder or keychain – is as much a particular signal of community for other Trainers as it is a generic message to the world. Knowledge, experience, and material goods act as social signifiers of Trainerhood, with Pokémon characters often mediating and motivating this identity-signaling and social culture.

3.4.3.1   Pokémon communication

The core objects of communication in the *Pokémon* media mix are Pokémon characters and information pertaining to them. This is not to say Pokémon are the only things communicated or the only means to communicate with, as people can talk about, for example, the geographical elements of the storyworld, the clothes their player characters wear, the start time of a tournament or the recent plot twists of the animated series, not to mention all kinds of metacommunicative exchanges (Bateson 1987, 185) that relate specifically to the play situation rather than its contents. Nevertheless, Pokémon are the foundational cause for these discussions: the geography of *Pokémon* exists to offer habitats for Pokémon creatures, the player's

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[138]   I would argue that it makes sense to approach most videogames today in this way, but analyses on *Pokémon* in particular benefit from this approach.

[139]   That is, a context outside the videogames of *Pokémon* but not the play of *Pokémon* in general: to build on Caillois (2001), extraludic but not extrapaidic.

avatar exists to enable a journey of Pokémon training in the gameworld, a *Pokémon* tournament is organized so players could use their Pokémon in a social setting, and the animated series is all about the life of a Trainer and the Pokémon in it. That is, as the organizing nodal points of a media mix ecosystem, Pokémon are the underlying basis of communication in the franchise even if they are not always the direct topic of discussion.

The creation of a shared reality of *Pokémon* and the affective intimacy therein is facilitated through actions and interactions that are directed to, or derive from, something related to Pokémon characters: players are Trainers insofar as they have Pokémon, the agency to train them, and a possibility to initiate trades, battles, and discussions surrounding them. In this way, Pokémon are often the message but also, in part, the medium; a focal point around which the social and playful Trainer identity set within *Pokémon's* storyworld can form and through which it can, in part, be enacted.

As the developers note, trading Pokémon and battling other Trainers and their Pokémon are intended to encourage sociality, instilling a social value onto the Pokémon and thus functioning as the catalyst for engaging with the games' procedural and affective systems. In this way, trades and battles – either actual or potential ones – are about affect management wherein desires play out socially and individually as players relate to unique characters and generic character icons circulating in *Pokémon's* social economy.

In the broadest possible terms, communication is the means we use to share and create a common reality (Seppänen and Väliverronen 2012, 21). In terms of media and media use, Ito notes that when participation is foregrounded as a property of media – as it is in media mixes and transmedia frameworks – all engagement with them become "fundamentally social and active" (2008, 400). Particularly in media mixes, this turns into what she calls hypersociality: social aspects that the media mix expands to a range of activities and geographies wider than individual media products (ibid., 404). In *Pokémon,* it is through the framework of Pokémon creatures and activities related to them that this common fictitious reality built with participation and social interaction emerges. The portable and networked form of the videogames encourages potential sociality and, through that, the co-creation of a shared social reality (as discussed in Section 3.2). It uses a long-established (see Huizinga 1980, 12) tendency of games to facilitate social cohesion and uphold as well as create socially distinguished space in the form of the magic circle (see 2.2.2): the tendency of games and play to depend on the recontextualization of situations and the modulation of social interpretations.

Communication between player-Trainers is enabled and motivated by Pokémon characters, and sometimes also filtered through them. This takes place in the context of the franchise's storyworld that enacts a playful framing on the players' everyday

as part of *Pokémon's* text. For the players, it is not an outright act of performing fiction as is the case in, for example, tabletop role-play and larps, but rather everyday communication that is captured, through the pervasive, metaleptic (see 3.5) and Pokémon-centric role-play of the media mix, into the fictional framing of *Pokémon's* storyworld, and which, through that capture, also constructs that selfsame world. That is to say, player-Trainers do not need to act as if they were characters in the worlds of *Pokémon* because the media mix nevertheless regards them as such. I do not pretend to be the Trainer of a Pikachu as, indeed, I *am* one, at least as far as the agency and affordance of the *Pokémon* storyworld and my pursuits in it go. I do not communicate as a Trainer per se because I do not need to: through the communicative and interpretive framing of *Pokémon,* everything I do is already part of a meshed role between fiction and the world outside it. This laid-back social ontology allows me to develop an identity and play a character, yet forces me to do neither.

Furthermore, as the whole communication chain is forwarded in a setting of potential sociality and potential multiplayer play, these communications do not need to reach directly from Trainer to Trainer but can instead temporarily terminate in the Pokémon, with the potential to reach another Trainer if they come into contact with that Pokémon's taxonomic and individual data (for example, if they come across the Pokémon via a trade or in battle and notice its rare breed, curious build, or funny name – all signals from which to read what that Pokémon's Trainer has done) or through signaling fan status through merchandize (for example, if you see someone with a *Pokémon* cap or keychain). Such acts of potential communication are meant as communiqués but are not part of any concrete exchanges. Rather, they function as presentation of self through Pokémon.

Relatedly, as noted earlier, Pokémon allow for a visual and game mechanical portrayal of effort spent, functioning as badges of merit and sociocultural capital. The only way to acquire these status-improving characters is through effort: for example, by attending events, going through the trouble of catching rare Pokémon, by breeding exceptionally strong or otherwise interesting Pokémon (such as Park Se-jun's Pachirisu in Section 3.1), or by obtaining character goods and other merchandize, all conveying something about the Trainer to whom the Pokémon or Pokémon-coded item belongs to. In this way, the social setting of *Pokémon* upholds a dynamic where Pokémon are meaningful to Trainers on their own but also as related to other Trainers. My proud self-expression as a Trainer through my shiny Eevee is, in part, dependent on the fact that other Trainers do not have a shiny Eevee or are knowledgeable of the effort it has likely taken to obtain it. That is, the affective significance of my Eevee is, at least in part, social.

The fact that communications in the *Pokémon* franchise revolve around Pokémon is not a particularly novel observation, but rather only the first step. More

crucial is seeing how this constructs the shared fantasy of *Pokémon* through dependency on the Pokémon characters and actions done to, and in relation to, them. As such, when the Trainer identity and its affordances as well as the social structure of the franchise are scaffolded onto actions towards Pokémon (and vice versa), it has direct implications on the affects produced by *Pokémon*.

Social contact and communication can be theorized in many different ways. Owing to its usefulness in accessing different levels of communication in media texts, I will here draw mainly from Thompson's theories of communication (1995) to illustrate this topic in *Pokémon*. Through this, I can enact a structured examination of the overall forms of sociality and communication in *Pokémon*, as ranging from individually targeted face-to-face interaction to progressively more mediated and less particular communications, all facilitating the formation of social groups and communities through media (Thompson 1995, 35). Because of its focus on contexts of use – the sites where the textual aspects of a product manifest and are interpreted in – this framework is particularly well suited for analyzing the sociality of a something like *Pokémon*. In particular, its comparative and open approach to media as used for communication in different contexts and accessed through different platforms is beneficial in looking at transmedia products that shift social play between physical and digital sites and use these sites for the production of social contacts.

Thompson's social theory of media coalesces around the concepts of *face-to-face interaction*, *mediated interaction,* and *mediated quasi-interaction* (Thompson 1995, 85). They reflect how communication and individual interactional moments in communication can be set onto a continuum of mediation. In this framework, face-to-face interaction is the immediate and physically co-present (ibid., 82) form of communication. It is dialogical (or potentially so) and immediate, and in this it allows participants a multiplicity of symbolic cues. In face-to-face communication one can, for example, take notice of minute details and nuances such as gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice (ibid., 83) or utilize a wide range of senses, such as touch and smell, for communication (ibid., 91). While similar elements are present in more mediated forms of communication (for example, reading into a layout of a typed document or checking metadata on a file), face-to-face situations offer a relative freedom of cues, unrestricted by the designs of the communicative medium.

Whereas face-to-face communication takes place in temporally and spatially shared contexts, mediated interaction through, for example, letters, phone calls, and emails requires participants to acknowledge a range of ambivalence in the place and time the mediated message is created and received. Mediated interaction also affects symbolic cues (ibid., 82) in that some of them, such as facial expressions in a phone conversation, are omitted while others, such as textual composition in an email, are

accentuated. In other words, the possibilities and restrictions of the technology used in mediation all structure the creation, delivery, and reception of the message, sharply increasing the relevance of non-human sources of affect in these situations. Affects encountered through mediated communication always include those formed with the mediating layer itself, such as the material feel of the machinery, the designed totality of a system, and the procedural dynamics firing off in reaction to it being used.

When mass media is introduced into this equation in mediated quasi-interaction, communication remains spatiotemporally extended and symbolically focused as with mediated communication and in contrast to face-to-face interaction, but also gains an emphasis on an indefinite range of recipients, addressed monologically rather than dialogically. That is, the core functionality of mass media platforms is to broadcast; to produce content without singularly identifiable recipients or an expectation for one-on-one dialogue. A book, for example, offers a communicational pathway that is mostly one-sided. Quasi-interaction is still a form of communicational interaction, however, as it has a communicator and a recipient that the acts of quasi-interaction connect. It "links people" together (ibid., 84), and is, in that sense, dialogue and interaction as a series of monological acts.

Although Thompson's theory is expressed as a neat typology, it does not imply that communication would, in practice, fall squarely within those categories (ibid., 85). Instead, these three domains allow access to the "interaction mix" (ibid., 87) of contemporary communication that includes face-to-face contact but also reaches beyond the immediate physical encounters of social life, forming a hybrid whole of piecemeal communication acts ranging from unmediated to mediated, face-to-face to technologically extended.

One can observe a hint of historical and technological determinism in Thompson's framework where communication is foundationally unmediated and through technology undergoes increasing layers of mediation. Thompson, however, is clear in his desire to map a specific moment and context of communication: that of the qualitative as well as quantitative shifts in communication brought about by the media industrial revolution from the nineteenth century onwards (ibid., 76–79), wherein a certain degree of techno-cultural gradience is to be expected. That is, Thompson does not propose a general theory of communication[140], but rather one that addresses the specific historical and sociocultural aspects brought about in

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[140]   Indeed, he explicitly states that his work is but one way of looking at communication, neither exhaustive in its typology nor applicable to all communication generally (Thompson 1995, 86).

communication by globalization, the rise of electronic and digital technology, and the birth and spread of commercial media industries.[141]

Thompson's model describes communicational technologies and the circumstances of their everyday use. That is, it is a theory of mediation, communication technology, and how they are part of the contexts of all social life. According to Holmes, therein lie its limitations (2005, 138–139). He argues that media are not so much used in particular contexts as they are the contexts themselves, with each medium and its usage bringing its own context with it (ibid., 140). This sets Thompson's work into the communicational mid-range, somewhere in between Holmes's context-sensitive, almost idiosyncratic, approach to media and communication, and a wholly sociocultural and historical take where acts of communication and their contexts are sidelined for wider, more hegemonic, targets. That is, Thompson's framework is best suited to accompany analysis where communication acts are abstracted to the level of different media contents and their relations and capacities to deliver, maintain or build – mediate – communication architectures as parts of social life and its contexts. In this way, it is useful for work such as mine that examines a whole media mix's worth of media, the encounters enabled by these media as well as between them, and the playful self-experimentation through mediated experiences (Thompson 1995, 232–233) that they allow.

Introducing a strip of idealized yet recognizable interactions to illustrate my analysis, the 2016 television commercial for *Pokémon Sun* and *Pokémon Moon* (Game Freak 2016) offers a glimpse into the intended sociality of the *Pokémon* media mix. It serves as an affectively charged exemplum of the sorts of communication and sociality the media mix's producers wish to sell, but in its impossibly perfect portrayal also encapsulates a version of the true lived social experiences of Trainers around the world – my own included.

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[141] Despite this, Thompson carefully avoids association with postmodernism. For him, instead of having taken a turn to postmodernism, we are still amidst the same processes that have been at work throughout the late 20th century, and it is merely our theories that have not been able to adequately follow along. Curiously, while positioning himself outside the postmodern in terms of temporality and scholarly identity, he nevertheless ends up squarely within postmodernism in a theoretical sense: insofar as postmodernism is – among other things – a response to the lack of theory to explain the paradigmatic changes of the world during the late 20th century and the fragmentary construction of the real during them, Thompson's project offers a handy analysis of communication reaching from modernity to postmodernity (for more on Thompson and communication at the turn of different modernities, see Lister et al. 2008, 253–254).

Figure 6. A still from a commercial for *Pokémon Sun* and *Pokémon Moon*. The commercial revolves around a group of kids finding a way to communicate with the help of Pokémon. As the children shake hands, an overlaid text encourages to "extend oneself".

The commercial centers on a Japanese boy who moves to Hawaii. In the opening scene, he is shown playing a *Pokémon* videogame on his 3DS console during an overseas flight. The scene shifts from the game screen to the boy seeing the Hawaiian Islands from the airplane window. The excitement felt in the plane, however, quickly turns into anxiety over the new and foreign surroundings. Without a shared language or pre-existing social networks, the boy seems to have become a lone bystander, watching from afar when other children play and spend time together. This changes when he realizes the local kids are playing a *Pokémon* videogame. Shyly joining the group, he begins befriending the other children. Even when they have no shared language (a fact emphasized by showing how the protagonist's videogame is in Japanese and the others' in English), everyone recognizes the importance of choosing a starter Pokémon and the potential for multiplayer interaction the game engenders.[142]

The advertisement ends in an energetic wish to extend oneself (ジブンを超えよう) through the transcultural social allowances of *Pokémon*. In the world portrayed by the commercial, *Pokémon* functions as a facilitator for sociality,

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[142] Beyond the general multiplayer interactions of trading, battling, and discoursing, the scene's subtext also signals the possibility of obtaining a Pokémon from another real-world region (in practice, a trade between games set to different languages): such trades are important as Pokémon traded in this way are interesting curiosities, might contain rare geographical variants, and gain even more experience than Pokémon traded the usual way. They might also produce rare shiny Pokémon if bred (Masuda 2007b).

promising to connect people through a shared context and to build community through its very structure. The franchise itself acts as an icebreaker for social interaction, and the game structures this social play in various ways. Just like the story of *Pokémon Sun* and *Pokémon Moon* revolves around a kid who moves from the Japan-derived Kantō region to the Hawaii-derived Alola region to meet and befriend others in a region-wide community of Trainers, so does the commercial portray how cross-cultural gaps can be bridged through *Pokémon* play, Trainer to Trainer.

The commercial provides an idealized version of sociality in *Pokémon* and is one more link in the franchise's long-standing project to emphasize face-to-face interaction. As the whole idea behind the videogames was founded on the original Game Boy's link cable (Larimer 1999; Fuji Television 2004; Nakazawa 2019, 82–83), there is, in the core of *Pokémon*, an impetus to facilitate meetings between player-Trainers. In the original *Pocket Monsters Red* and *Green* (Game Freak 1996a)*,* as well as in the succeeding games up until the fourth generation, the singular way for players to trade with each other and to battle each other was through physical proximity; by linking their two Game Boys together and navigating their player character into the Cable Club facility within the in-game Pokémon Centers. As one player reminisces how *Pokémon's* social functions worked in the 1990s, "in those days the old clunky social interface of Pokémon made complete sense. It was absolutely right that in order to share our Pokémon journeys we had to physically sit together, wired up with a link cable, because that's how friendships worked" (Battey 2013).

These early games can be played without the link cable, and indeed many did (and still do), but link play was mandatory if a player wished to collect a full Pokédex (as each *Pokémon* title never offers the full roster of Pokémon available) or to battle against a human opponent. Furthermore, the taxonomic and individual data of Pokémon is collected and showcased in part through these face-to-face encounters making them important motivators in the process of accumulating Pokémon and using them. Though the devices *Pokémon* videogames are played on have come to include wireless modes of communication and Internet play, face-to-face social interaction is still supported and, through advertisements and user interface design, also encouraged (for developer thoughts on this, see Kamen 2014). It is also facilitated through Pokémon Center retail stores and character distribution campaigns that require Trainers to congregate at specific physical locations in order to gather new Pokémon. All of these modes of potential face-to-face interaction bring people together; unified under a singular, physically shared, play context.

Along with the growth of the videogame series and advances made to the platforms the games are played on, technologically mediated communication over distance has grown more central for the franchises core series videogames. *Pokémon*

Diamond and *Pearl* (Game Freak 2007/2006) were the first mainline *Pokémon* videogames to incorporate communication features that enabled battles and trading to be conducted over the Internet. This reduced (though far from erased) the need for face-to-face interaction and turned communication in *Pokémon* into a more mediated affair. This development that started in the mid-2000s reached a peak of sorts in the 2013 *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y* (Game Freak 2013) and their Player Search System which automatically offers the player a steady and ceaseless stream of messages from other players and suggestions for trades and battles, reminding of the potential for multiplayer modes of interaction but never forcing them onto the player. It is a social media of sorts, keyed to the themes and affects of *Pokémon*: an algorithmically gathered group of people-as-characters, with whom the player can communicate freely within the structured intimacy of *Pokémon*.

This is essentially the face-to-face functionality of *Pokémon,* but at an age where the link cable – and the Pokémon-mediated social context that it engenders – extends anywhere on the globe. In a sense, face-to-face interaction and mediated interaction are two sides of the same coin. The core social features of *Pokémon* such as battling and trading are functionally identical in face-to-face and mediated communication, with the primary difference being in their level of mediation: in face-to-face interaction, the game itself presents a layer of mediation, but communication between players remains largely – even if not solely – unmediated, while in online multiplayer play the layer of mediation the game provides is joined by mediation of the communication between players as well.

As per Thompson, face-to-face communication functions under the condition of co-presence. The social situation takes place in a shared physical space and includes a wide range of interaction modes from speech to gestures, from touch to showing what takes place on one's screen to the other people present. As communication moves towards mediated layers, spatiotemporal availability increases the number of people players can communicate with while the narrowing of symbolic cues (for example, when there is no option for text or speech chat) limits the interactions they can have with each other, essentially focusing communication even more strongly around – and through – Pokémon characters, the storyworld, and the actions allowed by the game system. Nevertheless, both face-to-face and mediated interactions are dialogical and extend towards particular others. They are more or less immediate and made of action-reaction events between particular actors.

Increased availability of communication with other Trainers granted by technological advances and facilitated by the social fabric of *Pokémon* and its affects also evokes instances of mediated quasi-interaction. As *Pokémon's* communication veers towards spatiotemporal extension and broadening of recipients into potential rather than specific others, direct communications from player to player – be they face-to-face or mediated – are replaced with presentation of self through one's

Pokémon and player character, and engagement with an imagined community of Trainers instead of a specific subset of friends and acquaintances.

Historically, the core social features of *Pokémon* such as trading and multiplayer battles were designed to function through immediate, temporally and sometimes spatially affixed face-to-face and mediated instances of communication. However, all of them were, even in the early days, also set within the mediated quasi-interaction of *Pokémon's* potential multiplayer structure. In short, the act of playing *Pokémon* always contains the potential act of broadcasting one's choices, identities, and knowledge – oftentimes through Pokémon – to a wider community. Indeed, training, the core activity of *Pokémon* as discussed earlier, is done as an act of mediated quasi-interaction: without any particular recipient, with "extended availability in time and space", and "oriented towards an indefinite range of potential recipients" (Thompson 1995, 85). Training is a form of identity building as much as it is the core interaction loop of the videogames and franchise. In training, *Pokémon* play manifests as mediated quasi-interaction whereupon obtaining and developing particular Pokémon is an act of preparatory self-presentation; Pokémon are collected and trained for their own sake (the game is, after all, fun to play on its own) but also knowing they might represent the Trainer on *Pokémon's* potential social stage. In this sense, Pokémon function as instruments for the extended self (Belk 1988; 2013): they are affixed as almost prosthetic components of the Trainers' identities, where ownership and intimacy with Pokémon characters is personally meaningful but also relevant for the potential for communication they open. A Murkrow keychain or a Murkrow in my party used in a multiplayer battle are extensions of myself insofar as they communicate, for example, my identity as a Trainer, the effort I have spent on training my Pokémon, and my affinity towards that particular Pokémon.

Communication and the potentiality for it, then, are used to construct the shared fantasy of *Pokémon*. Whether it is face-to-face, filtered through layers of mediation or spatiotemporally displaced into asynchronous communication, the fundamental aspect of *Pokémon's* sociality is the ability to communicate with and through Pokémon and the role of a Trainer. To train a Pokémon is to know that another Trainer could identify what makes it special. To obtain a shiny Pokémon is valuable in part because of the knowledge that not many other Trainers have one. To present a Pokémon or to know something about it primes you up for potentially meaningful interactions between Trainers. In this way, sociality and communication in *Pokémon* are crucial as well as foundationally potential, with players existing primarily – but of course not solely – as members of imagined communities (Anderson 2006): *Pokémon* is (mostly) played alone, but always knowing other Trainers are doing the same thing, and being aware of the eminently unfolding potential for sociality that the games forward. In such a setting, Trainers reflect their actions in relation to those of others', and read the actions of others in contrast to their own. Which Pokémon to

catch, which ones to choose into a team, what to offer in a trade, which Pokémon keychain to dangle from a backpack, and how to instruct a less-knowledgeable player are all examples of *Pokémon's* potentially social frame, and of the signaling of oneself to others within it. It is, as Ito phrases it, formative of a hypersocial knowledge community: "social exchange augmented by the social mobilization of elements of the collective imagination" (Ito 2008, 8).

Experiences in *Pokémon* are reflected from the experiences of others; affective chains of acting and being acted upon that spread from a moment of individual play into potential contacts with others as well as into actualizations of those potentials. As Ahmed notes of the sociality of affect and emotion, they are not "'in' the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (Ahmed 2014, 10). This is also the case in *Pokémon*, where this affective process and its potentially social basis demarcate the lines of a player's Trainer identity in relation to that of others'.

Hence, on a pragmatic and experiential level, the social affect of *Pokémon's* media mix and storyworld functions as a frame – used here in the sense Goffman (1986) and Bateson (1987) use it, as a set of contextual guidelines for interpreting and constructing a given situation – within which participants can relate to each other and to their Pokémon in a shared setting of relative intimacy. If my student challenges me to a battle after class, we do not do that (only) as a teacher and a student, but instead we – for that moment – evoke the social playful framing of *Pokémon* around us, within which it is entirely normal for a student to challenge their teacher into a fight, ask a lecturer about training tips and favorite Pokémon, and a lecturer to cuss at a student for using a cheap strategy. This mode of camaraderie is as if we already had an extensive shared past together. Of course, as Trainers, we do: although we have not talked about *Pokémon* before, both of us have existed in the shared and mediated quasi-interactional worlds of *Pokémon* before our encounter, and in so doing constructed a past that is both shared and separate. It is this history of past contacts and their manifestations in our identities, affections, and Pokémon that are made apparent and communicated in the encounter. This is the actualization of *Pokémon's* potential multiplayer mode into an actual one.

These are a foundation of a community and a form of sociality that is at once social and solitary. In this sociality, affects structure encounters and are birthed in them; affect and intimate affectivity function to motivate play but also to incorporate if not an outright social component, at least a social attunement towards it. *Pokémon* asks to remain open to a wider social world all the while enabling a ceaseless becoming of virtual sociality. *Pokémon's* sociality is, in this sense, a field of possibilities of communication, sometimes collapsing out of the potentiality of the virtual into particular encounters in the – more or less – actual. In a metaphysical

way, this virtual sense of possibilities unfolding and collapsing is a union of *Pokémon's* fictional layer merging with a decidedly factual social world, joining the simulated and imagined storyworld with the material base of reality in a shared social context.[143] Affection and closeness with Pokémon and other Trainers is, in this way, designed as a concrete thing, observable in the social fabric of the world where Trainers meet each other under the framing of the franchise, but also as a virtual field of potentiality; imagined relations with Pokémon characters, toys, and Trainers.

3.4.4   The environmental affect of encounters in Pokémon

In conclusion, the *Pokémon* franchise in general and its videogames in specific rely on potential and actualized social communication to bring Trainers together and to proliferate *Pokémon* play through these instances of proximity and mediated as well as commoditized intimacy. Built upon the idea of potential social relations and a convenient media system to manage the actualization of this potential, *Pokémon* promises intimacy with humans and digital characters but leaves it up to the Trainer to decide the degree to which they engage with it. Moreover, the franchise's social incentive fuels and feeds off of *Pokémon's* core logics of affective labor where effort is turned into personal affection, increased knowledge, and presentation of participation and fanhood. Potential social relations and affective labor produce an overall environmental affect of *Pokémon* wherein all things can turn social and intimate, but nothing is forced on the Trainers. *Pokémon*, then, is a social sphere of potential and actual communication that predisposes relations to Pokémon, to other Trainers, and to the worlds of the media mix.

When I was discussing different Pokémon and their aspects with a friend, Trainer to Trainer, her daughter was playing with Pokémon figurines nearby, listening in on our conversation. She was curious as to why Pokémon seemed to have a reality – a shared world – connected to them. Why was a Lego minifigure just a Lego minifigure but Mudkip a particular type of creature with particular skills, strengths, weaknesses and a whole history together with her mother and me? A Mudkip figurine could be anything when used in play, yet in the shared social context or frame of *Pokémon's* storyworld, it is tangled with histories, meanings, and mutually understood conventions that a regular toy would (often) lack. A toy figurine can be anything, but a *Pokémon* media mix figurine is a particular rule-bound entity referencing the taxonomic data of a particular species of Pokémon and individual

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[143]   However, following Parikka's reasoning, one must remember that (digital) media are rarely in direct opposition to the material (Parikka 2015), and that each is entwined in the other, layered in a complex dialogue. A similar argument – regarding videogames specifically – is put forward by Lehdonvirta (2010).

data of particular characters, set into a network of shared and personal affects that shape it in distinct ways.[144]

In *Pokémon*, the affects in play creating physical and metaphysical places are set, in part, in the communicating medium of the media mix and its creatures, and actualize in contacts between players, and between players and the media mix, with Pokémon characters usually participating in these contacts and encounters. As per Anderson (2014, 105), *Pokémon's* structural framework and its potential sociality converge as an affect environment. In this way, the social reality of *Pokémon*, much like the social reality of our everyday, is affectively mediated; a construct of shared encounters, their results, and the surfaces of contact they create (Anderson 2014, 106; Ahmed 2014, 6). In such a way, the social setting of *Pokémon* is an overall affective ambience that attunes the capacity of the Trainers' body to affect and be affected.

The social reality of *Pokémon* surrounded us when we discussed the Mudkip with my friend and her daughter. As we existed in that shared and intimate fantasy of *Pokémon's* social affect environment and its layers of mediated and accumulated communication, the figurine was invested with particular affective and ludic properties other toys in the space did not – for us – have. For a moment, our capacity to act and be acted upon was meshed with the fantasy of *Pokémon*: we were Trainers conforming to, and in turn creating, the storyworld of *Pokémon,* and as we discussed the individual and taxonomic properties of Mudkip, each of us drew from past knowledge and experiences learned through moments of solitary play with the videogames and the media mix's other products, now actualized as socially shared – a shift from potential to actual multiplayer play between Trainers.

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[144]   That is not to say this would always be the case: Pokémon figurines are indeed used in free play in ways both totally removed from the media mix as well as creatively linked to it. Unlike many other toys, however, Pokémon figurines *also* tap into a highly specific shared social reality instilled on them by the media mix and its character images, taxonomic data, and individual data. Similar use can be seen, to varying degrees, in many other transmedia toys.

3.5 The world here and the world beyond: Crossing ontological borders in Pokémon

In discussing all things Mudkip with my friend, we were indeed socially wrapped in a particular affect environment. However, that environment did not spring from social matters alone, nor was the playful communication about Mudkip-as-real predicated only on our shared agreement over the social reality of *Pokémon*. Those were crucial factors, but they build on – and in turn influence – another key form in the structure and affects of *Pokémon*: that of its hyperreal play on different levels of reality and fiction.

In an annual list of popular and emerging words composed by the Japanese publishing house Jiyū Kokuminsha, a runner-up for the 2016 word of the year was *seichi junrei* (聖地巡礼), meaning pilgrimage. This particular use of the word relates to "a growing trend in the number of fans making 'pilgrimages' to locations appearing in such popular media as anime, TV dramas, and computer games" (Nippon.com 2016). In the context of videogames, such pilgrimages have taken place, for example, with the Japanese *Sengoku Basara* series of videogames and the historical locations related to its setting and characters (Andrews 2015). Such fan tourism operates by meshing the world of a media text with the wider social, material, and conceptual world around it. The quotidian – generally understood as the part of everyday outside the fantastic and the fictional – is altered to include connotations of the media text and, in this way, these travels play on the audience's "desire to make tangible what is in its very nature so intangible" (Linden and Linden 2017, 113).

Games and play of all kinds often mix elements that are imaginary and real.[145] Indeed, negotiating what counts as imaginary and what real (and what counts as real despite being imaginary) in the context of a game is precisely what the concept of the magic circle describes (see 2.2.2 for further discussion). Playing games is oftentimes about conceptual, social, cultural, and kinesthetic mixtures of fictional and actual points of reference, with our everyday selves engaging with arbitrary rule

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[145] Some nuance must necessarily be sacrificed for brevity and legibility. Hence, I have chosen to bracket the discussion on the real and actual in relation to the fictional and virtual into Section 2.5 and Subsection 2.2.2, and will, here, adopt what Goffman calls "an operating fiction" (Goffman 1986, 26), a necessarily abbreviated and abstracted take on what constitutes the primary frameworks of daily living and, among other things, the relationship between "real" and "fictional" in it. Taking after the aforementioned prior sections, I portray real and fiction as ontologically separated but experientially linked. That is, there might well be a difference between what is real and what is imagined, but in the practice of play and its magic circle, this difference often becomes contested and is a matter of continuity rather than ruptures (see also Giddings 2014, 32).

systems for enjoyment.[146] Videogames partake in such ontological demarcations and remarcations by way of their basic operation: videogames can, for example, function as windows into fantastical realms and simultaneously reference events that are all too real (see, for example, Koski 2017), and playing them can be equally an act of observing elements such as characters within the diegesis of the game as well as interacting with them by extending oneself into the game (Linderoth 2005; Keogh 2018), thereby mixing the strata of worlds and fiction.

Nintendo in particular has embraced this type of play and design. A pursuit to expand games and game technologies such as controller interfaces towards "blurring the line between the real world and game-world" (Goldberg, Lee, and Pulos 2016, 66) has been a design imperative in the company's line of products ever since its days as a producer of novelty playing cards and early digital games in the 1970s (ibid., 69–70). Crucially for *Pokémon*, this ubiquity of play and the overlap between gameworlds and everyday life was reflected in the original design of the Nintendo Game Boy: it allowed portable videogame play to become widely adopted and social, encouraging integration of videogames and game devices into the daily lives of players around the world. Embodying Yokoi Gunpei's philosophy of "lateral thinking of withered technology"[147] (Donovan 2010, 155) which entailed putting older technology to new use instead of pushing for new technological innovations in hopes of driving sales, the Game Boy became an easily mass-manufactured device that was far from the cutting edge of technology even when it was released but nonetheless boasted abundant battery life and more affordable pricing than competing devices. The fact that *Pokémon* was published late into the product cycle of such a platform meant that although the Game Boy was aging and technologically behind the curve, it was already widely adopted (Sheff 1994) and players were accustomed to the concept of portable gaming and pervasive social play – both pivotal for *Pokémon's* success and, importantly, for *Pokémon's* fantasy of overlapping the mundane with the fantastical.[148]

Combined with the intrinsically world-blending qualities of media mixes where signs move from one media to another and enable consumers access to the character and its world (Steinberg 2012, 188), franchises such as *Pokémon* utilize an

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[146]   Though generally intended as pleasurable, the exact outcomes of this mixture are, of course, not always positive, based on, for example, class, gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic status and their effect on the reality being augmented by play and games (for more, see Fickle 2019).

[147]   枯れた技術の水平思考, (*Kareta gijutsu no suihei shikō*), also translatable as "lateral thinking of matured technology".

[148]   On a related note, it was a similar setting of sufficiently matured and adopted smartphone technology and its everyday use that in part helped propel *Pokémon GO* to heights of popularity mirroring the original launch of *Pokémon* videogames.

ontological mix that leverages technological and transmedial platforms and practices in the proliferation and interpenetration of its worlds and affects. Of course, this is not unique to *Pokémon*, but is rather a paradigm of contemporary toys, games, audiovisual media, and the media mixes they partake in.[149] Japanese popular culture production and consumption in particular strive on the introduction and interrogation of layers of fiction as well as the affective–aesthetic results this produces. As Saitō argues, fans of Japanese popular culture are "extremely sensitive to different levels of fictionality" (Saitō 2007, 227), and part of the draw of many Japanese popular culture products is in their ontological complexity, as "from within our increasingly mediatized environment, it is already difficult to draw a clear line between the real and the imaginary. […] When enjoying a work, the *otaku*[150] takes pleasure in straddling all the levels of these layered contexts" (ibid.). Understood in this way, the media mix and its constitutive media thereby function on desires aimed at fiction, its relation to the real world, and its central nodes: the characters (see also Steinberg 2012; Itō 2005; 2006; 2011).

Aligned with these observations, I regard *Pokémon* as a gameic transmedia fiction with an expanded transmedia world that contains particularly strong play with the real world. The *Pokémon* videogames, for example, are designed with many linkages to real-world physical phenomena – tracking body movement, manipulating special peripheral devices, and observing natural circumstances such as day-night cycles and calendar seasons. Furthermore, in the media mix of *Pokémon,* objects and places gain meaning through *Pokémon's* other media: a toy becomes a rich site of derived meanings, Pokémon Centers are framed as obvious places for enthusiasts to congregate in, and fans are regarded as Trainers – regular people but also characters co-created with the media mix. All of these processes are about making something tangible out of the intangible in the very act of consuming the products of the media mix: transferring symbols and signs from the digital or – broadly understood – virtual fiction into the physical real, augmenting all manner of items and events with the franchise's fantasy.

In such a way, affects in these media systems are not limited to those between an audience and a fictional world but are birthed, circulated, and felt within the affective everyday; in the hustle and bustle of life in general as opposed to particular moments or sessions of concentrated play. Mediated intimacy in *Pokémon* and the

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[149] For example, Christy Dena has argued that the prevalence of transmedia practices often – and perhaps increasingly – create linkages between fictional and actual worlds in games (2009, 317).

[150] Saitō uses the popularly as well as academically loaded term *otaku*, but rather than retaining the stereotypical connotations of the word, he partly re-frames it to apply to consumers of Japanese popular culture that have an affinity and desire for fictional contexts and fictionalization in general (Saitō 2007, 227).

affective situations within it are not restrained to the playing of "a videogame" or the watching of "a movie", or any particular individual act of media consumption, but instead mesh with everything around them, striking the affective lightning rod that is the audience's body in its quotidian orientations. If the purpose of a media mix is to surround a consumer with potential access points to, and nodes of relating with, a storyworld, *Pokémon* exemplifies just how pervasive this proliferation can be.

So far in this thesis, I have established that Pokémon characters function as character images and playfully alive procedural animals that enable players to enact the role of a Trainer as a fictional and commodified identity revolving around affective caretaking labor directed at, and attached to, Pokémon, all taking place in a social affect environment that encourages understanding the media mix as a shared fantasy. This section presents a direct continuation of these arguments, focusing on how *Pokémon* overlaps spaces of play and everyday and the affective encounters therein. I suggest that in *Pokémon,* all of these aforementioned themes can be approached and made more visible through "one of the favorite conceptual toys of postmodern culture" (Ryan 2006, 204), the concept of *metalepsis*; of fictional and ontological layers blending to create mixes of the real and the fictitious, and the ability of this strategy to disseminate the affects of *Pokémon* into the daily life of Trainers. In this way, metalepsis is portrayed here as one of the means of creating *Pokémon's* mediated intimacy, an important part of which is the playful meshing of everyday realities and identities with fictional ones.

3.5.1 Crossing borders with metalepsis

In short, metalepsis is a breach between ontological levels, such as between different layers of fiction or between fiction and the real.[151] It is, for example, a story affecting a story within it, an author conversing with their character, or a text directly addressing its reader.

The contemporary application of the term comes from Gérard Genette[152], who loans it from prior rhetorical use and fashions it to describe a narrative technique and a quality of storytelling. He sets out by identifying an established form of metalepsis, the *author's metalepsis*, wherein the author features as a *primus motor* of a diegetic action by, for example, directly addressing the reader, or, alternatively, when the death of a character is attributed to the author instead of any diegetic reason (Genette

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[151]　On the practicalities of addressing fictional and real worlds as they relate to metalepsis, see Kukkonen (2011, 5–7). Her work is particularly useful when read in tandem with the discussions about boundary work in play presented in this thesis (see 2.2.2) and elsewhere (Stenros 2012).

[152]　For a longer historical arc on metalepsis, see Hanebeck (2017, 11–12).

1983, 234–235). Genette builds on this by including author's metalepsis within the broader concept of *narrative metalepsis,* to cover narrative transgressions beyond those regarding only the author's position in the storyworld. In doing so, Genette lays out the key description of metalepsis: it is a general transgression between worlds, or in his words, "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse" (ibid., 234–235). He writes of a "shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world *in which* one tells," and "the world *of which* one tells" (ibid., 236, emphasis added). Later on, he returned to the term, observing that "when an author (or his reader) introduces himself into the fictive action of the narrative or when a character in that fiction intrudes into the extradiegetic existence of the author or the reader, such intrusions disturb, to say the least, the distinction between levels" (Genette 1988, 88).

The basis Genette establishes is suitable for many sorts of analysis, but nevertheless remains rather strictly anchored to the field of literature. In part to counter this focus on "'high-brow' narrative fiction", Werner Wolf has proposed a methodology for exporting narratological concepts from the field of literary stories to a variety of transmedial targets (Wolf 2005, 88). To this end, he constructs an apt description of the phenomenon, stating that metalepsis is

> a usually intentional paradoxical transgression of, or confusion between, (onto)-logically distinct (sub)worlds and/or levels that exist, or are referred to, within representations of possible worlds. (Wolf 2005, 91)

Common to both Genette's descriptions of metalepsis and Wolf's iteration of them is that they establish metalepsis as affecting the topology of fictional levels, blending and shaping them in unexpected ways. Looking past the finer details of their definitions, both Genette and Wolf are discussing a phenomenon in which *intrusions* and *transgressions* take place in fiction; the expected order of things is either intentionally or accidentally being disturbed by actions or actants from another ontological level. Furthermore, this disturbance or transgression can flow in either direction, oriented to be either descending deeper into fiction, for example, when an author or a narrator inserts themselves into a storyworld or ascending from the fictional world towards the real world or a world ontologically prior to their own (Pier 2005, 304).

Genette's original description only accounts for literary fiction and is limited to ontological transgressions within the fiction, whereas Wolf suggests the concept and its effect might go further. Since a metaleptic moment takes place "across the boundary between 'reality' and 'fiction'", it leads readers and audiences to reflect on this border and to question its rigidity (Wolf 2005, 103, 103n31). Where Genette's

and Wolf's handling of the topic differ, then, is in their ontological implications. Whereas Genette primarily discusses trespassing narrative levels, Wolf hints at mentally crossing worlds; that of the fiction and that of the reader.

Carrying on with this thematic and addressing the intensity and ontological potential for blending worlds, Marie-Laure Ryan argues[153] that metalepsis can be divided into two main categories: the *rhetorical* and *ontological* metalepsis (Ryan 2006, 206). Of these, rhetorical metalepsis describes phenomena found, for example, in the works that Wolf presented as high-brow narrative fiction, and which Ryan describes more broadly as "literature before the twentieth century" (ibid.). Rhetorical metalepsis is characterized by a brief breaking-and-mending of the boundaries between fictional levels. One level of storytelling is complicated by an intrusion from, or to, another level. An example of this would be an author briefly inserting themselves to a story to comment upon characters. In Ryan's words, rhetorical metalepsis "allows a quick glance across levels, but the window closes after a few sentences, and the operation ends up reasserting the existence of boundaries" (ibid., 207.) As it is phrased in popular nomenclature, these actions break the fourth wall, but at the same time the action also ends up underlining the illusionary nature of the whole work. Once the blending of layers has been achieved, texts generally continue with the readers having a heightened sense of two distinct worlds.

Ontological metalepsis on the other hand is a more intense, more profound type of mixing levels. The description of ontological metalepsis is often attributed to Brian McHale (for example, in Ryan 2006, 206; Kukkonen 2011, 3), who links it to his musings on postmodern fiction and the ontological violations and layerings therein (McHale 2004, 119–120). Ryan, who refined the concept to better function as a categorical counterweight to rhetorical metalepsis, describes ontological metalepsis as opening "a passage between levels that results in their interpenetration, or mutual contamination" (Ryan 2006, 207). Hence, its difference to rhetorical metalepsis is a matter of duration, intensity, complexity, and overlap. Whereas rhetorical metalepsis opens brief corridors between the ontological levels of a narrative stack[154] and ultimately ends up enforcing the boundaries separating the levels, ontological metalepsis maintains this corridor and more thoroughly blends the ontological realms of the narrative stack. Quite often, both types are present and overlap, as noted by Pier (2005, 304). And indeed, this is the heart of the metaleptic paradox: fiction and storytelling rely on the existence of immutable borders between ontological realms (especially between those of real and fiction) and our collective understanding of the existence of those borders, but at the same time metaleptic

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[153] Based on Genette and, partly, in tandem with Genette's theories (Ryan 2006, 247n3).
[154] Ryan discusses ontological levels as a stack, with the real world of the author and reader on the bottom and successive levels of fiction laminated on top of it.

phenomena blend boundaries to such extent that they thrive exactly because these borders are breachable – or, to bring the concept closer to the topic of this thesis, because it is titillating to *play at* them being breachable.

3.5.2   Metalepsis in videogames and play

Forms of metalepsis such as discussed above are easy to identify in videogames when they take extreme forms, for example when seen in easter eggs (Jannidis 2009), or in games that underscore the gap between the player's world and the game's world, such as the various ontological obfuscations of *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan 2001; Ryan 2006, 225) or the Psycho Mantis encounter of *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan 1998). The two latter examples include situations where the games' characters try to influence not the player's character but the player themselves, through direct address and user interface manipulation. These instances, however, are brief and heavily bracketed curiosities.

In contrast to these extreme cases, all games (video- and otherwise) contain subtle microforms of metalepsis, perceivable in the permeable social, cultural, and diegetic boundaries upheld and routinely broken or transgressed in play. Indeed, the whole discussion on magic circles and borders of play (further discussed in 2.2.2) is founded on the need for players, onlookers, and researchers to demarcate when something is within the context of the fiction of play or a game, and when it is outside of them, with an ever-present potential for transgressions of this porous threshold. Furthermore, in their hybrid nature of forming cybernetic circuits out of biological and technological components, videogames collapse worlds in the very creation of their media-textual bodies and affects: playing a videogame is an act aimed at the digital domain through a physical interface that connects the game system's hardware to the player's biological body (for prior discussion on this, see 2.5).

In such an assemblage, transgressions of ontological boundaries are more the norm than an exception. For example, in discussing videogames as "half-real", Juul establishes them as combinations of fictional worlds and real rules (2005, 1, 196, 201–202). In this way, Juul characterizes – albeit implicitly – the underlying logic of videogames as fundamentally metaleptic, working to blend fiction and the real. He especially highlights metaleptic moments in games where characters acknowledge the player or the player's world: when the game seemingly bridges an ontological gap between the world of the game and the world of the player (ibid., 183) and in such a way utilizes the "breakdown of fictional levels" as a "positive experience" (ibid.). Another – more technologically oriented – way of fashioning the metaleptic core nature of videogames is offered by Harpold (2007) for whom metalepsis at games' "medial intersections", the intersecting planes of technology,

simulation, and narration as well as the player's actions and reactions to them, allows understanding games in an inclusive and holistic manner, beyond being simulations, stories, or machines, and rather as a combination of them all in the moment of play.[155]

The aptness of metalepsis to be a tool in understanding play and playable media is not surprising given how, as a trans-narrative phenomenon, metalepsis has "extended export potential" (Wolf 2005, 86) to media beyond literary texts. Furthermore, given that metalepsis is useful specifically in examining the way illusion and fantastical worldbuilding are ontologically structured and practically relayed in texts, it lends itself well for the study of play, games, and transmedia supersystems. These, foundationally, rely on a form of transformative renegotiation of reality as parts of the process of forming their magic circles, to which metalepsis adds an interesting critical angle of approach. Applications of the concept to videogames, for example, do not necessarily require grafting wholly separate theoretical structures of metalepsis, as Harpold (2007) and Juul (2005) show, but since a comparative approach to metalepsis is useful (Wolf 2005, 101), and analyses of texts – metaleptic or not – benefit from accounting for the texts' particular media and their affordances (Hayles 2004; Kukkonen 2011, 16), some form of particularization is in order, if only to heighten the potential of metalepsis as an analytical tool for, rather than a general quality of, games.

It is useful to contextualize metalepsis as it happens in games in relation to discussions on the illusionistic and anti-illusionistic traits of metalepsis (Wolf 2005, 102–103; 2009; Kukkonen 2011, 10; Fludernik 2003). Through its sheer paradoxical nature, metalepsis has the power to highlight the divide between real and fictional worlds. Often, metalepsis is used to suggest that borders between worlds both fictional and factual could be trespassed, but at the same time, this ontological play also hinges on the audience's understanding of the fantastical and impossible – or at least improbable – nature of such transgressions. Likewise, often noted is the comedic or parodic use of metalepsis (Ensslin 2011, 6; Hanebeck 2017, 113; Genette 1983, 235) in which ontological borders are transgressed or pointed at in order to highlight and re-establish them for comedic effect. Although ontological borders are portrayed as crossed in both cases, the metaleptic paradox short-circuits the fantastical element of the stories by displaying the adjacency and separation of the storyworld and the real world, and in doing so draws attention to the fictionality of these texts (Wolf 2009, 54).

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[155] Harpold's piece is written, in part, as a way out from the muddles of the so-called debate on ludology and narratology (for summaries of it, see Murray 2005; Aarseth 2012). Although the article's age is apparent in that regard, the wider point of metaleptic machinery at the core of videogames is still relevant.

Then again, those selfsame borders can be brought down for an illusionistic purpose as well. Indeed, if taken to an extreme, one can argue that all fiction is metaleptic as engaging with texts is a constant hermeneutic sounding between the text and the reader, with continuous minding of the different levels of fiction and real. Even so, in metalepsis this mechanism is foregrounded or particularly utilized (Kukkonen 2011, 11). Furthermore, even without the extreme expansion of metalepsis to all fiction, Kukkonen argues that if a metaleptic structure "naturally mimics the readers' double awareness of fiction and reality during the reading process" (ibid. 18) – as videogames do by constantly underscoring (and often catering to) both the fiction on the screen and the players' state outside of it – the effect often heightens rather than destroys the illusionistic power of the text. That is, since metaleptic structures and textual strategies are in part tied to the media-specific platforms of the host text, the illusionistic or anti-illusionistic qualities are dependent on the platforms as well as the texts themselves (Ensslin and Bell 2021, 185; Wolf 2005, 103n31). In such a way, digital fiction, videogames, and indeed most games of any kind, do not necessarily share the anti-illusionistic traits metalepses have in print. For example, a character addressing the reader constitutes a breach of illusion in a book but not necessarily in a game (Juul 2005, 183) – or rather, in the latter case there is a breach that spills fiction into the real and the real into fiction, but the breach is contained within the expected and playful illusion of the game and its cybernetic circuit of the player and the machine – the magic circle of the play situation. In a similar way, videogames generally require a degree of competency with an external input device such as a gamepad or a keyboard, but once that competence is gained, drawing attention to the material elements of traversing the text – such as handling a gamepad or, for example, sensing haptic feedback through it – are taken as part of the text and the experience of traversing it rather than something disruptive to it (see Keogh 2018, 76–77, 108; Parisi 2015).

Ensslin suggests approaching this illusionistic and ontologically ambivalent quality of media texts such as videogames through the notion of *interactional metalepsis*[156] (Ensslin 2011; Ensslin and Bell 2021, 49–50). By developing the term originally fashioned by Kukkonen (2011, 18), Ensslin addresses "how metalepsis as an ontological disruptor can be used to stage illusion in the dual sense of diegetic exposure and cybernetic performance" (Ensslin 2011, 16), where it reveals the

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[156] The authors cited here in relation to interactional metalepsis (chiefly Ensslin 2011, Kukkonen 2011, Bell 2016, and Ensslin and Bell 2021) do not theorize the concept of "interaction" as such, independent of interactional metalepsis. However, their accounts of interaction conform to, for example, Murray's seminal definition of interaction as the amalgamation of procedural and participatory environments or actions (Murray 1997, 74). That is, interaction is here understood broadly as a mode of rule-generated behavior and the ability to induce it (ibid.).

fictionality of the diegesis but also suggests an "illusory connection between the extra- and intratextual worlds" (ibid.). Her approach is not limited only to media texts that function on user input and a synthesis of hardware and software but also includes the participatory uses that these texts are subjected to in, for example, cosplay. Common to all these texts, ranging from videogames to cosplay, digital fiction to *Second Life*, is that they focus part of their impact to the extratextual world of the players. That is, more so than books, movies, or theatre performance that do extend their fiction to the real in the process of consumption (and in instances of metalepsis in particular), videogames and other utilizers of interactional metalepsis take this extension as one of their primary means of storytelling, worldbuilding, and interfacing.

Working with the concept of interactional and participatory metalepsis, Ensslin proposes that interactional metalepsis can be conceptualized as an expansion to what could be seen as the conventional model of metalepsis (Ensslin 2011, 12). Adapted from Klimek's (2011) model of metalepsis in written textual forms, Ensslin argues that interactional metalepsis is, in essence, metalepsis as extended to take into account the actions and being-acted-upons of the audience (Ensslin 2011, 11–12, 13, 14) when they engage with or traverse the text. Essentially, in interactional metalepsis, the ergodic process of reading is highlighted as a potential participant in – or at least imminently adjacent to – the diegesis. Hence, the interrelated levels of extradiegesis (the level of the narrator and the fictional world from which the story is framed to be told), intradiegesis (the level of the fictional characters and the story) and hypodiegesis (fictional worlds within fictional worlds) in Klimek's model are joined by an additional extratextual level of the readers' reality that the diegetic textual levels affect and are affected by.
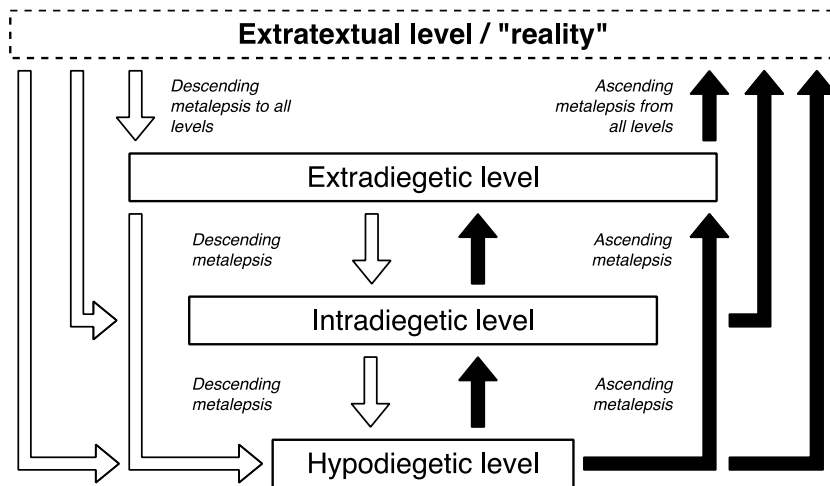

Figure 7. Ensslin's (2011, 12) diagram of interactional metalepsis (redrawn for clarity), based on Klimek's (2011) diagram of metalepsis.

Videogame characters are an excellent example of interactional metalepsis and the crossings between diegesis and the extratextual. In a metaleptic sense, videogame characters are tools that enable players to exert themselves on a gameworld. The character is the extension and manifestation of a player's agency, but also an authorial device that enables game designers to wield forms of procedural rhetoric and to structure the player's experience (Lankoski et al. 2003) as it forms, in part, through the player taking actions as enabled by the character. The character, then, is a locus of actions cutting back and forth between the real and the fictional, making it a site of heightened metaleptic attunement. To this, Ryan notes that "as worlds that invite the player to play the role of a character, [videogames] can exploit the contrast between the player's real and fictional identities; and as fictional worlds, they can resort to many of the metaleptic tricks of standard literary fiction" (Ryan 2006, 224). Mirroring the conceptualization of videogame characters as a broad category of player-extensions (Rehak 2003), this does not regard only clearly designated or characterized characters but player positions, interfaces, and interface devices as well. Bell discusses, for example, a cursor as a metaleptic device in digital fiction, since it facilitates a doubly situated presence (Bell 2013, 28; see also Ryan 2006, 122) where the reader is corporeally situated in the unmediated real but projects their agency to the mediated world through hardware.

Interactional metalepsis as a structure of characters and gameplay is also deployed in role-play and role-playing games. Role-playing games, as Klimek (2009, 183–184) identifies, operate on a metaleptic mixture of players, settings, and character roles that function to drive illusion rather than break it. That is, the diegesis is not weakened through the metaleptic framework but might indeed grow stronger for it. As Klimek notes, players continually shift between character roles, social roles, and their own identities, not unlike the findings in Fine's seminal work on role-play (1983), and strive to retain the fiction's framing even when the activity is firmly grounded in – and often permeated by – the unmediated everyday. As she notes of metalepsis as a fantastic device in, for example, fantasy fiction and role-playing games, "once the spectators or readers have accepted the 'transcendent' or fantastic rules of the world represented, they can easily understand the metalepsis without continually being reminded of the fictitious nature of the diegesis" (Klimek 2009, 184), thus playfully maintaining the fiction's illusion even through strips of intra- and extratextual breakages and overlaps, by way of participatory and interactional metaleptic structures (Ensslin 2011, 15).[157]

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[157] Such internalized, accepted, and desired manifestations of interactional metalepsis in role-play have been discussed, for example, through the concept of "bleed" (Waern 2011; Montola 2010, 2).

Demonstrating this effect in the context of Japanese console role-playing games, Barnabé discusses tutorializing and tutorial characters as a conventional genre-specific site for metalepsis. Barnabé notes that sometimes "tutorial discourses are part of the diegesis *as metalepses,* since they are recognized as such by the characters who populate it" (2022, 68, emphasis in original), and furthermore that this sort of playful attitude the characters adopt to instructing the player and portraying the gameworld functions as "fictionalized metalepsis" through which "part of the empirical world is also incorporated into the fictional universe" (ibid.). Fundamentally, what Barnabé identifies and further theorizes in JRPG tutorials and characters is an effect of the playful metaleptic framework of role-playing games, wherein part of the fun and the fantastical comes from ontological overlaps in play.

In these ways, the cybernetic loop of interfacing with an interactive media text such as a videogame and the performative co-creation of participatory fiction such as role-play – or play in general – are foundationally metaleptic, producing meaning through *ludic metalepsis,* an oscillation between worlds that takes place in play and through the playfulness that upholds it. While the ontological structure of play is, overall, addressed efficiently by the magic circle discourse (see 2.2.2), understanding play as metaleptic helps examine situations and objects – such as *Pokémon* play – where the overlay of real and fiction is particularly notable, and where this overlay can be said to be one of the key objectives of the magic circle to begin with.

The concept of ludic metalepsis forwarded here is mostly a conceptual and rhetorical move to harness theories of metalepsis to better account for boundary-crossing phenomena in games. It is an attempt to benefit from the overlapping potential of metalepsis and the study of games and play, and to wield that union in addressing and analyzing the ontologically complex nature of games, while also remaining sensitive to the qualities of playing those games. It is not a new branch of theory or an attempt to wrestle the term into new meanings given how, as shown above, the groundwork is largely already in place. It is, however, a move to highlight that there is strong affinity between metalepsis, games, and play, and that this affinity can be wielded in analyses through, for example, the interactional and participatory forms of metalepsis of Ensslin (2011) as well as the illusionistic effects of metalepsis discussed by Klimek (2009) and Ryan (2006). Furthermore, although the aforementioned theories already engage with metaleptic games and play of various kinds, it is important to remember that the ludic aspects of metalepsis are neither new nor derivative: observing the possibility of a playful quality in metalepsis was present already in Genette's seminal definition (Hanebeck 2017, 22–23) and has

been noted as a function of metalepsis in later works as well (see Wolf 2005, 102; Ryan 2006, 224, 230).[158]

Ryan introduces several manifestations of metalepsis in videogames but reminds that full ontological metalepsis – that is, metalepsis that thoroughly blends ontological levels or worlds and which Ensslin (2011) and Bell (2016) discuss as interactional metalepsis – does not take place in videogames and simulations because our bodies tie us to the base reality, outside of fiction, even when our senses are surrounded by immersive simulation (Ryan 2006, 209–210, 230). Ryan's threshold for metalepsis to "*really* spill into the real" (ibid., 226, emphasis in original) seems to be in physical alterations originating from fiction, taking place in the real world. Indeed, it is true that when the reader is killed in Cortázar's *Continuity of Parks*[159] or the player dies in a videogame*,* it is the fictional representation of the reader or player that is killed, with – thankfully – no actual threat to the life of the extratextual person. As she closes her chapter on metalepsis, Ryan suggests that metalepsis is a thought experiment wherein "metaleptic texts make us *play* with the idea that we are fictional" (Ryan 2006, 230, emphasis in original) but will not change the fact that for us there is only one real world: the one in which we corporeally exist in. In her words, "we can visit other worlds in imagination, but our bodies tie us to the base of the stack" (ibid.), restricting the thought experiment from ever gaining true manifestation.

But what about *Pokémon* that, at its core, does attempt to utilize the players' bodies as components in its playscape? It frames players as Trainers, playing with the idea that they inhabit this fictional role in their corporeal everyday. Furthermore, this suggests that players and audiences of *Pokémon* have the affects and agencies of not only their everyday selves but also their everyday selves *as Trainers* – enabling the *Pokémon* media mix to capitalize on their affective responses to the storyworld and its characters. In the affect-laden cybernetic circuit of actions and reactions that establish all videogame play as an inherently ontological hybrid, metaleptic effects run on both sides of the screen and, crucially, are inevitably captured and felt in the bodies of players.

Affects, as bodily sensations sparking off in contacts of various kinds, are felt on the extratextual level in the contact event between an extratextual body and its metaleptic relation with the diegetic levels. To challenge Ryan's closing argument – "we can visit other worlds in imagination, but our bodies tie us to the base of the

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[158] Furthermore – and this is offered not so much as an argument as a scholarly source of amusement and curiosity – Suits's classic take on games and playing is also formulated through layers of playful metalepsis (Suits 2014, 171).

[159] *Continuity of Parks* (Continuidad de los parques) by Julio Cortázar was published in Spanish in 1964 by Editorial Sudamericana, and in English in 1967 by Random House.

stack" (Ryan 2006, 230) – it seems rather that we can visit other worlds in imagination, *and* our bodies tie us to the base of the stack. The ontological, spatial, and affective configurations of *Pokémon*, although emanating from simulation and the diegesis of a fictional storyworld, nevertheless aim at a metaleptic coupling where playing bodies are affectively captured into the world of *Pokémon* as Trainers, participants, and characters, even if they are also bodies in the real world, on the base of the stack. Much like Pokémon creatures existing as metaphoric and symbolic animals, the ontological veracity of metalepsis is not found in literal transgressions but in symbolic ones. Especially when talking about the sorts of metalepsis that increase or enforce a text's illusory power, they ought to be understood as "an imaginative transfer into the impossible" (Fludernik 2003, 393), playing with ontological borders and transgressions as well as the bodily titillations derived from such play. In a way, metalepsis is naught but the audience's corporeal body coming in contact with fictional bodies (or bodies of fiction), as well as the capacities to act and be acted on – that is, affects – that are shaped in those encounters.

In this way, ludic metalepsis does not inject reality into fiction or fiction into reality; rather, it brings them into contact with each other and this, in turn, is felt as playfully mixed worlds. In a straightforward and logical sense, real elements introduced to fiction become part of the fiction, and as such do not retain their realness (Johannes Koski in a story is not, really, Johannes Koski but a fictionalized version of me). Likewise, fictional elements brought to the real do not cease to be fictional nor do they become unambiguously "real" (a Sherlock Holmes cosplay does not create a real Sherlock Holmes, whatever that would be). These awkward phrasings, however, betray the playful and enjoyable effect of all types of metalepsis where transmissions from the extratextual to the fictitious and back are not trivial or unnoticed but indeed part of the intended fun. In a sense, this joy of ontological traversal is the material and affective result of the "new reality" created as an effect of the magic circle of play (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 96). The extratextual real gains fantastical qualities as it is enveloped – even partially – in fiction, and fiction also gains a hint of reality by its incursion into the extratextual. Although these crossings are mostly illusory and playfully imagined, the act of such transontological play by itself introduces enjoyable sensations of borders crossed and worlds merged.

Metalepsis is a paradox, and true to its paradoxical mix of ontologically incompatible worlds, it describes something in between real and fiction, not quite fully committed to either, leaving the construction, navigation, and deconstruction of ontological thresholds and the worlds contained within them to the playful co-creation between authors and audiences. Ludic metalepsis does not magically turn fiction real, and insofar as it is conducted in fiction, the metaleptic crossings tend to be transfixed to fiction to a degree that they can't but stay at least partially fictional. Playing with the idea of fiction-as-real and real-as-fiction, however, does make the

ontological border between real and fiction enjoyably permeable. The distinction between what is real and what is fiction remains, but it is easily dismissed for the affective pleasures of experiencing worlds blend in play. In such a way, ludic metalepsis is play with worlds: a distinct way of being playful as well as the ubiquitous function of all play in general.

3.5.3   Ludic metalepsis in Pokémon

On the face of it, Pokémon and my Trainer identity are straightforwardly fictional. Yet they also effortlessly impinge on the everyday world and my life in it. It takes no great effort of imagination to think of myself as a Pokémon Trainer even when not actively playing the franchise's videogames, for example. Likewise, it is easy to regard the Murkrow figurine on my desk as Kafka, my Murkrow from *Pokémon SoulSilver* (Game Freak 2010a). This is not surprising, given how *Pokémon's* gameic media mix encourages a pervasive mode of role-play and how it proliferates generic character images to evoke as well as build individual data. Part of the pleasure of *Pokémon* comes from its ability to ubiquitously grant me the agency and identity of a Trainer, and any character image the potential of personal connection and accumulated affection. The media mix, thus, offers itself as a series of openings of metaleptic entry to – and transfer from – the storyworld, presented to consumers as aspects of products but also as products themselves: a ludic metalepsis that injects and encourages *Pokémon*-affiliated play and playfulness in the everyday. Rather than regarding it as a series of individual micro-transgression between real and fiction, I posit that it forms a more comprehensive paradox where these individual transgressions form into an experience of overall ontological blurring.

Games are a metaleptic medium, as already discussed, but in *Pokémon* this goes further, into what could be said is a domain pervasive throughout the whole franchise and its media mix. *Pokémon* is not just transmedial but transontological. The storytelling is conducted not only via different media – already providing a collection of ontologies between which Trainers move – but also through a blending of different levels of fictional and actual realities, augmenting the real with fiction and fiction with real. That is, the whole diegetic world of *Pokémon* is structured so that it enables traversal between textual and extratextual rungs of the media mix, through a whole catalogue of media and playful relations to them.

Foundationally for the franchise, this is reflected in how the *Pokémon* videogames and their worlds are designed as "not-closed" (Ishihara Tsunekazu, quoted in Masuyama 2002, 41), meaning that the game and the communication it enables are not restricted to an authored lifespan of a story that begins and ends. Rather, the players can keep on playing the game even when the plot of the game has ended. As discussed in tandem with the role-playing heritage of *Pokémon* (see

3.2), unlike many JRPGs that end, suggest replaying with added content and extra story, or offer limited end-game content, *Pokémon* videogames have no actual end state. Thus, this not-closed format of play over continuous generations of videogames has no decisive beginnings and ends; the videogames are meant to provide a running and evolving multi-decade platform for training and battling (alone and with others, as discussed in 3.4), and so – as they keep on going – they facilitate encounters between players and between players and Pokémon, and sustain potential for communication and affective investment all the while also enabling players to develop their roles as Pokémon Trainers

Drawing from Japanese developers and critics, Allison (2006a, 219) remarks on how *Pokémon* is seen as something that goes beyond itself; as communication and play (which, one might add, are often the same thing) that emerges from the videogames and other *Pokémon* media but expand to everyday situations. Indeed, this everyday communication is not just abstract exchange of information: whether it is another player with whom you are bartering with for a trade, the animated series that lets you in on some aspect of the media mix (say, that Meowth can be taught the electric type move Thunderbolt), or a playful frame of mind while traveling in a *Pokémon*-branded passenger jet, they are done in connection with the fictional frame of the franchise and while occupying implicitly or explicitly the role of a Trainer. In these instances, "commodities of play and travel become personal friends", as Allison remarks about the passenger experience on board a *Pokémon* jet (ibid., 4).

As is the case with *Pokémon's* media mix in general, it is thus not only a question of metalepsis in videogames but of how, in play, what begins in videogames grows out from their digital and mechanical casings and spreads to affect the worlds beyond (see, for example, Giddings 2014; Elza 2009, 62). Masuda Junichi points out in an interview that it is important for the developers of *Pokémon* to maintain a focus on "play being not just in-game but outside the home as well" (Kamen 2014), stressing that although technology and videogames are at the heart of the franchise, the fundamental level of play for *Pokémon* – digital and otherwise – goes beyond them, to the world(s) at large. A key aspect of *Pokémon* is play that is everywhere, under the framing of *Pokémon,* but not necessarily actively enacted through, for example, videogames or other products.[160]

Pokémon is a transmedia role-playing world – or rather, a collection of worlds working under the aegis of the unified brand – for which producers sell the right to participate in, learn of, and ultimately define. By drawing from the analyses presented earlier in this work, my overall argument is that the whole media mix of *Pokémon* is metaleptic, down to how Pokémon characters are structured, how the

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[160] For more, see Section 3.4 for the discussion on *Pokémon* as a potential multiplayer game.

player is positioned as a Trainer, and how the social structure of the game leverages this. In order to further highlight how *Pokémon* videogames and the rest of the media mix use metaleptic elements, I will next briefly discuss some specific metaleptic connections that further bridge the fictional world of *Pokémon* and the factual world of the player-Trainers. These strategies of metalepsis, although originating from the videogames, are deployed across *Pokémon's* storyworld and, together with the media mix's broader structures discussed in previous sections, partake in the shaping of affects created and felt when being in contact with it.

3.5.3.1   Temporal connections

Time is a common avenue for metaleptic transgressions in *Pokémon's* media mix and in the videogames in particular. Functionally, much of the gameplay in *Pokémon* core series videogames is turn-based. That is, in a *Pokémon* battle, the player may spend as much time as they wish on picking the next move for their Pokémon while the game waits for input. Even outside battle, opening a menu usually stops the world. In these instances, the diegetic time does not pass, so there is a stark contrast between "play time" (time that passes for the player in playing the game) and "fictional time" (time that passes within the diegesis) (Juul 2005, 143). Opening a menu and the game waiting for the player to pick a move are both forms of interval control (Elverdam and Aarseth 2007) where the player is given power over the progression of time in a videogame.

Outside of battles and menu screens, however, ever since the generation 2 games *Pokémon Gold* and *Pokémon Silver* (Game Freak 2001a), time in *Pokémon* games has generally progressed in sync with extratextual time as dictated by the consoles' system clock.[161] Some Pokémon only appear at certain times of the day or certain days of the week[162], NPC Trainers might be off sleeping during the night, some

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[161]   After the first-generation games in 1996, for over 20 years the only significant departures from this in the core series were the 3rd generation games *Pokémon Ruby* and *Sapphire* (Game Freak 2003), where time does track a 24-hour cycle, but it is less visible to the player. More recently, in the 8th generation games *Pokémon Sword* and *Shield* (Game Freak 2019), game time is bound to story events until the player clears the main story. After this, the game follows extratextual time like in the earlier generations. The 9th generation games *Pokémon Scarlet* and *Violet* (Game Freak 2022a) combine their new open world design with an in-game time model where 72 extratextual minutes maps onto a full day and night cycle in the game.

[162]   The swarm mechanic mentioned in Section 3.3 is an extreme and particular version of this overall design. Likewise, the media mix follows this metaleptic and playfully laborious arrangement with limited-time campaigns of videogame characters and character merchandize (both usually requiring actions outside the games), offering the Trainer trivial but nevertheless time-sensitive events that require keeping track of real-world time.

Pokémon evolutions are dependent on, or affected by, the time of day, and the game graphics reflect a circadian rhythm of night and day. Outside of battles and menus, then, the game connects temporally to the world at large through real-world time – time that affects the game but ontologically follows "events taking place in the physical world around the player […] as well as in the player's body" (Zagal and Mateas 2010, 848). In this way, the metaleptic connection of time between textual and extratextual levels disconnects play time from active participation and forms of interval control insofar as the game world now follows the passage of time regardless of player actions (apart from extraludic means such as manipulating the system clock). The result of this is play as "continuous gaming" (Lainema 2010) where the world of *Pokémon* and decision-making relating to it can meaningfully take place whenever even if the videogames are organized in a mix of moments set on real-world time, play time, fictional time, and interval-controlled adjustments thereof.

Because *Pokémon* intentionally layers multiple modes of temporality, and challenges the concept of time as a controllable property in a videogame (cf. Elverdam and Aarseth 2007), *Pokémon* defies dichotomies that separate time within the game from time outside the game, such as play time and fictional time (Juul 2005) or real-world time and gameworld time (Zagal and Mateas 2010). Much like environmental sounds continuing while a game is paused to "keep the player 'in the mood' of the world" (Juul 2005, 151), the synchronization of the gameworlds' time with real time sustains the affective sense of overlapping ontological layers – a feeling of two worlds as one.[163] Since the diegetic overall flow of time is tied to the extratextual flow of time, one can be on the bus, check their wristwatch, and be reminded that now would be an optimal moment to evolve an Eevee, or conversely take a cue from the waning light in the videogame and notice that evening is fast approaching in the actual world. Instead of dividing the temporality of *Pokémon* into two, I suggest that it is more useful to expand the notion of play time – that is, time spent playing (Juul 2005) – to innumerable metaleptic moments of micro play with the videogames and the media mix, entangled indivisibly with the everyday. Time, in this metaleptic way, becomes one more variable of play where the magic circle (see 2.2.2) ties into the Trainer identity and the ability of a Pokémon Trainer to uphold a playful mindset and the feeling of being a Trainer even when not actively, or visibly, playing.

Additionally, the long run of *Pokémon*, with games and other products released over the span of more than 20 years, also creates a longitudinal axis of metaleptic temporality. Whereas on the level of a single videogame, time is linked with the passage of real-world time, on the level of the franchise overall, experiences can

[163] In newer *Pokémon* videogames, this has been less evident, perhaps owing to *Pokémon GO* upholding temporal (and indeed spatial, as will be discussed next) metaleptic connections in the media mix.

track across years of play and memories. With the games being largely compatible with each other and the world staying as consistent as it has, *Pokémon* encourages players to develop active personal histories with the games, the franchise, and the social elements in them, engaging in "a 'game' across games" (McCrea 2011, 396), rather than playing single games or bracketing their experiences as isolated instances. This is further accentuated by the role-playing framing of the Trainer, affixing these personal histories stemming from the various levels of the media mix to an identity of the player-Trainer.

As Ishihara Tsunekazu – one of the original developers and the president of The Pokémon Company – has explained, the producers of the franchise strive to keep Trainers from feeling like they are ever approaching an end of any sort (Kelts 2006, 17). In this way, a key allure of the franchise is that there are always more Pokémon to discover and catch, across an increasing number of games, products, and years. Although there is no end or closure in *Pokémon* products, there is a continuous relationship between the gameworld and the world of the players, as well as an ongoing process of occupying the role of oneself as a Trainer. In both circadian and longitudinal ways, time spent with *Pokémon's* diegesis accumulates as, and connects to, extratextual time, showing that although time in the real world and time in the media mix are not one and the same, they are nevertheless interdependent and, on many occasions, metaleptically interlinked.

3.5.3.2   Geographical resemblances

Just like temporal contacts affix the "when" of *Pokémon* to a transontological blend, geographical designs establish the "where" of *Pokémon* to somewhere between worlds. The first four generations of *Pokémon* games from *Red* and *Green* (Game Freak 1996a) to *Diamond* and *Pearl* (Game Freak 2007/2006) are based on specific Japanese regions. They – and the foundational geography of the media mix established through them – contain cultural, geographical, historical, and mythological real-world referents of Japan (Hemmann 2013, 261), most notably covering the regions of Kantō, Kansai, Hokkaidō, Kyūshū, and Okinawa.

Beyond their cultural and geographical connections, the franchise's locations also contain geographical features drawn from personal and affective domains. As the director of *Pokémon Ruby* and *Sapphire* (Game Freak 2003) and world director of *Pokémon Emerald* (Game Freak 2005) Masuda Junichi notes, "the Hoenn region in Pokemon Ruby, Sapphire and Emerald is modeled after Kyushu because I wanted to recatch my [childhood] memories of summer in Kyushu" (Masuda 2004c), and "I would […] play on the beach and snorkel or go into the forest and catch insects. It was a very abundant environment with a lot of animals and those are my strongest memories of that time. Kyushu is very personal to me and it was the key theme

behind *Ruby* and *Sapphire*" (Kamen 2014). Moreover, the whole of *Pokémon's* original geography in its first videogames is an amalgam of real and affective geographies. It was based on real geographical referents but was also designed to enact an affective purpose of sorts: whatever other reasons Tajiri Satoshi had for creating *Pokémon*, a certain drive to recreate his childhood pastimes and expeditions to (urban) nature was a key influence in shaping the original design of *Pokémon* and its world (Allison 2006a, 201; Bainbridge 2014; Giddings 2014, 6; Keogh 2017; Nakazawa 2019, 126).

Looking beyond the geographically Japanese-oriented first four generations of games, the 5th generation videogames *Pokémon Black* and *Pokémon White* (Game Freak 2011) portray New York and its suburbs, the 6th generation games *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y* (Game Freak 2013) take place in the French-derived Kalos region, Alola, the setting of the 7th generation games *Pokémon Sun* and *Pokémon Moon* (Game Freak 2016) takes after Hawaii, and the 8th generation setting of Galar in *Pokémon Sword* and *Pokémon Shield* (Game Freak 2019) is based on Great Britain. This globally expanding relation to real-world geographical and cultural topology matches the rise and globalization of the franchise (Hemmann 2013, 266–267). *Pokémon* has grown from a Japanese product that affixes its textual elements to the extratextual lives of Japanese consumers to a global product that aims to do the same to consumers everywhere. Real-world geography serves as a referential but fictionalized and idealized form of connection between the storyworld of *Pokémon* and the extratextual world around it.

Figure 8. Depiction of Lumiose city and its Parisian references in *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y*. *©2023 The Pokémon Company International. ©1995–2023 Nintendo/Creatures Inc./GAME FREAK inc. TM, ® and character names are trademarks of Nintendo.*

Geographical ambivalence invites intended audiences – Japanese and global – to relate to the game's locations through real places. Traveling from Tokyo to Kyoto can be mapped onto *Pokémon* and the traversal from Kanto to Johto. Likewise, the various locations in the games are linked to a multitude of real-life points of reference (such as the Magnet Train referring to the Tokyo–Osaka Shinkansen line or the Prism Tower referring to the Eiffel Tower), offering the fictional regions further characterization but also inviting ascending and descending metaleptic worldbuilding as they become linked with extratextual referents. This geo-textual layering has reached an apex of sorts in *Pokémon GO* (Niantic and The Pokémon Company 2016) which offers a hyper-localized mediation of space where players can equally transport *Pokémon* into their physical location and their physical location into the discursive domain of *Pokémon,* in what Ensslin and Bell describe as a convergent form of interactional metalepsis (2021, 75). *Pokémon GO* also interfaces with various other *Pokémon* videogames*,* meshing not only its own variety of *Pokémon* fiction with the real world but also that of the wider gameic media mix. For those of us who do not live in the real-life Kantō region or in any of the other canonized and fictionalized international locations referred to in the franchise, *Pokémon GO* enables overlapping the geography of the fictional world with the factual one, anywhere on the globe.

The temporal and geographical overlaps in *Pokémon* are both callbacks to Goffmanian natural frameworks within *Pokémon's* diegesis and its instances of play. For Goffman, a natural framework is an understanding or perception of a fundamental sort: natural frameworks are what we use to understand and identify "occurences seen as undirected, unoriented, unanimated, unguided, 'purely physical'" (Goffman 1986, 22). Natural frameworks are part of a "framework of frameworks" (ibid., 27) that constitute the roughly generalizable "reality" we subscribe to. Although full of variations and deviations, things such as the passing of time and the relative immutability of geography are natural frameworks that, insofar as human understanding is concerned, exist as parts of reality.

As textual works, *Pokémon* products bridge the gap between extratextual natural frameworks and their representation in the diegesis. In negotiating their magic circle, these natural elements of the unmediated real become part of the *Pokémon* world, transformed in play and anchored outside of it – but also expanding play to touch upon what would otherwise be left outside of the fiction. Nobody will mistake the Prism Tower for the Eiffel Tower, the Johto region for an accurate portrayal of Kansai, or one's backyard seen through the lens of *Pokémon GO* as a fictional world in which Pokémon exist, yet they all call back to the physical and uncontested existence of natural frameworks, as if to remind that while they exist within a storyworld, they are stand-ins for something quite tangible. Through this juxtaposition of the real as fantasy and the fantasy as real, *Pokémon* opens up

interpretative vectors that align the media mix's fiction with the natural frameworks of the real. These natural frameworks are playfully incorporated into the canon of *Pokémon,* and, in doing so, the media mix suggests that something of the worlds of *Pokémon* also exists within – or at least adjacent – to these frameworks. Passage of time, personally or collectively recognizable sociocultural geography, and landmarks are diegetic elements in the *Pokémon* world that invite interpretation through metaleptic meaning-making and the ludic mode of being that the media mix encourages.

3.5.3.3   Commerce and participation: Pokémon Centers

The routing of *Pokémon* play through transontological spatial and temporal overlaps converges in the commercial hubs of the franchise: the Pokémon Center stores and the *Pokémon*-flavored brand of consumerism they operate on. Being one of the more prominent physical manifestations of the media mix, they are particularly interesting to focus on in terms of how they reproduce the social, economic, and affective fiction of the franchise – all the while metaleptically affixing that fiction to everyday locations. Pokémon Centers are real-world shops, run by The Pokémon Company (originally called The Pokémon Center Company), that are loosely based on the games' Pokémon Centers, sharing both their name and their function as a social and commercial gathering spots for Trainers.[164] In effect, Pokémon Center stores sell media mix merchandize, host social events, and offer a location for Trainers interested in trading and battling to encounter each other face to face or via local wireless connection. In this way, Pokémon Center stores are used to actualize the franchise's core aspect of collecting, capturing, and enacting the Trainer role. In this sense, apart from selling concrete goods, the stores themselves are one more product in the affective economy of experiences that *Pokémon* sells.

Typically, Pokémon Center stores offer special promotional Pokémon characters for the videogames as well as sell (and oftentimes hand out) products that are adorned with various limited-run character images. That is, in addition to being general sources of *Pokémon*-related activities and character goods, Pokémon Center stores are also designed as distributors of exclusive and hard-to-obtain characters and merchandize. For example, during the opening festivities of the Mega Tokyo Pokémon Center in 2014, attendees received a shiny Charizard and Pikachu (the mascots of that particular Center) for their *Pokémon* videogames, and could buy

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[164]   As noted on the company website, this overlap is intentional: "Since Pokémon Centers also appear in Pokémon video games, they bring the game world into the real world. Visitors can feel immersed in the world of Pokémon as they see and handle the Pokémon products" (The Pokémon Company 2017).

seasonal limited products such as *hanafuda*-themed plastic sleeves with special illustrations.[165] As such, Pokémon Center stores are focal points where fans can congregate and where they can obtain or purchase – collect and capture – Pokémon in various ways, based on the overall procedural and playful logic of effort, acquisition, and commodified affection in the *Pokémon* media mix and its ludic roots.

Going to a Pokémon Center store is a metaleptic mirroring of visiting a Pokémon Center in the videogames (and vice versa). This overlap between real-life events and digital Pokémon Centers was grounded into the videogame series right from the first titles. In the videogames up until (and including) the fifth generation, the franchise's producers chose to employ a cumbersome method of communication[166] wherein trades and battles between players necessitated visits to in-game Pokémon Centers. In these games, multiplayer trades and battles are initiated by navigating one's in-game character to an in-game Pokémon Center and entering the multiplayer lobby within the building's digital architecture. Leaning on Allison (2003), McCrea notes how this leads to a situation where "the in-fiction explanation of public play types allows players to, in Allison's terms, continue exploring the boundary between the game's fantasy and everyday life" (McCrea 2011, 398).

By drawing metaleptic parallels between what players do in the videogames and what they do outside of them and embedding these parallels into the rule structure of the videogames provide players with opportunities for structured ontological experiences. The production of these experiences is, however, not confined only to the videogames but more precisely arises from transgressions between the diegetic and extratextual levels of play that the games encourage, and the modes of being this has cultivated in *Pokémon's* media mix. Forcing players to navigate to a particular in-game location to enable multiplayer functions is a curious design choice, but the ramifications of it are apparent when set into the wider playful structure of *Pokémon*. This metaleptic organization of play, everyday, and consumerism is rooted in the videogames but actualizes in the encounters arising from, but not limited to, them.

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[165] To go the extra mile to truly link up with the core logics of accumulation and affection in *Pokémon*, the shiny Charizard and Pikachu were not available simultaneously: instead, each was available every other hour. In totality, then, those who wanted to have both of the special Pokémon had to travel to the specific Pokémon Center, queue or push their way to the distribution location (a part of the Center's wall adorned with character images, with a wireless device distributing the Pokémon behind it), receive the Pokémon of the hour, and then wait for a while to go through the process again to receive the other one. This operation requires time and effort: labor predicated on, and in turn further refining, the affective composition of *Pokémon* (see 3.3).

[166] Given how central communication and sociality are to the whole franchise, the laborious and particular form of this method of communication seems all the more important.

That is, given the metaleptic organization in *Pokémon's* media mix, the diegetic objects and the player-Trainers' extratextual doings give shape to the storyworld as well as the unmediated everyday without necessarily prioritizing either. From the perspective of the media mix, and the participatory commercial worldbuilding it encourages, there is little difference in visiting a Pokémon Center in Tokyo or in Saffron City: both are playful ways of partaking in the consumerist social diegesis of *Pokémon*, and both, ultimately, are part of the same commercial chain of interactions that sustains the franchise: the affective accumulation of, and expenditure of time with, Pokémon characters.

Having established this transontological bridge between the commercial superstructure, official retail outlets, and the storyworld of *Pokémon*, these forms of fiction-imbued commerce and communication can be seen to have spread to other retail contexts as well. Pizzato, for example, notes that "when he was seven and eight years old, my son Luke would go every Saturday to the '*Pokémon* League' at a large bookstore and spend hours playing the game and trading cards with other kids who gathered there in an open space designated by the bookstore manager" (Pizzato 2009, 75). Similarly, Elza writes: "the show's Pokémon League tournaments even spilled over into the real world, with eight-year-old boys across the world dragging their mothers into McDonald's or Toys 'R Us at appointed times for 'official' Pokémon tournaments, where they could compete with other trainers according to age and skill level" (Elza 2009, 61). Of course, although framed as social events, these gatherings are also aimed at driving sales and, as the logic of *Pokémon's* postmodern business model goes, through that enable attendees to enact their roles and agencies as Pokémon Trainers. In this way, these sites of commerce related to *Pokémon* function as social and commercial junctions that help to blend the media mix's textual and extratextual dimensions – and draw profit from doing so. Gatherings of fans – especially in *Pokémon*-affiliated spaces – thus become lucrative metaleptic blendings of real and fiction, physical and digital, framed through the lens of the media mix and its affects, and captured as instances of an affective economy.

3.5.3.4   Metaleptic toys, tools, and devices

Consuming *Pokémon* goods and merchandizing is a metaleptic reference to the core activities of collection and meaning-making revolving around Pokémon characters. This is possible in part – as discussed in the previous sections – because Pokémon characters are both particular personal character constructs as well as generic circulating signs. That is why a Meowth figurine bought from a Pokémon Center store is personally relevant while also generic and mass-produced. In this way, through a traversal of meaning and affect, the Meowth is virtually indistinguishable from a Pokémon character in the videogames and the animated series. And as the

character images and various levels of data circulate in *Pokémon's* media mix, even seemingly unrelated products can become fixed with specific traits. For example, when buying a Meowth figurine, I might do so because it reminds me of a particular Meowth (or of my affectively resonant history with Meowths in general). In that way, Meowth is a metaleptic object in which ontologies intersect: it is a piece of plastic, a generic Meowth, and a specific, individual, and affective object, often all at the same time.

This two-way metaleptic move between fiction and its extratextual setting, the process in which a Meowth is simultaneously felt as a piece of decorative plastic and as a character, is not restricted only to character goods but is apparent in the whole gamut of *Pokémon* play products, where iconic diegetic products are reproduced in material forms. Plastic Poké Balls to store and catch figurines, gym badges fashioned after the designs in the games and animations, and apparel done in the likeness of clothes worn by the fictional Trainers are all forms of ascending metalepsis where elements of the fictional world are produced and sold for use in an extratextual setting; that is – as per *Pokémon's* porous magic circle – intended to foster role-play, identity-signaling and expressions of fanhood. These items hinge on their ability to evoke the fiction of *Pokémon* in settings that are not part of the diegesis but which, by way of these products, become entangled with it. To borrow Harzheim's notion of toys as "product portals" in the media mix of *Pretty Cure*, *Pokémon's* play products also "tie the experience of playing with the toy to the narrative of the series, imbricating the mythology of the characters and their world into everyday spaces" (Hartzheim 2016, 1080).

Likewise, real-world objects push into the diegetic levels of *Pokémon* in descending metalepsis where, for example, the videogames explicitly refer to elements that originate from outside the fiction. For instance, the Pokédex in core series *Pokémon* videogames tends to be fashioned after the devices the games are played on. In Pokédex designs, elements such as folding hinges reminiscent of the DS and 3DS, iconic cross-shaped directional pads used in Nintendo's videogame systems, and sometimes direct likeness[167] are met with more general aesthetics of portable technology derived from sources like mobile phone design.

On a similar note, at the start of each core series *Pokémon* videogame, there is a Nintendo console at the home of the player character. In all core series games, one of the first things a player is able to examine is this commercial and metaleptic object that comes with a pithy summary of the device and its real-world features. As much worldbuilding as it is transmedia marketing, this reoccurring detail highlights

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[167]   See, for example, the Pokédex in *Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire* that refers to the Game Boy Advance or the Pokédex reminiscent of a Nintendo DS in *Pokémon Diamond*, *Pearl* (Game Freak 2007), and *Platinum* (Game Freak 2009).

Nintendo's product ecosystem and even enables the marketing of specific limited products. For example, at the start of *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y* (Game Freak 2013), the (female) player character holds a Pikachu-branded 3DS XL, available for purchase in Kalos as well as in the real world. Such metaleptic wormholes are also opened up by NPC Trainers. In *Pokémon Sun* and *Pokémon Moon* (Game Freak 2016), a Trainer in the Akala Ferry Terminal is having "Link Battles against Trainers far away from here right now" while operating a 3DS-like device. The player and the fictional Trainers, then, are not engaging only in the overall act of collecting, training, and using Pokémon, but on both rungs of ontology they can do so by operating a Nintendo 3DS console, essentially playing the game that they themselves are part of. The fantastical insertion of the player into a diegetic reality where one can collect *Pokémon* is met with the NPC's fantastical escape from the intradiegetic world towards an extratextual world of game consoles and *Pokémon* battles over Wi-Fi connections.

Pokémon's media mix creates surprising juxtapositions that shatter the clear ontological differentiations of these domains, aiming at a laissez-faire fictional existence that does not ask to believe in its fantasy any more than it requires to filter out the real world. Given the tendency of postmodernist fiction to "foreground [the seams between the fictional and the real world] by making the transition from one realm to the other as jarring as possible" (McHale 2004, 90), the strange loops and paradoxical ontology-bending elements of *Pokémon* seem to be intentional parts of its transontological worldbuilding. Moreover, through the paradox of metalepsis, they suggest transgressions between worlds that simultaneously dispel the fiction's illusion as well as establish a sort of transontological fantasy in its stead.

The ascending and descending metalepses of the franchise's commercial products enable a sort of mimetic blend where it is clear that players can, for example, wear "authentic" apparel and items in the everyday as well as see familiar objects in the fiction's diegesis. *Pokémon's* merchandize, as most other objects of *Pokémon's* franchise and world, exists in a humdrum of ontologies where they are simultaneously originals and representations: Trainers in the games and in the actual world collect Pokémon as well as *Pokémon* goods. *Pokémon*-themed magazines are read by the citizens of *Pokémon's* fictional world just as they are read by real-world Trainers. In this way, a special edition 3DS XL – imminently recognizable in its specificity – fits into the fictional world of *Pokémon* as easily as a plastic Poké Ball or a gym badge on a keychain does into the real one. None of them belong entirely to one primary level of being but are part of the same metaleptic whole of *Pokémon's* transontology.

3.5.3.5   From Johto to Helsinki: everyday affective spatialities

So far, I have established that *Pokémon* deploys metaleptic strategies to link its storyworld to the extratextual world – and, in doing so, utilizes the paradox of metalepsis by turning this extratextual reality into a part of the text and its diegesis. Here, I will address the effect this totality of ludic metalepsis has on the everyday and the experience of space as they become part of the textual playground of *Pokémon*.

The power of *Pokémon's* metaleptic connections is not only in the creation of a potent and participatory diegesis but also in its deployment to material space. In specific ways, such as in the Pokémon Centers of both worlds, and more generally in metaleptic linkages of, for example, time and geography, *Pokémon* creates openings for the recontextualization of everyday space. Rather than trying to create a unified whole such as a particular place for *Pokémon* play, a distinct fantastical world of *Pokémon*, or an attempted complete overlay between its fictional realms and real places, *Pokémon* realigns and remakes space by introducing fiction to the extratextual and allowing fluid penetrations of the real into its fiction. It takes the various encounters, moments, and connections spurred by the media mix and its creators (fans and developers alike) and uses them to lace the everyday with its own brand and sense of the world.

This is par for the course in metaleptic phenomena. Metalepsis, as something involving "the change of level" (Pier 2005, 304) in a narrative structure such as a storyworld, is specifically "woven into the fabric of narrative categories, most notably those of time and place," and "must thus be seen as lying at the crossroads of various textual features" (ibid.) rather than as something purely (and abstractly) within a text, medium, or narrative. In such a way, it functions as further means of understanding and analyzing the creation and playful participation in a fiction's ontologically complex mimesis. That is, when addressing metaleptic media, it is important to not only examine the textual dimension but also to see how it maps onto extratextual space and time – and how those two combine into a metaleptic paradox of textual and extratextual interpenetrations.

Exemplifying sound reasoning for such an approach (although without textual or metaleptic aspirations), Horton has pointed out that geographical and spatial inroads to *Pokémon* might produce more accurate information about the uses and logics of the franchise than the approaches afforded by, for example, media studies or cultural studies (Horton 2012, 4, 12). In a keen observation, Horton argues that *Pokémon* – as all pop cultural phenomena – is spatial; it is consumed, activated, experienced, and acted out in spaces and places, rather than (only) as abstract planes of representation.

In the light of the analyses presented in this thesis, Horton's observation appears well placed (even if a little polemic). The role-playing core of *Pokémon*, the proliferation of character icons and characters related to them, the environmental affects sparking off in its social encounters, and the overall blending of worlds in

Pokémon's metaleptic whole – each exhibiting the crossroads of *Pokémon's* textual features – all round up into a view of *Pokémon* as a spatial organizer and its affective economy as one deployed in everyday spaces.

Furthermore, conceptual and material space holds a central position in the affects of play and playfulness. As discussed earlier (see 2.2.2), play as a mode of being and acting is an embodied and spatially located practice, and as such it cannot be adequately grasped without paying attention to the spatio-temporality of its formative affective encounters (see also Harker 2005). Addressing the spatiality of affects in relation to the geography of videogames, Carr (2006) has investigated how affects are birthed in the experience of space as it is represented and navigated in games. For Carr, the specific designed ways that games enable textual traversal (see Aarseth 1997, 62) suggests that they rely in part on spatial strategies of interfacing with the text to create their feeling tones. That is, through structuring their in-game spaces, interaction in those spaces, and the players' ability to navigate these spaces, videogames build an affective framework intended to modulate the players' overall experience of the text. Likewise, videogames – and games in general – also have the ability to affect the experience of space outside the game. In a similar approach to Carr's – but one that discusses affective impacts on the extratextual level – Colman notes how affects have an effect on (if not actually are) corporeal knowledge and connect experiences in videogames to experiences in physical space outside of them; because players play games as embodied corporeal beings, this invariably results in "a migration of the virtual media experience to the physicality of vernacular dimensions" (Colman 2008).

Indeed, this is part and parcel of the cybernetic loop of the machine and the player, linking the corporeal with the ludic and the technological, that enables affects to circulate between the games' fantasy and the corporeal everyday outside it, by leaving traces of one into the other and vice versa. In such a way, the play-place formed in play – the affective ecology of actions and potentialities in the abstract time–space of play – transforms interpretations between spatialities; for example, when driving a car feels like racing after playing a racing game, when knee-high objects feel like places to take cover behind after playing a cover-based shooter game, or when a bicycle rack appears like a perfect spot to roll a *katamari* over after playing *Katamari Damacy* (Namco 2004). In other words, the sensations and experiences that games offer do not stop when we stop playing. It is the activity of play that stops, but its capacity to affect the player[168] leaves impressions that last beyond direct engagements with games.

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[168]   It is worth reminding here that in this thesis I operate on the premise that humans have "playful biological tendency" (Stenros 2015, 64) and as such tend to carry a sort of potential for play and playfulness throughout their lives, as a result of their biology as well as their sociocultural history of contacts – an affect of play if there ever was one.

As discussed so far, the mediated intimacy of *Pokémon* videogames is designed for particular affective registers such as affection through social interaction and expenditure of time and effort. These are mechanisms of turning Pokémon characters affectively sticky, that is, emotionally relevant and prone to accumulating more affective charge. In particular, these registers and the procedural rhetoric at play behind them are designed for traversal between ontological domains. *Pokémon*, with its inclusive and ever-shifting magic circle, provides what is basically a radically enlarged affective play-place that can, as seen in Section 3.4, manifest in, for example, social relations between Trainers. It does not stop at the boundaries of the videogame, nor of the animated series, or any other singular component of the franchise. The play-place of *Pokémon* is potentially derived from the whole media mix, as keyed to the personal tastes, actions, and identities of individual consumers in the participatory and convergent culture of *Pokémon*, but nevertheless also foundationally structured through the consumerist role-play and the affective structure proposed in the original videogame series.

Metalepsis enables the interpenetration of the diegesis and extratextual elements of *Pokémon*, hence also inviting the affective registers of *Pokémon* to enter into these relations. This, in essence, is what it means when *Pokémon* is called "not-closed" (Masuyama 2002, 41) or something that goes "beyond the world of the game itself" (Allison 2006a, 219, quoting Okada Tsuneo), and when it is noted to form into social encounters between Trainers, or formalize in real-world Pokémon Leagues (Pizzato 2009, 75; Elza 2009, 61). Likewise, this metaleptic temporality and spatiality is at play when *Pokémon* toys, products, and images take over literal and mental space in homes (Giddings 2014, 79), and when the ongoing and cross-generational nature of the *Pokémon* videogames turns them into a larger assemblage of play that transcends singular play events and spans, potentially, multiple decades (McCrea 2011, 396). The whole franchise functions as a collection of metaleptic occasions that enable the extension of the spatial and temporal limits of the storyworld. In this way, *Pokémon* meshes into the everyday; a game, a site of play, and an everyday, shimmering back and forth, touching upon the transmedia world, the extratextual world, and identities of players as they engage with worlds across spatiotemporal and ontological lines.

Crucially, the phenomenology of *Pokémon's* spatial affects is always constructed with, and in relation to, the overall grand and small narratives of the media mix, and their encoded forms in *Pokémon's* various media. This means that Trainers always remain within the feedback loops of the augmented space (Manovich 2006) of *Pokémon;* a datafied frame of designed interactions and semi-structured play, where pervasive character images, play products, and established identities continuously remind Trainers of the media mix. The transontological ecology of circulating data and meaning affixed onto *Pokémon* (and Pokémon) augment physical space with data originating from the storyworld, and, conversely, the data inputs of Trainers

engaged in play imbue the storyworld with elements of physical space (cf. Manovich 2006, 222). This is a trait of the whole media mix and its products, but it has lately gained particular attention in its application in *Pokémon GO* (see, for example, Hjorth and Richardson 2017), which operates almost entirely on this premise.

Pokémon GO exhibits *Pokémon's* core logics of role-playing, affective labor, and metaleptic construction of blended shared realities, and adds to that physical movement through everyday space and oftentimes passive on-the-go play.[169] In doing so, it draws from a long line of *Pokémon* accessories that prioritize bringing *Pokémon* play into everyday space. In terms of the franchise's interactive digital toys, we can see this core theme play out in early products such as the *Pocket Pikachu* (Jupiter Corporation 1998) that used a pedometer to allow the player to walk with and befriend an on-screen Pikachu, and its successor *Pocket Pikachu Color* (Jupiter Corporation 1999) that relayed data of the players' walks to the core series videogames *Pokémon Gold* (Game Freak 2001a/1999), *Pokémon Silver* (ibid.), and *Pokémon Crystal* (Game Freak 2001b/2000). Both devices use the idea of affective and labor-dependent relations with Pokémon and the metaleptic base of the storyworld to enact play that takes place in everyday space framed partly within the game and partly outside of it. Regardless of where Trainers are or what they are doing, these devices create technological links between their actions and the fictional world of *Pokémon*.

The same idea was taken further in the *Pokéwalker* (2010b), a tie-in device for *Pokémon HeartGold* and *Pokémon SoulSilver* (Game Freak 2010a) that expanded on the features of the *Pocket Pikachu*. It allowed players to transfer their Pokémon from the videogames to act as walking buddies on the *Pokéwalker* and also offered the opportunity to capture wild Pokémon into the *Pokéwalker* during walks. Sometimes the device would also present players with automatically caught Pokémon that wished to join the player on their own. All Pokémon found through the device could also be transferred to the videogames, further strengthening the idea that the Pokémon encountered during walking around in the extratextual world were the same Pokémon that live in the videogames.

More recently, the *Pokémon GO Plus* (Nintendo Platform Technology Development 2016) and *Poké Ball Plus* (Nintendo Platform Technology Development 2018) have offered similar functionalities for exercise, passive play, and pervasive use. Both devices connect to *Pokémon GO* and enable players to basically play the game without opening their smartphones. The buttons, sounds,

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[169] *Pokémon GO* encourages, among other things, walking without actively interacting with the game, intermittently checking the game when close to potential areas of interest, and generally using the game as an initiator for socializing or an identifier of other players and fans.

vibrations, and lights on the devices alert players to events in the game and allow players to react to them less invasively than by looking at the videogame. Furthermore, the *Poké Ball Plus* can be connected to the 7th generation core series games *Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu* and *Pokémon: Let's Go, Eevee* (Game Freak 2018) as well as the 8th series core games *Pokémon Sword* and *Pokémon Shield* (Game Freak 2019). When connected with these games, a Pokémon can be transferred to the *Poké Ball Plus* and used (in limited capacity) with *Pokémon GO*.

All these devices – along with *Pokémon GO* and the metaleptic tendency of the core series videogames – exemplify the media mix's insistence that *Pokémon* does not need to be played, watched, or collected, but rather *done* (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2004, 12) in a multitude of ways. *Pokémon* is not only consumed but also lived – bodily and spatially participated in. The *Pokéwalker*, for example, bridges the gap between Johto and Helsinki, suggesting my daily commute as a good opportunity to catch rare Pokémon, and for a while, *Pokémon GO* taught me that a corner shop near my home was the place to be for Trainers wishing to catch Drowzee.

Walking while carrying a *Pokéwalker* might be an entirely non-ludic and extratextual activity, yet I still know where in my daily commute my *Pokéwalker* caught a particular Pokémon. Having walked where I did and received a Pokémon from that real-life stretch of commute, that location and that Pokémon became meaningful in a particular way, the location imbued with a speck of fiction and the Pokémon caught from there with a sense of realness – aspects of affective stickiness affixed onto Pokémon and everyday space. Walking with the *Pokéwalker* or *Pocket Pikachu* does not require one to maintain a constant lusory attitude or regard all situations as inherently playful, yet they enable the potential for all moments and all spaces to be caught within the diegesis of *Pokémon*. In such a way, these devices are always within reach of a playful mode of being – a sort of backgrounded play that acknowledges the differences between the diegetic and the extratextual worlds but nevertheless maintains a connection between them.

Set in such a lineage of products – as well as in the overall metaleptic structure of the media mix – it comes as no surprise that *Pokémon GO* and the *Pokémon GO Plus* bracelet have a particular emphasis on integration with the player's otherwise non-ludic everyday and its spaces. Indeed, this aspect of quotidian low-key entanglement of worlds is far more extensive than a straightforward projection of digital events onto real geography (and vice versa). The various metaleptic *Pokémon* paraphernalia from the *Pocket Pikachu* to *Pokémon GO* absolutely do turn locations into dually encoded spaces where real-life signs, objects, and actions overlap with those of *Pokémon's,* but that is only a part of their more expansive metaleptic mode comprised of a reframing of the everyday mindset: of suggesting that the affects and affordances of a Trainer indeed reach from one world to another. Simply put, it is a strategy to frame *Pokémon* play and the transontological setting of *Pokémon* as

inherently metaleptic. In this way, *Pokémon GO* did not appear out of the blue with its geographical and geo-locational emphasis and playful augmentation of the real, but rather these aspects are the continuation of what are already intensely mediated spatiotemporal and affective practices of *Pokémon*: for example, in its lineage of walking-oriented devices that themselves are results of the franchise's core logics of role-playing, affective labor, social structuring, and metaleptic practices, all aimed at the everyday.

In this circulation of data and meaning in the totality of the media mix and its audience, the augmented space of *Pokémon* can be seen as a techno-social spatiality, drawing its form from social relations as well as from the mobile technology used to mediate them,[170] all predicated on the franchise's commercial impetuses of production. When the layered and datafied space described by Manovich comes into contact with the social and mobile practice of *Pokémon* play, the result is not only a feedback loop of data but a technologically as well as socially constructed whole that metaleptically incorporates both the fiction of *Pokémon* and the mundane actualities of the everyday real: materially, socially, and spatially situated life where the affects of *Pokémon* become the affects of the world beyond it.

3.5.4   The permeable borders of Pokémon

The media mix's transontology is the effect, and arguably the aim, of *Pokémon's* metaleptic textual structure; of its worlds twined together across media, linked with references and metaleptic moves. Here, characters and Trainers transgressing ontological borders is a form of storytelling as well as a form of consumption.

What is interesting about the metaleptic practices of *Pokémon* is not that there are individual objects and bodies in transontological states but that the whole media mix thrives on – and is produced as – an ecology of textual and extratextual connections. Nintendo's 3DS console appearing in the storyworld of *Pokémon* is loaded with meaning because of its connection to the players' knowledge and experiences of a 3DS in their own life, and the photo of game director Masuda Junichi cosplaying as a Team Plasma member (Masuda 2012) packs affective punch for its connections to the *Pokémon* videogames, animated series, trading cards and other media, as well as to the audience's experience of all these things, worlds, and their relations to everyday reality. Even my local grocery store with its comical swarm of Drowzee in *Pokémon GO* turned into a node in this network, joining *Pokémon Sun's* and *Pokémon Moon's* (Game Freak 2016) Melemele Island as a go-to place for catching Drowzee. In this way, *Pokémon* is not to be understood only as

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[170]   For more about Manovich's augmented space as basis for new techno-social spatialities, see de Souza e Silva (2006).

a collection of products and experiences but also as the co-created and interpretive network that connects them; and likewise, the affects in *Pokémon* do not rise only from encounters with single items, identities, or experiences, but perhaps more importantly from the transmedial, intertextual, and transontological relations between them. In this landscape, media mixes can be understood as structures of affect, striving on the cultivation and usage of charged capacities and interrelations, of acting and being acted upon, between audiences and media texts and reaching across ontological levels.

McHale argues that affection circulating in this kind of assemblage of producer–text–reader is metaleptic by its nature, its effect, and its purpose (2004, 222–223), and that this relationship is particularly strong in postmodern texts – of which *Pokémon* along with much of Japanese popular culture, media mixes, and their research draw from (Azuma 2009, 7–8, 25, 74; Roth 2013; Steinberg 2012, xi; Daliot-Bul 2014, 117; Allison 2006a). Indeed, McHale sees love, seduction, and desire as necessary parts of all fiction and the reading of texts and observes that what many authors of postmodern texts do is actively utilize rather than leave it as an effect lingering on the background of reading and writing. Postmodernist fiction, for McHale, consists of texts that are not so much about love (although notably *Pokémon* can be argued to be also about that) as they are about concretely creating, receiving, and structuring love as an affect of the work itself: "Love, then, is less an object of representation than a *meta*object, less a theme than a *meta*theme. It characterizes not the fictional interactions *in* the text's world, but rather the interactions *between* the text and its world on the one hand, and the reader and his or her world on the other" (ibid., 227, emphases in original). The text and the reader forming a relationship is, fundamentally, a metaleptic act, but moreover one that functions on desire, love, and affection (see also Pearce 1997).

While it might be a stretch that desire and love are universally the mode of feeling at hand in the metaleptic engagement with (especially postmodern) texts, it certainly has some purchase for the purposes of examining media mixes. In media mixes, after all, character images are proliferated in order to achieve material and affective saturation in the everyday lives of audiences (Steinberg 2012, 44). The point of creating transmedia systems around character images and character merchandize is to make the characters function as attractors that bring different products under a single recognizable banner and, by forming a larger ecosystem of such branded products, to make these character images diffused and ubiquitous; so that the desire aimed at characters and branded products can form into a wider and deeper infrastructure of commercialized affection (Steinberg 2012, 45). The layered contexts of these dispersed and reproduced storyworlds, along with the disseminated and affective characters that embody them, are key part of the pleasure derived from media mix products (Saitō 2007, 227). Combined with the affective labor of piecing

together small and grand narratives (see 3.3.4), media mixes appear as sites where audiences and consumers actively partake in the parsing together of a transmedia world and engage with its overall affective economy in everyday life, operationalized largely through ubiquitous characters and character products. This infrastructure of desire hinges on strong affective relations in general and linkages between audiences and characters in specific, and furthermore is designed – especially in *Pokémon* – to thrive in metaleptic circumstances where fiction is diffused into the everyday real. Simultaneously, it suggests a way for the audience – Trainers – to take note of the mediated nature of their everyday and its affects. The *Pokémon* media mix uses the "Trainer" moniker and its affordances as a metaleptic signifier in much the same way as McHale discusses the second-person pronoun as one potent tool in building and expressing the affective relation between a reader and a postmodern text, allowing the projection of self onto the fiction (McHale 2004, 223–224). Reminiscent of Tatsumi's observation of the popcultural and postmodern tendencies that started in the late 1980s – right around when the early development of *Pokémon* began in earnest – *Pokémon* indeed highlights how "we have come to live the life of metacharacters ourselves" (Tatsumi 2006, 186), as the fragmentation of reality and the playful ontological challenges to it under postmodernism came to be seen not only as a literary trait of metafiction but more pervasively of late capitalist culture and its fascination with playfulness in general (Daliot-Bul 2014, 139).

As *Pokémon* brings down ontological borders in its media mix, it maintains this charge of desire and play in the everyday; an affect between the text and the reader that not only represents love, affection, and desire – as McHale suggests postmodern fiction to be structured – but also largely operates on their mechanisms on the level of the text's structure. The composition of Pokémon characters and the affective labor they are designed to draw from Trainers in acts of play and purchase are concrete ways of evoking affection and intimacy through the text's representations as well as through metaleptic slippages in its structure, establishing this affective quality both as an object and as a metaobject in the worlds of *Pokémon*.

The corporeal activation and inclusion of the player's embodied everyday conceptually, temporally, affectively, and spatially into the world of *Pokémon* (and vice versa) brings this play and desire tantalizingly close to the base of the ontological stack (Ryan 2006, 204). Pokémon are not real the same way cats are real, yet in the heterotopia of *Pokémon's* ludic metalepsis it is known Drowzees once lived outside my local corner shop, that a toy Mudkip simply cannot use the move Flamethrower unless it risks going against the laws of the storyworld, and that I truly am more invested in a piece of plastic if it resembles a Murkrow. Ludic metalepsis in *Pokémon* is the designed transontological structure of the media mix supersystem and the mode of participation in the reality of *Pokémon*, all influencing the concrete

and implicit structures of affection, felt in the bodies of players and set as parts of their everyday lives.

Metalepsis, then, is not only a paradoxical act of stepping over a threshold of ontologies but, as Pier (2011, 275) suggests, a way into a storyworld. Instead of a window to look through, it is a door through which the realm is accessed on a level beyond reading, interpreting, or activation. By expanding the metaleptic reach of *Pokémon* into the very core interactions of the franchise, the veritable media mix supersystem enables corporeal entry to the storyworld that is more than just reading, watching, or playing. As affects are about the contacts between bodies and capacities to impress and be impressed upon, ludic metalepsis offers a way for these contacts between bodies and worlds to – at least potentially and above all playfully – bridge the gap between illusion and reality, bringing the everyday reality of being a Trainer in contact with the everyday reality of being yourself. It is, then, a method of dissemination of *Pokémon's* affects into the consumers' day-to-day lives. *Pokémon* does not exist (only) as instances of play among the everyday, but rather as a modality of being and an orientation towards life.

Fundamentally, *Pokémon* thrives in the constant creation and recreation of its magic circle as play with and within the media mix. It's metaleptic and transontological magic circle plays a key part in the distribution of character images, identities, and worlds as well as encounters with them. In other words, *Pokémon* is founded on the principles of media mixes in general but pushes them beyond the usual by not only bringing the media mix onto the audience's everyday but also materially transforming this everyday on an ontological level.

In setting up these artificial realities and the reality of artifice (Giddings 2014, 155) illusionistic arts such as videogames – and in the case of *Pokémon*, their supporting media mixes – tear down illusions only to re-establish them, taking after the Baudrillardian and postmodernist hyperreal where notions of the real and virtual are hopelessly (or, for many, hopefully) intertwined. What is established as an interactional framework of designed affects in videogames carry over from play in the virtual domain to play in the actual domain (Giddings 2009, 150–151; Colman 2008). In a similar fashion, the paradox of metalepsis in *Pokémon* highlights the fictionality of the media mix world, but at the same time it helps to playfully thrust it into the extratextual everyday of the Trainers. In heightening the fantastical, *Pokémon* establishes itself in the real with the affective potential that comes from enabling audiences to *play as,* and in such a way *to be,* Trainers themselves. It shows how the notion of the real or the unmediated real can rarely truly be removed from fantasy and mediation: the unmediated always appears in relation to the mediated, and as such the everyday of today's pop cultural landscape already has most audiences engaging in metaleptic processes of mediated sensations and ontological traversals of which those in *Pokémon* are a particularly notable example.

In *Pokémon*, players and audiences do not so much partake in transmedia tourism or go on fannish pilgrimages as they bodily attend to the world of *Pokémon* in their day-to-day life; *Pokémon* and its affects – activated by Trainers partaking in its playful and procedural affective circuitry – form a fictional world embedded, embodied, and performed in the real. Through its role-play form, *Pokémon* establishes an easily entered platform for fictional identities and playful make-believe, upheld and furthered by its systems of social participation and sharing. By participating in the media mix – often through structures of affective labor – audiences are invited to co-create the worlds of *Pokémon* and, of course, to spend money while doing so. All of this forms into the mediated intimacy of the media mix: a form of being and feeling characterized by close relations to Pokémon characters as well as to other Trainers, taking place at the threshold of real and fiction.

In the mediated intimacy of *Pokémon*, desire is leveled at a keychain just as well as a digital pet, and it is expressed equally in the physical world as it is in, and through, the videogames. Desire, affection, and love are thus present as corporeal outcomes of intimacy that combine and, in a sense, transcend the border of fiction and real, actual and virtual. These sensations are the core aesthetic and commercial affect of *Pokémon*, as they are the foundation towards which its worlds and procedurality build. They are the metatheme of the whole media mix, pervasive not only across the levels of the media mix but also across ontological layers of all reality, imagined and actual alike.

4 Conclusions

4.1 Affect and mediated intimacy in Pokémon

In this thesis, I have searched for an answer to the question "how is affection formed and distributed in *Pokémon*". In order to do this, I established a methodology for affective reading in videogames, drawing primarily from game studies to understand games and play and from affect theory to reflect on the affective elements suggested by the reading.

Due to the centrality of play and gamelike structuring of the *Pokémon* media mix, much of my reading was conducted through play. My attention was primarily on the videogame form of *Pokémon*, for the reading of which I defined videogame texts as characterized by (although of course not limited to) their ergodicity, the agency that ergodicity invites, procedurality that shapes agency, and co-productive authorship that takes place between game developers, players, and the game artifact. Through comparative and structured play (Aarseth 2003, 6; Mäyrä 2008, 165; Stenros 2015, 44), I drew out the procedural composition of *Pokémon* as a played text that forms the gameic media mix (Steinberg 2015) of the franchise and joined this with contextualization of the wider history and culture of *Pokémon* and its circulating texts in the various stages of their lifecycle (Johnson 1986–1987). Crucial in this form of reading was the method of strategic playfulness: a willing surrender to the play of *Pokémon* that allowed me to entangle myself in the affective circuitry of the franchise and to meaningfully position it as a textual other (Pearce 1997).

In constructing my theoretical framework, I viewed affection as a modality of intimacy. I suggested that affection is intimacy as directed and acted out – essentially intimacy as affect. To center affection as a point of attention for my reading, I formulated the concept of mediated intimacy as a particular historical and sociocultural form of intimacy that fosters affects such as affection through and with technology. To this end, leaning on Latour (2009), I theorized a mode of playful agency of technology that directs us to see technology and media as a participant in our lives; technology as affective agents co-inhabiting the everyday with humans and creating relations in a diverse group of actors, human and non-human alike.

To read the encounters in our affective co-inhabitation, I organized my reading for examining affect as an element of the playful and procedural texts of *Pokémon*.

More precisely, I turned to affect theory as a way to understand our contacts with these texts and their circulation. I framed affect – in terms of being a tool for critical reading – as a social and cultural process, contingent on textual encounters and the cumulative experiences of those encounters in affective tones and aesthetics. Here, Ahmed's works (2014; 2010a; 2010b) helped me find a way to read affect not merely as a psychosomatic bodily state but as a cultural and social practice inscribed upon texts; a sort of affective actor-network where affect does not reside in anything but is rather a force or relationality between bodies and is shaped by these bodies and their capacities to act and be acted upon. This, I argued, is especially useful in reading videogames as it offers an inclusive ontology of bodies and their co-dependencies helpful in understanding the cybernetic union of humans and machines that is created in videogame play. In this way, videogames – and, more widely, play more generally – appear as a network of actors and actions; an environment of encounters with affect as the force produced, read, and felt in these encounters. As a media franchise predicated on affection and intimacy, my reading centered on how the technological and playful fundamentals of *Pokémon* invite particular forms of action, expression, and emotion within – broadly speaking – the domain of mediated intimacy. In this setting, I specifically examined the process of affective particularization. That is, to see how texts and affects circulate in *Pokémon's* media mix and how they form emotionally resonant objects, concepts, and associations – a process Ahmed calls affective stickiness (Ahmed 2014, 4, 11).

I used this approach to explore the videogames and media mix of *Pokémon*, and as the research process matured, I identified particular modes that *Pokémon* uses to produce, circulate, and shape affection. In this way, I divided my reading into a set of thematic cases (Chapter 3, Sections 3.1 to 3.5), each of which I also supplemented with supporting theories and tools. In my reading, I made the following claims through which I analyzed affection in *Pokémon*:

1) *Pokémon* is a ludic whole rooted in role-play
2) Pokémon are metaphoric animals that elicit and retain affection on three layers of data
3) The Trainer role is entwined with affective labor
4) *Pokémon* is an actual and potential social sphere
5) *Pokémon* intentionally blends the fantastical and its affects into the everyday real

The whole media mix of *Pokémon* functions on the logic of the videogames that started the franchise. I looked at the ludic origins of *Pokémon* as well as its 20-year development as a videogame-led play product and argued that a vital component in understanding the media mix lies in its origins in role-play and role-playing games.

My argument built on tracing the genealogy of role-playing and role-playing games from early and culturally widespread forms such as acting and military simulations to more specific developments such as tabletop role-playing games. Identifying tabletop role-playing games as a point of convergence between older forms of role-play and later ludic applications allowed me to view the legacy of tabletop role-playing games and role-play more generally in, for example, videogames. I discussed works that I called descendants of role-playing games such as card games, social games, and pervasive or location-based games that all draw from the aesthetics and procedural practices long established by role-playing games, but which are not – or are generally not thought as – role-playing games themselves. Similarly, I discussed how role-playing games have been more directly remediated (Bolter and Grusin 2000) into subsequent ludic forms such as digital role-playing games – the Japanese console role-playing game being the primary genre-origin of *Pokémon* – which retain much from their predecessors but also bring in elements from outside this heritage. Taking after Montola (2008; 2012a), Hitchens and Drachen (2008), and Mackay (2001), I established *Pokémon* as a complex artifact and activity of play that has close ties to role-playing as understood in the context of computer and console role-playing games but also in a broader sense, as connected to tabletop role-playing games and role-play as a general playful activity.

This realization allowed me to reframe the whole operational logic of the *Pokémon* media mix from something that is consumed or "done" (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2004, 12) into a system of play – a playground – that invites a playful attitude in everything related to itself. I argued that in its role-playing sensibility, *Pokémon* forwards a two-tier character system for participation: there is the conventional protagonist role of the diegetic stories seen in the main characters of the videogames, comics, movies, and animated series, and then there is the more ambivalent but no less ubiquitous positioning of the audience as Pokémon Trainers. That is, the primary actors of the *Pokémon* media mix – the ones through which relations with Pokémon are constructed – are the fictional Trainer characters as well as the factual assemblage of players-as-Trainers. This two-fold structure establishes the Trainer identity as something shared between fictional and actual participants and also plays a significant role in enabling a pervasive form of everyday role-play that actualizes in contact with the media mix. Players are not engaging with Pokémon just through ready-made protagonist characters but are invited to lightly regard themselves as characters as well – to build their participation in *Pokémon's* storyworld through the framing of themselves as Trainers and the agencies, affordances, and affects that come with this.

Important here is the emphasis on play as a significant method for interfacing with the whole media mix. When discussing the audience as players, I do not necessarily mean to frame them as players of the *Pokémon* videogames but as players

more generally: as people who play in the playground of texts *Pokémon* offers; as role-players in the worlds of *Pokémon*. In such a way, I maintain that there is very little difference between someone who plays the *Pokémon* videogames and, for example, someone who watches the animated series, as both acts are undertaken within the overall social and cultural boundaries of *Pokémon* and its role-playing practice. In other words, both are instances of being – and learning to be – a Trainer: play as facilitated by *Pokémon*.

In this logic of role-play in *Pokémon,* we also see the commodified position of consumption and play forwarded by *Pokémon*. That is, role-play linked with the expansive and affective media mix world is the postmodern business model of *Pokémon* where the idea is to sell information, world-defining agency, and the possibility to participate in the creation and exploration of the playworld – socially, culturally, and affectively. By consuming objects of the media mix, the audience gains access to the world of *Pokémon* and, vitally, buys themselves opportunities to act on (and in) it through the Trainer role that the media mix confers them. It is not only the player position that is constructed through role-playing but the whole media mix, its economic operation, and the place of the consumer within it.

As I argued, all media mixes depend on an activity reminiscent of role-playing games – both in the creation and in the reception of media mix products – and observed that media mixes have foundational roots in, among other things, role-playing culture. However, whereas many media mix franchises offer small narratives the audience combines into larger ones in participatory acts of world-creation and -definition, *Pokémon* takes it a step further and provides an identity to do this through. In other words, *Pokémon* takes the core functionality of media mixes – a participatory form of co-creating and selling a world – and monetizes it into an active role-play identity that is as enjoyable as it is profitable. In this way, fanhood of – or more generally just participation in – the *Pokémon* media mix becomes an act of identity building: a ludification of fan identity into the domain of role-play. Rather than just monetary transaction and one-off pleasures, it creates a mesh of affects localized on the hybrid identity of the audience that continue to mark and influence the multitude of texts within the media mix. While other transmedia properties also hinge on histories built with their audiences, *Pokémon* makes sure these experiences are traced onto the identity of the Trainer experiencing these things. Thus, I argued, *Pokémon* has succeeded in turning its audience and fan position into a diegetic component. The Trainer framing – the establishment of "you" as the protagonist of *Pokémon* – is a potent strategy for building histories with the franchise; histories on which affective encounters and impressions rest upon. It is a way to tie together products, experiences, and narrative fragments and to link them with a personal identity and role that is involved in the media mix as a part of the diegetic world.

Next, based on the core properties of the Pokémon characters, I argued for understanding Pokémon through three layers of information: character image, taxonomic data, and individual data, all of which together adorn Pokémon with a sense of non-human agency as well as illustrate the different ways Pokémon elicit, invite, and capture affection.

All Pokémon exist as generic and circulating images aimed at diffusion throughout the media mix. This aspect, their character image, enables their proliferation as images into any visual surface, from drawn pictures on stickers to complex 3D-models on the screen of a game console, yet also functions as an affectively charged representation of the entire franchise: each circulating character image is a visual brand marker and a potentially emotionally resonant fragment that evokes past and potential future contacts with the storyworld. Furthermore, while the overall visual aesthetic of the characters focuses on variations of overall cuteness, it also contains a more complex side that visually communicates power relations between Pokémon, underlying game mechanical and systemic elements, and personal choices of each Trainer.

Alongside their visuals, Pokémon contain a layer of taxonomic data. All Pokémon exist as members of various catalogued and numbered species, and come with species-specific diegetic characterization as well as stats, moves, types, and other game mechanical details particular for their species. The taxonomic data sets one species apart from others and engenders each species with aspects of collectability and quantifiability. Knowledge, in *Pokémon,* is closely related to power in that the more one knows about the taxonomic properties of a Pokémon, the better-equipped one is to train and wield it – and given the general consistency of the media mix, nearly all media within it can act as potential sources of learning for this taxonomic play. Furthermore, this importance of taxonomic properties aligns the whole activity of *Pokémon* play diegetically as well as extratextually with non-human animals and their categorization. Although taxonomic play, Pokémon are playfully portrayed as objects of a natural science of sorts, turning Trainers into naturalists on a journey of learning about Pokémon and cataloguing them onto the various Pokedexes of the *Pokémon* videogames and other media products. The taxonomic data, in this way, serves to differentiate Pokémon and to motivate collecting as well as learning about them by suggesting a rich catalogue of quantifiable beings and associated information.

This developer-designated public taxonomic data is closely linked to the potential for Pokémon to accrue particular histories and traits through their association with Trainers. It describes the changing body of the Pokémon as well as the effort a Trainer spends on the Pokémon through training labor. This individual data is enforced through what I identified as character permanence: the tendency towards persistent individualization and finiteness in Pokémon characters and their

systemic elements, as well as the more general notion of histories and experiences inscribed on the individual and unique bodies of singular Pokémon, through memories and shared moments Trainers have with them as well as through the effort they have spent on catching, training, and wielding them.

I noted that affection takes different variations of emphasis between these levels. They are three different facets for players to relate to and through which to engage with Pokémon. In practice, affection, as affect, is offered three different ways, or ethological capacities (Deleuze 1988; von Uexküll 2010), of manifestation between bodies, as well as numerous combinations thereof, as these different facets of Pokémon enable different ways of acting and being acted upon. For example, someone might direct their affections and affective reactions towards strong Pokémon they've trained to a high degree – that is, affection at the level of taxonomic and personal data – or someone might favor rare and particularly cute Pokémon, joining taxonomic rarity with personal associations of effort spent finding a Pokémon with a particularly resonant character image.

Together, these three layers make Pokémon into what I called media mix animals. Procedurally, metaphorically, and conceptually they take after pets and companion animals, and they exhibit non-human agency that certainly does not make them alive but nevertheless invites to playfully regard them as such. They are textual and ethological subjects that, at least playfully, hint at various relations for their Trainers to enter into with them, derived in great part from the space of animal life. Originally created from digital ludic systems and forwarded as a form of life, they produce – and indeed are – procedural metaphors that play with the notion of animism, aliveness, and animality, and attune affective relations to match. In this way, Pokémon characters are not quite pets and certainly not alive, but their affective aesthetic nonetheless loan qualities from these domains even while they simultaneously benefit from the dissemination and instrumentalization that comes with them also being physical and digital commodities that circulate in the media mix, with a life quite independent from, yet connected to, their Trainers.

Relatedly, the Trainer role is in name and in practice shaped around affective labor directed at Pokémon. Even if it is not possible to claim that *Pokémon* (as an artifact, as a commercial entity, and as played and experienced by players) is always about intimacy, affection, or nurture, the franchise nevertheless cannot – or at least should not – be disentangled from the history it has with these themes, as expressed in its fictional framing and by its developers and audiences. What this means in practice is that although it is not rare to engage with *Pokémon* in "non-nurture" terms (that is, to play *Pokémon* like checkers and regard its characters as pawns or property), there is always the potential of affective investments making inroads into the experience through the very structure of the Pokémon themselves, as general and personal, changing and permanent procedural metaphors of pets and companions.

This organization of interaction is also encouraged through the positioning of the player as a Trainer. The Trainer is a procedurally developed fictional role and a substantial consumer position, the core of which is to form relationships with Pokémon: to collect, value, desire, and train them – and to showcase them to other Trainers through, for example, trading, multiplayer battles, and fan activity.

To unpack the Trainer–Pokémon relationship in my reading, I used the concept of affective labor (Hardt and Negri 2001; 2004; Paasonen, Hillis, and Petit 2015) and its manifestations in videogames (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). Following Hardt and Negri, I discussed affective labor as a form of immaterial labor aiming at the "creation and manipulation of affect" (Hardt and Negri 2004, 293) and connected it to affective experiences elicited by games. I noted that effort plays a significant role in these experiences: games, as ergodic texts, are in some ways foundationally tied to manipulating and requiring player effort and as such always map their mediated intimacy onto frameworks of different forms of effort and investment. In particular, I identified this in what I called training labor: videogames, toys, and other playful systems that tie the effort their medium asks from the player to notions of training non-human animals. That is, they line up the effort of traversing the text with the effort of caretaking, and in doing so, establish a potent affective feedback loop where affective and thematic elements overlap with the action of accessing them.

This is particularly relevant for *Pokémon* where the overall ergodicity of its textual playground is synchronized with training labor and brought to the forefront thematically as well as systemically as the commitment required from – and proudly exhibited by – Trainers. In large part through training labor, Pokémon that otherwise are mostly circulating character images and taxonomic information (both affective vectors in themselves, of course) gather affective stickiness: they come to feel personal and meaningful embodiments of the time and effort that has gone into them, acting as modulators of affects through their visual, taxonomic, and, crucially, individual anatomies of data. This also to a degree conflates Pokémon as objects of affection and Pokémon as valuable assets, because *Pokémon* intentionally overlaps caretaking labor with instrumental usefulness and socially constructed worth (such as rarity). Thus, the mediated intimacy developed by the media mix is less about categorizing play and relationships to affective and instrumental – or feel-value and use-value – and rather suggests that they are inseparable; feeding off of one another to create a sense of closeness and affective distinction between players and their Pokémon. In this way, the particular type of effort consisting of collecting, training, and using Pokémon in various ways that *Pokémon* establishes Trainers as conducting forms a central tenet – a core gameplay loop – of *Pokémon* videogames from where it has spread to be a ubiquitous theme in the socioeconomic and ludic structure of the media mix more broadly.

On the scale of the whole media mix and its products, Trainers are invited to become interested in media and products more broadly: to parse together bigger pieces of the grand narrative and in so doing conduct interpretive and worldbuilding work within the textual frame of the media mix. Media mixes in general operate on the logic of relations and dependencies where engaging with products of a media mix is to trace connections, to understand bigger pictures, and to co-produce the grand narrative together with the producers and other fans. In *Pokémon*, this is connected to training labor in that the relations and interpretive work of media mixes are set in lockstep with the caring and collecting labor Trainers both actual and fictional undertake. In such a way, buying a Pokémon figurine might be an act of acquiring a cute piece of plastic, but it might also be an act of adding one more piece of information to the bigger picture of the grand narrative ("so this is what Murkrows look like") or a realization of desires evoked by other parts of the media mix ("wow, a Mudkip figurine, just like my starter in *Pokémon Sapphire*"). Furthermore, this work of worldbuilding is not important only for the way it actualizes past events and affective ties but how it is also an investment into future ones as well. The ubiquitous circulation of *Pokémon's* character images, for example, does not necessarily aim for immediate affective intensifications (although that is clearly one aim) but enables the blossoming of affection in the future, as experiences, small narratives, and media fragments settle into the totality of knowledge any Trainer has of the worlds of *Pokémon*. In such a way, the mediated intimacy of *Pokémon* is a system of relations and contacts realized in the past and potentially actualized in the future, with the Trainer and their ergodic affective labor towards Pokémon and towards the whole media mix as the central actor and act in this process.

All in all, I posited that training labor as a core gameplay loop and as interpretive worldbuilding work in the media mix are both mechanisms of creating and employing sticky signs arising from as well as contributing to the mediated intimacy of *Pokémon*. The Pokémon character with its three levels of (in-)formation is, beyond anything, a process of particularization. The colorful characters are not only plentiful and affixed onto most everything but are also done so with a mode of potential personal relation through vectors of affection operating on the level of generic species and particular individual characters. In this way, the triple data layer of Pokémon and the affective labor of ergodically interacting with it is not only a system of creating procedural animals of a media mix but also a way of encouraging their stickiness – of the creation of particularized textual bodies that are ready to collect and retain affective charge as ubiquitous signs, as shared taxonomic collectibles, and as personally meaningful characters.

This all takes place in a potentially social environment. The *Pokémon* media mix and the activities it encourages are, to a great degree, formulated as a social, shared domain. Trading Pokémon, training them for battles, taking part in the participatory

culture of the media mix, and establishing the Trainer identity all function through various levels of sociality and social formation of affect. That is, the mediated intimacy of *Pokémon* shows not only in contact with the franchise and its worlds and characters but in contacts between human Trainers as well.

Important for my reading here was the history of encounters: how the way we are affected by something or someone often depends on our past contacts with it or them (Ahmed 2014, 6–7, 194). These past contacts result in layers of associations and intensities called up in new contacts – all the more so when these affective resonances accumulate onto affectively sticky objects such as Pokémon characters. Furthermore, following Ahmed, we can see that affects cannot be read as personal or social, but rather as a force in between: a relation that allows us to see the shapes and borders of bodies through their contacts with each other. As such, affect has a role in the collective formation of lived environments. How we build and subsequently relate to situations, ideas, spaces, and all manner of relations in the everyday is dependent on affect as a form of personal and shared action.

I argued that environmental and social dimensions of affect are particularly useful for *Pokémon* because the whole playful media mix is founded on themes of portable play and techno-social mobility. In my reading, I highlighted a particular tendency of Japanese technology and game culture – especially during the decades before and after the turn of the millennium – to anchor themselves in modes of portability enabling and encouraging mobility and social relations but also fostering individual and stationary engagement. Beyond anything, these pervasive everyday technologies and their circulating media texts enable a technological intimate act of extending their digital worlds and potentials almost anywhere.

In this totality of technologically mediated forms of sociality, intimacy, and communication, *Pokémon* wields a range of ways to encourage and structure encounters. I argued that Pokémon characters themselves are engines of social interactions, created for the purpose of motivating collection, trading, training, and multiplayer battles with other enthusiasts. Each of these acts is, in turn, a setting for social situations between Trainers, ultimately forming into a totality of *Pokémon*-enabled and Pokémon-focused communication. It encourages Trainers to meet each other while playfully enacting the fiction of *Pokémon*: trading with others, battling with them, and talking about Pokémon are all acts of low-key existence in the world of *Pokémon*, creating and upholding a Trainer identity for the involved. One is, after all, a Trainer mostly because others – the media mix, other Trainers, and the franchise's characters – support this identity as socially real. In moments of *Pokémon*-talk between fans, it is clear no one is actively attempting to role-play, yet at the same time all action takes place through roles of sorts, enacting and creating a shared world.

What *Pokémon* does so well, however, is not just sociality but the potential of it. I forwarded *potential multiplayer play* as the social core of the franchise and its videogames: most actions in *Pokémon* can be social or taken for a social purpose, but the videogames or the media mix never require anyone to do so. *Pokémon*, founded on sociality as it is, never requires social acts, but by its design is always open to them. The training labor that *Pokémon* videogames ask their players to enact is enjoyable partially because of the knowledge that the trained character could be recognized and appreciated by others – without ever having to do so to reap these affective benefits. Likewise, obtaining rare Pokémon is enjoyable in large part because not many Trainers have one: that is, the rarity of a Pokémon holds a great deal of affective potential precisely because of the (potential) social nature of play in *Pokémon*. Any Trainer could have one, but only a select few go through with the effort (or have the luck) required to acquire one. All information about *Pokémon* is potentially social, as the act of participating in the media mix is an act of participation in the co-creation of the storyworld. Knowing where to find particular Pokémon, what the taxonomic data of a Pokémon is, or where in the Kalos region a particular village is located are all examples of information useful in solo play but also shareable between Trainers: information offered and asked as sociocultural capital.

In this way, the thematic of potential multiplayer turns all acts in the videogame into possibilities of social contact: a form of intimacy at once delayed and actualized. Furthermore, this also applies to *Pokémon's* wider sphere of play, such as *Pokémon* trading cards, soft toys, key chains, and figurines. They are all intended as objects that function on their own, but they can also be deployed in the wider social context of the media mix. A key chain can be just a key chain, but it can also signal one's preferences and trainerhood to others just like a trading card can be a pretty picture one looks at every now and again, but it can also be a sought-after rarity that would definitely turn heads at a Pokémon Store.

Overall, the media mix trades in commodified intimacy of a fundamentally social and collective kind: with proximity to Pokémon and proximity to other players in the social frame of *Pokémon* structured to drive profits and produce affective intensities. To be a Trainer is to belong to a global multitude of physical and digital bodies that all exist on a shared platform of potential sociality, in play alone as well as with millions of others. I argued that this frame creates an environment of affect where Pokémon (and *Pokémon*) are a communicating medium used in contacts between Trainers. Furthermore, the social totality of *Pokémon* enables affects to play out personally and collectively in the circulation of signs and the affects they gather, all to the tune of the feeling tone of *Pokémon's* mediated intimacy.

Finally, I explored how *Pokémon* intentionally blends the fantastical and its affects into the everyday. Media mixes function on the affective draw and proliferation of their worlds and characters. They trade in commercialized affection

as well as the circulation and ontological dispensation of it. The elements of the media mix must show in the audience's everyday where they offer multiple, often fragmentary, points of entry into the fiction. I argued that *Pokémon* is a key example of this, with its highly transontological Trainer position that is simultaneously used to access the media mix's world and its characters as well as to position the audience as active (and paying) participants in the co-creation and discovery of the franchise's fragmented narrative. Trainers, in short, participate in the affective economy of *Pokémon* by spending money and effort to dip into a playful mindset that the media mix frames as the actions of a Trainer. In adopting the player and their economic as well as affective capacities into the Trainer role, *Pokémon* provides a setting for the mixing of fictional and real elements in the everyday experience of its audience. *Pokémon* is not only a fictional world accessed through imagination, play, and money, but more accurately also a layer of worlds set on top of the base real. For this reason, I concluded that there is little sense in examining the franchise or its affects without addressing how they impact the everyday, as the everyday is not in any way inextricable from the acts and affects of the *Pokémon* media mix.

In order to approach this overlap of worlds, fictional and otherwise, I used the concept of metalepsis, which opened my analysis to *Pokémon's* curious mix of textual ontologies and the challenges they – much like any pervasive products of fiction – provide to notions of reality, mediation, and mediated intimacy. Through metalepsis, I approached *Pokémon* and the everyday as a joint system of real and make-believe and argued that this intentional transontological structure enables *Pokémon* a heightened tendency to project its affects to the everyday – that is, to the world seemingly outside fiction – of its audience.

I defined metalepsis as a contamination between ontological levels, such as when an author converses with their character or a character addresses the reader. Significant for metalepsis is the implied traversal between domains: whether the illusion of transgressions is believable or not is secondary to the sense of wonder it evokes. Indeed, as a form of narrative paradox, metalepsis always contains a degree of impossibility. In this way, metalepsis is fundamentally a playful structure, inviting the audience to take its fantastical quality seriously. I noted that all games depend on a similar logic insofar as they are fantastical and agreed-upon special domains, with a requirement of constant boundary-work to discern the game from the reality around it (even if the two can never be entirely separate). I observed that videogames are a particularly interesting case in this regard, as they are fundamentally hybrid in nature, producing their textual functions through technology but requiring their player to conduct bodily acts not entirely diegetic yet intimately tied to the diegesis: a cybernetic circuit of bodies and/as machines with all of their affects taking place in encounters and transgressions on the borders between biological and mechanical, actual and virtual, physical and digital, real and fantastical.

For the metaleptic understanding of *Pokémon,* I drew on prior research as summarized into the concept of *ludic metalepsis* – metalepsis of play. The term includes interactions with a played text but is not in any way limited to particular orientations or directions of engagements between texts and participants. I maintained that metalepsis can be seen to be wielded equally by the producers and consumers of a co-created (game-)world, and to be emanating from the fictional world to the real and vice versa. Sometimes this metalepsis of play takes the form of straightforward interaction with procedural systems (such as when playing videogames), and at other times it is play with and in relation to texts in extratextual engagements, outside the direct or total framing of play (such as when seeing a sunset makes you realize it is late enough for particular Pokémon to be caught more easily). In both cases, players engage with a process where the fictional world (and implicitly its designers) and the players' world are in a state of co-affecting. I argued that metalepsis is used in *Pokémon* as a crucial device in positioning its worlds and affects on a flexible state of being, layering the fictional with the non-fictional, and playfully obfuscating the boundaries between the layers. Beyond *Pokémon*, of course, one must acknowledge the fundamental transontology present in all play, as it takes place in the real world while generally referencing – and creating – a fictional one. In *Pokémon*, however, this magic circle of the play situation is expected to be actively transgressed and these transgressions to be noticed and enjoyed.

Classically, metalepsis breaks illusions by forcing fiction into an irrevocable collision with another ontological level. It reminds of the fiction's status as imaginary and fantastical by toying with the concept – but not the actual act of – transgressing ontological levels. In *Pokémon,* however, I argued that metaleptic strategies such as forming temporal, geographic, material, and spatial connections bring play closer to the everyday, not to the detriment of the fantastical but to the fantastical embellishment of the real. The realm of play and the realm of the real are, in this form of ludic metalepsis, not antagonistic. The metalepsis of *Pokémon* is, fundamentally, play with reality, and therein lies its power to use the anti-illusionistic and paradoxical metaleptic breakages to increase a sense of playfulness and fantasy in the everyday rather than dampen them.

Affects in the media mix of *Pokémon* are not limited to those between an audience and a fictional world. They are also birthed, circulated, and felt within the affective everyday; in the hustle and bustle of life in general as opposed to particular moments or sessions of concentrated play. Mediated intimacy in *Pokémon* and the affective situations within it are not restrained to the playing of "a videogame" or the watching of "a movie", or any particular individual act of media consumption, but instead mesh with everything around them, striking the affective lightning rod that is the audience's body in its quotidian orientations. If the purpose of a media mix is to surround a consumer with potential access points to, and nodes of relating with, a

storyworld, *Pokémon* exemplifies just how pervasive this proliferation as well as engagement with it can be. The metaleptic entry of *Pokémon's* fantasy into everyday life outside active play – the radical expansion of play to incorporate a more ambient form of ludicity that encourages long-term and spatially flexible playfulness related to *Pokémon* – enables one more vector for affective association and accumulation with which the *Pokémon* media mix crafts affective stickiness onto its characters.

Putting all this together, and to succinctly answer my research question, affection in *Pokémon* forms from the playful orientation and agency of Trainers as they partake in the media mix of *Pokémon* through a form of everyday and potentially social role-play. The capacity to act and be acted upon – the affects of the media mix – emphasize affective labor in (and as) the role of a Trainer as well as its capture in the perennial transmedia bodies of Pokémon. This by no means guarantees affectionate feelings, but it orients the whole media mix towards what I called mediated intimacy – of playfully expressing and receiving affection in a relationship with non-human agents. The mediated intimacy of *Pokémon* thus functions as a cycle: it is the thing sold to Trainers but also the product that the Trainers' collective affective labor provides for the franchise, to be sold again as a community and as a commodified sensation of affectionate feelings and emotional proximity to bodies digital and physical alike.

Pokémon, in this way, is a network of humans and non-humans, of animal bodies both real and metaphorical, literal and procedural, affecting and being affected through a feeling tone greatly emphasizing a sense of intimacy, affection, desire, and forming of relations, even as it is also unquestionably an efficient postmodern machine of fragmentary fantasy sold piece by piece and utilizing manufactured desire to perpetually generate profit.

Affection, here, turns out to be many things. It might manifest in the desire to catch or train a rare Pokémon or in the pride and fondness towards one already caught and trained. Likewise, it could be an affective investment towards a particularly cute Pokémon, or towards a Pokémon with unusual taxonomic properties. Thinking about *Pokémon* in terms of flowing affects and experiences captures the traversal of feelings and signs in *Pokémon's* affective economy as well as the way these feelings and signs are distributed though playful means in the media mix. But as I demonstrated in the analysis chapter of this thesis, within this flowing totality, things also stick at times, and for a time, build up meaningful combinations of bodies, histories, and feelings, all coming together in particular orientations according to the workings of the franchise as well as its audience. It turns Pokémon and contact with them into processes of affective accumulation. When looking at *Pokémon* – or any media mix system for that matter – it is not enough to seek out the paths through which affects and signs travel, but to also identify the points at which they stick, collect, and gather. Both have been the aim of my thesis.

In this thesis, I have presented a reading of *Pokémon's* mediated intimacy, positioning *Pokémon* and its mediated forms of intimacy in relation to relevant historical, cultural, and social contexts as well as to textual studies of games, play, and affects. The contribution of this thesis, beyond the reading itself, is the development and discussion of critical vocabulary and concepts for the mediated intimacy of *Pokémon*, as well as the methodological steps to reach them. Furthermore, in this thesis, I have demonstrated the centrality of the *Pokémon* videogames and their ludic logic to the whole media mix, by tracing how a videogame that was intended to foster a playful and affectively charged role set in a potentially social everyday environment turned into a media mix that does exactly that, but expanded onto a transmedial and transontological stage.

Affection is not the only interpretive frame useful for understanding *Pokémon*. However, it is, as I have hopefully demonstrated, a powerful concept for the examination of how the *Pokémon* media mix – essentially a network of co-affecting bodies – is structured into and navigated as nodes of sticky affective signs that give meaning to the innumerable objects within its influence. In my reading, *Pokémon* has appeared as a collection – a playground – of texts built on a foundation of mediated intimacy, with its texts projecting into popular culture as objects to be felt for and felt with. To play *Pokémon* means to partake in its affective worlds, its engine of commodification, and its multimedia structure that expects and encourages Trainers to playfully believe, affectively care for, and materially invest in their media mix animals.

On a final note, I wish to address the future of discourse with *Pokémon*, popular culture, and technology. With this thesis, I hope to offer an alternative to the cynical and pessimistic criticism that easily overcomes scholars – myself included – as we struggle under the postindustrial and neoliberal grip of late capitalism in our playworlds (and beyond): a view of *Pokémon* and technocultural cultivation of intimacies as primarily economic ventures void of honest feelings, in service of profits and little else. In its stead I wish to suggest how something more interesting can be – and indeed already is – built from the pieces of the *Pokémon* media mix and other sites of mediated intimacy, mired as many of them are in the feverish logics of escalated global enterprise culture. This is not to say criticism of the prevailing corporate and capitalist system and its occupation of the everyday would be ill advised or futile but to suggest that even here, in the hyperreal of commodified relationships, there exist genuine pleasures and interesting encounters – affects between many kinds of bodies – to read, feel, and learn from, even if we must also remain cognizant of the realities of life and emotion under capitalism.

Pokémon are decidedly fantastical and unreal, yet the whole media mix and its ludic structure uphold them as playfully real, which is both the predisposition for *Pokémon's* particular mode of mediated intimacy to form as well as the result of its

enactment. Pokémon are not playfully alive in the sense that they would be convincing facsimiles of biological life. Rather, their playful aliveness consists of the biological animal (and caretaking) metaphor they evoke, the technological and textual otherness born of their diegetic and procedural agency, the very real relevance as signs and multiplayer components they have in the potentially social community of *Pokémon,* and the metaleptic play at the border of the real and the imagined that they encourage.

Pokémon are champions of rethinking machinic and media-bound representations of life as affectively real. They are an efficient and widespread fantasy of companionship. In this way, the mediated intimacy of *Pokémon* becomes a way of understanding relations not only with fictional characters but more broadly with various artificial forms of life. The plethora of objects in our lives that are not alive, but which nevertheless are – by design or through overall ambient animism – playfully read as such, from Latour's door closer to *Tamagotchi* and from videogame NPCs to neural-network-trained chatbots, bear similarities to Pokémon and the relationships people have formed with them over the years. The specific practice of affect-manipulation in *Pokémon* certainly does not explain them all, but it points us towards a better understanding of how humans have learned to encounter their non-human technological cohabitants, what sort of mechanisms might be present in these encounters, and, above all, how they have already shaped the technocultural landscape globally. Furthermore, by looking at the success of *Pokémon's* mediated intimacy in this way might reveal why some forms of artificial life and labor are rejected as alienating and others welcomed as charming – the successes and failures of relationships formed (and forced) with non-humans.

Through *Pokémon,* we can learn, and have learned, a way to live with new forms of technological life and imagined realities, all the more prominent in this era of increasing convergence, non-human participants, and a mode of life requiring ever more attention to all manner of bodies, worlds, and ecologies around us. If, indeed, we are emerging onto a new age beyond postmodernism, perhaps the vocabulary in this thesis could help operate with the non-human bodies of today and tomorrow, interpret texts about our relationships, and find different kinds of intimacies in the worlds around us.

4.2   Further study

In this thesis, I have opened many paths of inquiry but followed only some of them. As such, the wider worlds of affection in *Pokémon* still contain unanswered questions and room for more detailed takes.

Overall, my thesis is theoretical in nature. The methodology is, by design, subjective and aims at an interpretation of the topic. It follows that a similar methodology might – and indeed should – produce different arguments and interpretations, and alternatively would also likely pair well with, for example, clinical and quantitative work. I would welcome these works as valuable challenges to my results – and those of others – to further advance the scholarly discourse on *Pokémon,* and our knowledge of it in general.

In my project, I have examined only one affect – or affective process – of *Pokémon*. Looking at the whole ethology (Deleuze 1988, 125–127; Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 257; von Uexküll 2010) of *Pokémon*, this means that we are now one step closer to understanding what the affects of *Pokémon* – what it can do and what is done to it – are, but in order to gain any significant insight into how *Pokémon* relates to the world, we need to understand its affects more broadly. That is, in the tradition of von Uesküll's tick, the affects that define *Pokémon* are yet to be more fully identified, but we are now at least a little closer to it.

Relatedly, a fruitful line of further investigation would be to distance the Ahmedian reading – used in my work to the extent of identifying the circulation and accumulation of affect – from a somewhat Deleuzian and Spinozist focus on encounters and contacts and instead highlight the underlying cultural rules that shape these events. In this way, one could examine "the histories of what or who is allowed close enough to this or that body for this or that body to be affected in the first place" (Ahmed 2014, 232–233n25), such as fan cultural gatekeeping, issues of access in a form of media fundamentally based on capitalist consuming, and ecological concerns of production and consumption in *Pokémon*.

In terms of the economic setting of *Pokémon*, in this thesis, I chose to examine *Pokémon* through the concept of the media mix and its playful and affective qualities. Another – related and highly interesting – approach to the economic framework of *Pokémon* would have been through the logics and modalities of free-to-play and freemium games (see, for example, Nieborg 2015; Heimo et al. 2018), which are a popular way to structure the economy of contemporary videogame franchises and gameic media mixes. I chose media mix as the interpretive production and consumption structure for its applicability to products beyond (typical) mobile games and app economies, but it is clear that free-to-play and freemium are not at all dissimilar from media mixes in many ways: each system dishes out access to their worlds and assets in varying and fragmentary degrees, and enables more access, agency and definitional power if the audience pays more. Furthermore, there are a

lot of similarities between *Pokémon's* business model and the free-to-play and freemium styles of monetization, which we can already see in recent work on *Pokémon GO* (Alha et al. 2018).

Another important vector for study would be to follow the Marxist line of critique I have already mentioned here and there in this work. This direction – on which work has already been pioneered by Anne Allison (2006a) – could still offer new readings of, and interesting critical insights into, the way in which *Pokémon* instrumentalizes and commodifies its procedural animals. The thematic of affection and desire that I have here established through concepts of labor, play, and media mix ontology and offered as sites of enjoyment and potential could equally be – and indeed already commonly have been – approached from the direction of oppression, domination, and ownership.

The work I have presented here concerns media that players engage with and the affects and aesthetics that emerge from this engagement; that is, the textual and affective cycle of production, reception, and reproduction of the playful worlds of *Pokémon*. In this cycle, however, I have consciously focused my attention more on the production and circulation of the co-created text of *Pokémon* rather than straightforwardly focusing on its creation in the hands of audiences. This decision was largely influenced by a wealth of prior player- and audience-oriented research into *Pokémon* that left the products and worlds of the franchise relatively untouched in favor of thorough discussions of its social dimensions. It is clear, however, that there is more to learn from Trainers, their experiences, and their actions in creating the discourse and textual whole of *Pokémon*.

One avenue here are modifications, rule challenges, and player-created adaptations of *Pokémon's* systems and products, as well as other works of fan creativity such as fan art and fan fiction. Further study into these alterations and derivative works would likely shed more light on the audience experience as well as the systems of the whole media mix. I have begun to explore this thematic in order to gain valuable insight into the different uses and adaptations of *Pokémon* (see Koski 2015), but this direction of research could be pushed much further, mapping out the histories, aesthetics, and affects of player-created works, mods and challenges as well as their relation to the official authored elements of *Pokémon*.

More research is also needed on the history of *Pokémon*; forms of local history and microhistory in particular. As *Pokémon* is typically viewed in terms of fads, massive spells of popularity, and global flows of popular culture, our understanding of the phenomenon's history tends to overlook the more nuanced and fine-grained aspects of *Pokémon*. Socially and geographically, this direction of further study could mean, for example, looking at what *Pokémon* was like in Russia during the late 1990s, where the context of the whole console ecosystem was radically

idiosyncratic.[171] Likewise, more work needs to be done on the microhistories of *Pokémon*. Examples of valuable microhistories and their affects that I planned on undertaking but ultimately decided to leave for later were tracing familial transfers of nostalgic and affectionate attitudes towards *Pokémon* and analyzing highly visible but highly local fan productions such as the Finnish *Pokémon* musical *Valitsen sinut!* that premiered in 2016.

Of particular interest in the history of *Pokémon* is what I established in this work as the fourth wave of *Pokémon* (2004–2013). This period occurred when *Pokémon* was no longer at the height of its initial popularity but before its second global explosion of popularity around *Pokémon GO* had come about. It is characterized by a steady form of production and consumption where *Pokémon* remained a vibrant franchise but attracted little attention compared to its heydays. This period is something of an unexplored territory in terms of closer looks at how the producers kept the franchise going and how fans grew up with – or departed from – the media mix, playing, modding, and enacting fanwork around it, or finding new interests and drifting off until, perhaps, returning to the familiar role of a Trainer in *Pokémon GO*.

Finally, when conducting work on this thesis, I ended up looking at a large variety of games, toys, and playful objects that shared many traits yet which I could not comfortably file under any clear genre or classification. These products and product series such as *Pokémon*, *Animal Crossing*, *Neko Atsume* (Hit-Point 2014), *Dreeps* (Hiraoka, Watanabe, and Fujita 2015), *Tamagotchi*, and *Princess Maker* – to name but a few[172] – range in style and scope, but they all share something in common. Oftentimes these works are pet raising games and character simulators, attempting to portray a playful and gentle representation of a living being and positioning the player as a caretaker of sorts. The range of games, however, is too broad for any pre-existing moniker, and while sometimes the whole game reflects this ephemeral affective aesthetic, often the only thing in common is a shared set of game mechanics and a related feeling tone rather than a clearly identifiable subscription to a particular genre or type.

What these videogames and playful objects have in common are, for example, calls to communicate (integration with social media, highly shareable or social content), collection (of game pieces, achievements, media mix paraphernalia), creative adaptability (worldbuilding, character creation, customization), sense of

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[171]   More work on local histories is needed also because this type of research often suffers from the insularity of scientific publishing: it is entirely possible that there is a wealth of detailed historical research out there already, inaccessible because of language barriers and relatively limited circulation.

[172]   Due to the topic of my thesis, I focused on Japanese games. Examples of similar games outside of Japan include, for example, the products in the *Sims* and *Creatures* series.

permanence (of characters, worlds, and events), lack of clear end and fail states, integration to the everyday, and metaleptic playfulness (temporal and spatial linkages between the gameworld and the world outside it, and conceptual expansion through transmedia development).

During my work, I came to call this broad category of playful media *evocative games*,[173] suggesting that the quality they all share is the aim to evoke particular strong feelings that speak through themes of caretaking, nurturing, creativity, and slow-paced yet procedurally guided progress, all embedded in a form of mediated intimacy familiar from my work with *Pokémon*. This definition is broad enough to be nigh useless, but it – and the process that led to it – convinced me that there is a need for a critical and comparative analysis of these games to better understand them and to connect them, *Pokémon* included, to a larger historical, cultural, and ludic continuum of similar games, toys, play objects, and discussions.

This would be a logical continuation on the themes and theorizations I have offered in this thesis. Concepts such as media mix role-play, character permanence, potential multiplayer game, and ludic metalepsis are all aspects of *Pokémon* devised in this thesis that could, from the basis of theorization done here, be explored further in other playful media, such as in what I now tentatively call evocative games. These examinations would undoubtedly teach us more about *Pokémon* as well as the games, forms of play, and modes of being that share a similar evocative and gentle relation to worlds, bodies, and feelings.

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[173] This tentative title referred partially to Turkle's "Evocative Objects" (2007) and to the idea that there is merit in exploring how objects function as "companions to our emotional lives" (ibid., 5). All games aim at evocation, of course, but these evocative games seemed to stand out by highlighting this quality and being very particular in both the strategy of evocation and the feelings they attempted to evoke. Or so I felt, but who knows what further research will reveal!

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