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**Pokemon and
Japanese
society**

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Introduction

At the basis of this thesis is a search for the elements within Japanese society that have made Pokemon, as a polymedia phenomenon consisting of video games, animation and gadgets of various kinds, a huge success, becoming a worldwide cult.

The motivations that prompted me to delve into this topic stem mainly from my love for both subjects, the world of Pokemon and Japanese society, and more broadly Japan in general.

Pokemon, as a cultural phenomenon, were part of my childhood and through their evolution have managed to reappear and reintroduce themselves several times in my life until arriving here in my thesis. I find it very interesting to address their history as a global phenomenon and why I, like so many other children, have become attached to them.

Japan and its society, on the other hand, have always been a mystery for me to discover as much as possible, and this thesis allows me to delve into its many facets.

Based on these elements, my research is based on the book written by Anne Allison Millennial Monsters, which gives an exhaustive picture of Japanese society in the first millennium and the media phenomena of that time, such as Pokemon.

The aim of this thesis is therefore to analyse Japanese society in the period from the bursting of the economic bubble (1991) to the early 2000s, focusing on the elements of unease, especially among young people, which will later be the strengths thanks to which Pokemon will manage to penetrate (and partly cure?) society.

The thesis is divided into six chapters: The first chapter recounts the biography of Pokemon author Satoshi Tajiri, and how events within his life led to the creation of the idea of Pokemon and its subsequent realisation;

In the second chapter, there is a comprehensive description of the game from which the Pokemon phenomenon originated, its first version. Its workings and mechanics are explored in depth and then it is explained how these were important for the phenomenon to be appreciated by society. The underlying elements of the game are also described here, such as links between elements of the game and Japanese popular culture, the quest to inspire a sense of sociality in players and much more; The third chapter continues with an analysis of the social situation during the same period in Japan. It then considers the causes that led to the bursting of the economic bubble and the consequences that it had on society. In addition, it analyses all the societal inconveniences related to the world of children and adolescents such as bullying (*ijime*), marginalisation and the problems created by the school system;

In chapter four, as in the next two chapters, I analyse in more depth some of the aspects that made Pokemon a cult, adding something to it that perhaps other games do not have and for which they have not received the same fame. In this chapter in particular, I analyse the *otaku* subculture and its importance in making Pokemon a global phenomenon. Indeed, not only thanks to their appreciation of the Pokemon franchise has managed to become a cult in its home country, but they have also supported and been part of its development abroad;

In the next chapter, the fifth, the concept of loneliness and how it afflicts the majority of the population who find solace in alternative goods and worlds such as Pokemon is explored;

In the last chapter, I expand on the theme opened in the previous chapter by giving credit to the *kawaii* culture and how it is used to create objects that can provide emotional relief.

Chapter 1: Satoshi Tajiri and the birth of Pokemon

The world of Pokemon was born from the mind of Satoshi Tajiri (田尻智).

The creator of the famous little monsters was born in Machida, a village on the outskirts of Tokyo, on 28 August 1965.¹ Here he spent his childhood with his parents, his mother a housewife and his father a Nissan car salesman. From an early age, as is typical in Japanese society, his parents urged him to concentrate on his studies, spurring him on to excel and focus his energies on school.

Tajiri, however, immediately shows different interests. School does not attract his attention but on the other hand he proves to be fascinated by the nature around his home.

The streets were not yet paved and the areas around the flats and on the way to school were surrounded by natural places like farmlands, rice paddies and forests full of streams.

Despite his parents' disapproval, Tajiri spends his free time away from home, searching for new places, but above all, for new animals especially insects, that inhabit this unexplored world. His passion grows so great that his friends nickname him Dr. Insect and he admits in an interview that he is considering a career as an entomologist.² In several interviews, the author himself talks about this period of his life, linking it to his passion for insects:

"As a child, I spent my time outdoors in the fields looking for small animals. If I put my hands in a river I would find a crayfish. I would put a stick under the water, make a hole, wait for the bubbles and many creatures would appear. I would take them home and spend afternoons watching them... Each insect was a fascinating mystery to me."³

Despite the fact that the idea of Pokemon is still far from being created by Tajiri's mind, some very important elements are to be found in the period of his childhood.

First of all, the design and name of several pocket monsters (the original name of the Pokemon saga) were derived from the creatures Tajiri collected. Many of the early Pokemon have the shape and characteristics of worms, larvae, butterflies and insects. An example is Caterpie. The name in both English and Japanese refers to the caterpillar and is called Pokemon Baco to accentuate its resemblance to the real world animal.

In this period not only was the design of Pokemon born at an embryonic level but also one of the mechanisms that would make it the most popular game in the 2000s: the collection.

1 Nakazawa Shinichi, The lure of Pokemon page 125

2 Loredana Lipperini, Generazione Pokemon page 52

3 Loredana Lipperini, Generazione Pokemon page 52

For Tajiri, the experience of collecting insects as a child was so beautiful that he will want all children to experience it, making research and collection the founding element within Pokemon. In numerous interviews he will say that he realised that he had created Pokemon to recreate on screen his childhood adventures among different scenarios full of new animal-friends to observe and capture.

However this period of discovery of nature comes to an end.

In the 1970s Tokyo was an expanding metropolis, and even suburbs like Machida were swallowed up in its expansion, becoming an industrial satellite of Tokyo from a rural province. Roads were paved, hills were levelled and rivers were artificially dried up.

By the time Tajiri started his second year of middle school, the places of his childhood had been destroyed to make way for an urban landscape of asphalt and shopping malls.

However, Tajiri was not particularly affected by this change, as he himself admits in an interview with Nakazawa Shinichi in "The lure of pokemon"⁴, from a child fond of insects he became a child fond of video games.

Tajiri adapted to this change and found his new favourite place in the arcades.

Here, in the arcades of shopping centres Tajiri enjoyed spending hours of his life playing games such as space-invaders, of which he became the expert and most devoted player, so much so that when his favourite arcade closed, the owner gave him the machine containing the game as a present. Although it was this passion for video games that made Satoshi Tajiri the man we know now, at the time his parents were not happy with his passion for video games. Frequenting gaming halls was frowned upon, plus this pastime drove him further away from his studies. He often skipped college classes to go to the arcade with his friends and the importance he gave to video games created a distracted attitude at school.

As the author also recounts, his mother often cried and pleaded with him to stop going to the arcade and concentrate on his studies, but Tajiri's passion continued.

Despite the difficulties in school, Tajiri managed to finish college and continued his studies.

His passion led him to enrol and attend a two-year specialisation course in electronics and computer science at the Tokyo National College of Technology. After finishing his studies his father tried to get him a job as an electrician but his efforts were in vain.

Although Tajiri was pursuing a different path from the one his parents had imagined for him, he had a clear idea of what he wanted to do.

Already at the age of eighteen, he had started his own small business together with his arcade friends. Together with his other video game enthusiast friends he had created 'Game Freak'. This

⁴ Nakazawa Shinichi, The lure of pokemon page 125-126

was an amateur magazine in which young video game enthusiasts and experts told their impressions, reviewed video games and divulged tricks for consoles. Here Tajiri found another fundamental building block that later gave him the opportunity to create Pokemon. In the arcade he met Ken Sugimori who joined the founding of Game Freak magazine and took care of the graphics, while Tajiri did the writing. This would also be the case for Pokemon in the future.

In fact, it was Sugimori who created the Pokemon design under Tajiri's guidance.

It was Tajiri himself who created the first copies of the magazine, printing the pages in a copy shop and then pasting them together to create the first issue of Game Freak in 1986.

The magazine became so successful that a bookstore decided to officially sell it.

Tajiri used the money he made to do more and more research and the move proved successful when with the previous game edition the magazine achieved record sales of 10,000 copies, at 300 yen each.

The more "the Game Freak friends" learned about the different consoles and new games, the more the desire arose within them to create a new game that lived up to their expectations.

Game Freak was not the only magazine Tajiri was dedicated to. In particular, he had become an expert on Famicom, the name under which the Nintendo Entertainment System became famous in Japan. It was an 8-bit video game console produced by Nintendo between 1983 and 1995 that was very innovative and managed to lift the video game market out of crisis in 1983.

The console had a higher quality than other video games on the market. In addition, it introduced a very important element: the production of software to third party companies. In fact, it was from this moment on that Nintendo gave its licence to produce games to external software companies.

The innovativeness of this console caught Tajiri's attention and he began writing for various magazines covering the subject, such as: Famicom Hisshobon (later renamed Hippon), Family Computer Magazine and Famicom Tsushin. Although he appreciated the mechanics behind the console, the playable game titles were unsatisfactory to him.

So, in the mid-1980s he decided to turn to game development to fill the absence of interesting games on the market.

Tajiri had never produced a video game before, but in his teenage years he had taught himself how to program. His curiosity led him to try to understand both the inner workings of the game by learning how to program and the outer workings by taking consoles apart and putting them back together.

Sega proposed a competition where they collected ideas for new video games from small teams, the winning team of the Sega company annual game idea award would see their game accepted and

sponsored by the company. Tajiri initially proposed the development of the video game that had got him hooked on video games, a sequel to space invaders. However, the project did not win the award. Despite the defeat, Tajiri was not discouraged and participated the following year with a new idea. The idea for "Spring Strangers", the new video game, won the award. Spring Strangers was only the first of several video games that Tajiri then started to create for various companies.

The action game consisted of rescuing the protagonist in danger by solving 100 levels. Players, who could play individually or cooperatively, had to flip floor tiles to defeat their enemies and move to the next level.

Once Tajiri had finished developing the game, he decided to propose it to a production company. He held in high esteem, Namco. To his surprise, the company immediately decided to produce it.

When the game was released in 1989 it was a hit. Due to its great success, Tajiri was able to use the proceeds to found his own game production company named after his first business: Game Freak.

With his new production company he created other games such as Wario and Mario, a puzzle game starring famous characters from the Nintendo Super Mario saga; Pulseman, a platform game created for Sega.

The turning point, however, came with Pokemon.

The breakthrough that triggered in Tajiri the impulse to create this new video game came from another famous Nintendo platform. In fact, when Tajiri saw the Game Boy, he found it to be the ideal platform for his new idea.

The Game Boy was born in April 1989 by the Nintendo Research and Development group led by Gunpei Yokoi and Satoru Okada. Nintendo found a way to make the game console portable.

Prior to this platform, there were only consoles that needed to be connected to electricity and thus were not portable due to their large size.

To play video games, players had to have a television to connect the console to and a power outlet to plug both devices into.

Nintendo wanted to create a portable alternative to its famous Nintendo Entertainment System that was also durable and low-cost, so that kids could afford it and take it anywhere without fear of it breaking. In fact, the design of the console and cartridges is reminiscent of a desktop console.

What impressed Tajiri most, however, was one of the accessories sold with the console. It was equipped with a device called the Game link cable. This accessory allows Game Boys of any type to be connected together and depending on the video game allows users to interact in different ways.

Tajiri realised that this accessory was crucial to the success of his video game when he dreamt of some insects walking on them and switching from one device to another.

Tajiri's idea was in fact based on cooperation. He wanted players to have fun together and that his game could be a source of a new sociality for kids.

Through cable, children could do what Tajiri had done at their age but in a digital version : collect and exchange insects with their friends.

Thus was born the idea of creating a video-world that replicated little Tajiri's adventures in nature and also gave the new generations the opportunity to experience those sensations, even though the world around them was no longer what it used to be.

So in 1989, a year after the founding of the video game production company, Tajiri set to work on a new project tentatively titled "Capsule Monsters ". He started with his friend and collaborator Ken Sugimori to create the character designs.

They were to resemble Tajiri's fellow players, so most of the initial Pokemon resembled insects or creatures found in the middle of fields. With this idea in mind, the two designers decided to create Pokemon by reinventing existing animals, starting with small insects such as worms and bees, then moving on to modify certain types of fish and molluscs, and finally even common animals such as dogs, cats and horses.

Thus a butterfly becomes Butterfree, a bee becomes Beedrill and a horse becomes a fiery steed called Rapidash. However, insects are not the only element inspiring the design of these creatures. Tajiri and Sugimori also took inspiration from Japanese monsters and mythology, incorporating spectres and creatures derived from Japanese folklore.

One example is Gyarados. It is a gigantic sea serpent with very high combat statistics, and therefore very strong when fighting opponents. In contrast to its first stage evolution Magikarp, whose name and design refers to the carp fish. It is considered a "weak Pokemon" that has no powerful moves to use against opponents and is basically useless in battle. This Pokemon, however, represents a piece of folklore. In fact, a legend is known in Japan whereby a carp, if it crosses a waterfall, can enter the dragon portal and become one itself. This legend is meant to signify that by overcoming many obstacles, such as the carp going upstream and managing to cross the waterfall, one can become stronger.

In similarly, a Magikarp that only knows weak fighting moves will have to go through many struggles to evolve into its higher stage Gyarados , which will, however, be much stronger.

Another example is the Pokemon Gastly. It is represented as a floating black ball covered in purple gas or fire. This would be a reference to the Japanese myth of the *Yokai Sogen Bi*, a decapitated monk's head condemned to wander eternally on earth while being devoured by fire.

It was thus, mixing nature with elements of folklore, that a team of ten designers led by Sugimori drew the first 150 Pokemon that were born. Indeed, to make the game more intriguing, Tajiri invented the 150th Pokemon, the mystery Pokemon.

Mew, the mystery Pokemon, was put into the programme by programmer Shigeki Morimoto as a sort of joke among Game Freak programmers. The Pokemon that could only be obtained through a glitch (a program malfunction) was later discovered by some players. Tajiri then decided to use the presence of this Pokemon to his advantage. By fuelling the rumours that this Pokemon existed, users were even more driven to play the video game.

However, several years passed before the game was released to the public.

While the designers were creating these little monsters, Tajiri was thinking about how to make the mechanics of the game work. Initially, they thought of a mechanism in which the player could buy Pokemon from specialised retailers he/she would find on his/her path. But this mechanic was for the designers too consumptive and based on a binding monetary system within the game.

They then thought of a system based on charisma. Through various actions the protagonist could develop a charisma thanks to which the Pokemon, or just certain types based on charisma, would choose to follow them. Finally they chose the ultimate way, the one still in use today, which is the player's use of a specially made device to capture Pokemon. This device, called a Pokeball, can either be bought or found by the protagonist who uses it by throwing it at a Pokemon that has a varying probability of becoming imprisoned inside it. In fact, the capture of the creature is not guaranteed. The effectiveness of these items is determined by the capture rate, the probability of a Pokemon to remain inside a Pokeball.

With the design finished and the game mode created Tajiri, although harbouring some doubts, submitted the video game to Nintendo's scrutiny.

Despite Tajiri's fears that the game concept would not be fully understood by Nintendo, the company accepted the project with high hopes for the young designer. However, Nintendo invited him to improve it, even having the famous video game creator Shigeru Miyamoto join him. It was he who came up with the idea of marketing two complementary versions. When Pokemon is produced, in fact, two video games will be released: red pokémon and green (or blue in the American and European versions) Pokemon. In the two versions there will be a limited number of Pokemon, so that interaction between players will be necessary to complete the Pokemon collection. In fact, if one player does not exchange Pokemon with another, depending on the version, they will not be able to capture certain Pokemon. Specifically, Ekans, Arbok, Oddish, Gloom, Vileplume, Mankey, Primeape, Growlithe, Arcanine, Scyther, Electabuzz will not be found in green/blue Pokemon,

while Sandshrew, Sandslash, Bellsprout, Weepinbell, Victreebel. Meowth, Persian, Vulpix, Ninetales, Pinsir, Magmar will not be found in red Pokemon.

Thus began a very difficult period for both the production company and Tajiri himself.

The development of the now called Pocket Monsters, as the previous name capsule monsters had given rise to legal problems, was very demanding for the production company with only nine employees. The work to optimise Pocket Monsters lasted six years, in which Game Freak reached the brink of bankruptcy. Five employees decided to leave the project due to heavy work pressure and delayed salaries. For a long time, Tajiri himself had to take off his salary and had to rely on his parents to help him with the project. They gave him their savings on one condition: if Pokemon did not work out and he wasted their savings by doing so, he was not to turn up on their doorstep again. At the end of these six long years, Tajiri handed the finished project over to Nintendo.

Now, however, another problem seemed to stand in the way of Pokemon.

The Game Boy technology, which had initially inspired Tajiri to create this game, had become obsolete. In the six years he had spent improving the video game, the fashion had changed and there were now better consoles with higher graphics and performance. Because of these conditions, Tajiri expected that Nintendo, despite having approved the project six years earlier, would now decide to reject it. Fortunately, once again Tajiri's concerns proved to be in vain. Nintendo saw the previous successes created by Tajiri and decided to market Pokemon as well.

Thus, on 27 February 1996, the two video games were released in Japan, becoming one of the most famous video game cults of all time and making Tajiri a prominent figure in the world of video games.

Chapter 2: The World of Pokemon

2.1-MECHANISMS :

After looking at the development of the Pokemon video game, in this chapter we will concentrate on discovering more about the game's internal workings.

First of all, it is important to understand what genre Pokemon is. One of the innovations that this video game brings is also related to its type. In fact, video games are generally classified into eight macro groups:

1. Action : games of this type reproduce a path, usually guided by a main story, characterised by obstacles to be overcome on a scrolling platform;
2. Adventure : these are video games based on the accumulation of objects that are used to solve a puzzle;
3. Fighting: these are games based on fighting where, as the name suggests, the one who fights the hardest wins;
4. Puzzle games : based on solving puzzles;
5. Role-playing games: digital version of role-playing games such as dungeons and dragons in which player have a narrative in which he/she is the protagonist;
6. Simulation : also called godgames, you create an environment and observe what happens in it;
7. Sports: are based on a simulation of any sporting activity, from football to fishing;
8. Strategy : based on constructing strategies to complete a mission.

Pokemon, in contrast to the games that came before it, finds it challenging to fit into one of these genres. The reason Tajiri's video game may be categorised as a mixed game is due to the multiple components from various genres that make it up.

The presence of an external plot but within which the protagonist can make autonomous decisions that influence the game is a typical element of video games that can be classified as role-playing games. Like role-playing games geared towards older players (like the Legend of Zelda and Final Fantasy series), it develops a fully realised fictitious universe, but it actually thanks to its twodimensional puzzle like design,leaves children to create a large portion of that environment on their own. There are also elements of strategy games, since in order to continue in the game it is

necessary to beat certain enemies and therefore to create battle strategies in advance to be sure of winning, and of adventure games, since the game has among its fundamental mechanisms that of accumulating objects but also the Pokemon themselves. Again, the presence of fights useful for the purposes of advancing through the different levels of the games is based on the logic present in fighting games. Also, the fighting part is present because Nintendo required that the play not only involve exchanges. Nintendo insisted Tajiri incorporate both tactics in the software, claiming that a game without combat would be regarded as uninteresting by kids and would not sell well for Nintendo.

Tajiri actually intended to provide his game's players the opportunity to play something that wasn't constrained by a certain genre but could offer them a variety of options, luring fans of one genre while introducing them to the benefits of another. Tajiri was able to do this while also modifying the game's rules to suit his own preferences. Only the components that intrigued him were taken from the various genres, and he shied away from those that did not.

In his game, Tajiri include the presence of fights typical of fighting games but disagreed with the way violence was depicted in video games. For the author, the presence of excessively violent content in video games was an unnecessary element that might even cause problems for some sensitive players and set a bad example for others. So, he decided to insert clashes by eliminating the violence factor, creating battles without bloodshed and without any deaths. In fact, the Pokemon that loses the battle will fade away because it is exhausted from the fight. It will not die. This is because death and violence are banned in the meta-world created by Tajiri.

However, combat is only one of the main purposes of this video game.

In fact, there are four different purposes. In addition to fighting virtual video game characters and real-life friends, thanks to the Game Link the player can also exchange Pokemon. Real players and their digital counterparts meet thanks to the Union Room, a kind of special room in video games. By connecting with the Game Boy Advance Game Link, players can appear on the screen of both Game Boys to fight and exchange Pokemon. Given that one cannot strictly play alone due to the game's rules, its design envelops players in webs of social ties as intended by Tajiri. In addition, he believed that interactions would sustained outside the confines of the actual game and changed into different forms of money. Tajiri gave the illustration of a young child trading one of his Pokemon for a bowl of ramen or a comic book, blending metaphors, economies, and pleasures. The goal is to use communication with Pokemon to create a community of friends. However, as Tajiri himself put it, what motivates such communitarianism is mostly the desire to form friendships (as in giftexchanging) rather than merely new-age obsessions, monsters, or buddies. Instead, it is the selfinterest (compatible with a commodities economy) of, say, spotting another child on a train

carrying a monster one desires and striking a deal to acquire it. Similar to what the creator Kubo Masakazu has said, the genius of Pokemon is its "open-endedness", which allows kids to take their Game Boys anywhere and, inspired by the desire to get a monster from the child standing next to them, start playing/bargaining with new friends.

The other two objectives, on the other hand, do not require the use of the cable, but can also be carried out without it.

They are based on discovering more information and accumulating more and more creatures and objects that can be found on the map. Players will not only have the chance to discover different Pokemon depending on the different areas they discover as the game unfolds, but they will also discover more information about this unknown world as the story progresses. The fun is both discovering new species of Pokemon and accumulating new knowledge about them and their history. Kids need to grasp the finer points of monsterology in order to catch more Pokemon. The complexity of this cannot be overstated because the Pokemon not only have several qualities (powers, weaknesses, secrets), but also change as they succeed in battles (gaining abilities and occasionally evolving—a characteristic of natural life that Tajiri found particularly fascinating as a youngster). Pocket Monsters are a complex and dynamic living form that require knowledge in order to capture. This transforms playing the game into a pursuit of "pokemonology", which involves mastering a multitude of knowledge and requiring technical skill (inputting information into Pokédexes) and learning techniques. The entertaining nature of the Pokeworld inspires youngsters to engage in educational activities that are relevant to them and more under their control than those of others. According to Kubo Masakazu, the educational system now beats down children by forcing them to memorise countless dry data for demanding exams. Youth who are overly controlled by this regime are refilled by the imaginatively rich Pokemon play environment, which has a gaming path that is not only playable by anybody but also adjustable by preference and want. The stakes in this situation are different from those in school since the monsters are fictional. Both involve study, but Pokemon practically animated the information, resulting in an intense connection and bond. When a player gets to know their monsters and develops their strengths, they develop a personal attachment to them.

The game it is based on three main factors:

1. Play factor: in the case of Pokemon, the play factor is found in the battles between different creatures.
2. Narrative factor : consists in the creation of the Pokemon universe itself, through the images and stories that accompany players within the video game, they can immerse themselves in an alternative reality, along with its history and internal mechanisms.

3. Collecting factor: it stems from Tajiri's passion for collecting insects that lies at the heart of the idea of Pokemon. Many of the game's mechanics are based mainly on the accumulation of Pokemon themselves or objects. It is the element that for many scholars has made Pokemon so famous.

Due to the difficulties in making these games and Tajiri's low budget at the end of the production of these titles, they have glitches. These are anomalous software behaviours that allow players of the video game to perform actions that violate the rules of the game itself .

The following glitches are present in the video game:

- ⑩ Tie glitch : even if the player finishes a fight with a tie result, the audible music is played when the player wins;
- ⑩ Error 0 glitch : this is a glitch that causes several graphical errors in the area called "path 6". Players can activate this glitch by following a set sequence. The player must position himself near the Bug Catcher (one of the non-playable characters within the game) so that it sees him and approaches him to ask him to challenge it. Before the challenge begins the player must use a move that allows him to instantly move to Kuchiba City. From there the player must move to route 11 and challenge another of the characters he encounters . From there he must return to Kuchiba City and talk to any of the characters he finds in the city. Returning to the starting route, number six, a message will appear and a fight with a trainer of the route will begin. After victory a message will appear saying error 0 and it will be activated. The consequences of this error are manifold. All players within the game will move slower. The player will be forced to challenge coaches randomly while moving around the map, some randomly played sounds will be heard due to the glitch, Coaches along the route may disappear, reappear or teleport while the player is moving, the player may fail to open the menu showing the characteristic message "ERROR 0", The game may freeze, Some texts may appear abnormal. Saving at the end of the procedure will make the effects permanent.
- ⑩ Evolution stone glitch : Some Pokemon can only evolve into their next form thanks to tools called stones. Thanks to this glitch, if a Pokemon levels up at the end of a fight with another Pokemon whose index number corresponds to the index number of the necessary stone, the game will erroneously start the evolution as if it happened normally for reaching a predetermined level.
- ⑩ Indoor fishing glitch : In the Hanada Gym and Lorelei's room at the Blue Plateau, the water tiles have wild Pokemon; this allows the player to fish inside the building.
- ⑩ Invisible PC glitch: Since the Hotel of Tamamushi is based on the graphical structure of a

Pokemon Centre, if the player goes to the spot where the PC should be and presses A, he can access the PC screen. Other invisible PCs can be found in the Safari Zone (Hostels 2, 3 and 4) but they are located off-screen and can only be accessed via cheats.

- ⑩ Lift Key Glitch: In Rocket Hideout, if the player stands to the left of the Recruit who has the Lift Key and speaks to him, the tool will appear below him.
- ⑩ Nidorina's verse glitch : During Professor Oak's presentation at the start of each new game, Nidorino's sprite is associated with Nidorina's verse.
- ⑩ NPC Glitch :If the player does not have the Guren Island Gym Secret Key and uses Surf on the east coast and then returns to the ground directly in front of the Gym door, a man will appear on the roof of the building. Similarly, if in the Kuchiba Gym the player walks left and up until facing the bucket at the bottom left and then presses A, one of the Gym Trainers will be moved incorrectly; it will return to its position once the text window for the bucket is closed.
- ⑩ Exhausted Pokemon glitch: If the player has some exhausted Pokemon on his team and others still in strength, he can deposit the latter in the PC while remaining with only the exhausted Pokemon on his team. After taking three steps from the PC's location, the player will suddenly be out of the fight; however, if you only take two steps, save the game and turn it off and on again, the step counter will be reset and the player will be able to walk two steps at a time. If you start a fight with only exhausted Pokemon, the message of defeat will appear immediately.
- ⑩ Comet Glitch: Although the Comet move was designed to never fail, in Japanese releases it can fail if the opponent has increased its Elusion.

Despite the fact that all of these are programming problems, thus denoting a low quality of the game, they had a positive effect on players. Instead of complaining about malfunctions, they exchanged what they learnt from the video game and looked for new errors out of curiosity or to see if they could profit from them. Thus, even a negative side of the video game became an element of exchange and unity for the players.

2.2-PLOT:

Before starting the actual adventure, the player must create an avatar. Given the technology available at the time of video game creation, the process is not very complex. The player can choose the sex of his/her character, whose appearance cannot be created but is already preset, and the name by which he/she will be called in the game.

After making and saving this information, the game begins.

The first thing the player sees is the character created inside his room, in which there is a bed, a basket, a computer and stairs leading to the lower floor.

There the players will find another character who identifies herself as the player's mother. With her the player will have a short farewell speech, where he will discover that for children of his age, approximately 10 to 12 years old, it is normal to leave home to explore the world.

The digital figure will in fact say: "Right! All boys leave home someday. It said so on TV" .⁵ As well as greeting the protagonist of the video game, encouraging him to leave, she will also add that Professor Okido is looking for him.

In order to find him, all the player has to do is try to leave the town of Pallet Town (composed of player's house, player neighbour's house and the professor's laboratory) by proceeding north on the map.

Arriving at the edge of town a figure will run up to the protagonist telling him to stop and follow him because without a Pokemon to protect him in the tall grass he will be in danger.

This is because as we will learn later in the game's storyline, in the exploration areas, which most of the time consist of tall grass, players can find wild Pokemon. Wild Pokemon means Pokemon without a master, free to appear and go where they want. When the player walks into the same area as one of these Pokemon it will attack him. A different battle screen will appear, however, than when fighting another player or the fictitious opponents in the video game. In this case there is another option that offers us the possibility of catching a Pokemon with a Pokeball and making it one of player's Pokemon.

The Pokeball is the only object in the game with which a player can capture wild Pokemon and increase their collection. There are 3 different types of Pokeball: Standard, Great, Ultra. The only differences, apart from their aesthetics, are the increasing likelihood they have of capturing a Pokemon and their cost.

In fact, within Pokemon there is a system of coins thanks to which the player, by going to special places called markets, can buy various objects including the very useful Pokeballs.

Before the exploration of the game can begin, however, the player must follow the character's instructions and follow him to receive his first Pokemon. Without it, the adventure cannot begin. By following Professor Yukinari Okido the player reaches a laboratory where he is placed in front of a table with three Pokeballs, where he will be asked to choose one.

Having a Pokemon, the player can begin his adventure by walking through the fields represented on the screen. Pokemon's world is made up of a variety of playful habitats that are superimposed over digital grids, including national parks, adorable villages, and a variety of playful forests, trees, and trees.

⁵ Pokemon videogame

There are a number of tunnels, bridges, walkways, and highways connecting all of these panoramas, which go forever into further virtualized space. In search of new Pokemon the player travels these pathways over a landscape of cascading frontiers.

The atmosphere is very reminiscent of the one Tajiri recounted in his childhood. In fact, the landscape consists of trees, streams and grass from which sprout creatures unknown to us, such as the young Tajiri's insects. In an attempt to recreate the typical scenery of his childhood in the countryside, Tajiri not only created the landscape, but also tried to recreate some of the typical elements of sociability in these places. In fact, as the player walks, he encounters many figures, especially old people and children, who are always willing to tell him something. Sometimes they will give the player useful speeches to advance in the game, sometimes at the end of a speech they will give the player gifts to thank him, and sometimes they will just give him curious anecdotes.

The game is divided into cities. Each of them serves both as a level to be passed, by defeating the gym-leaders and earning their medals, and as a place to explore. Each of them has its own story. The first city player encounters is Tokiwa city. Recalling Tajiri's own desire to pay homage to the nature of his childhood, the name is derived from *tokiwa-iro*, the green colour of evergreen plants. In addition, the slogan of this city is: 'Tokiwa city, Eternal Green Paradise'. Being the first city, it is the simplest visually and in terms of possible interactions for the player to get used to the dynamics of the game.

In fact, as soon as the player arrives, he will see the three recurring elements in each city :

1. The gym: where player fight with the gym leader, a virtual opponent usually divided according to the characteristic element of its Pokemon,
2. The Pokemon centre : a kind of hospital for Pokemon whose function is to restore life points and thus heal our team of Pokemon. On the second floor of this structure is usually the Union Room, the room where fights and exchanges with people from outside the game can take place,
3. The Pokemon-market: these are structured like mini-markets, here the player can buy useful items (usually: Pokeballs, potions or remedies that cure Pokemon) or sell their items to accumulate coins,

Despite the fact that it is one of the simplest towns players will encounter in the game, it also has its peculiarities. First of all, the game does not make the gym leader available for a battle in the gym. This is because the Pokemon possessed by the player are still too weak. The game masks this problem by telling the player that the leader of the gym is not present, so the gym is closed. It will later be discovered that although it is the first gym player see it will actually be the last one he have to face.

As in any other city, in addition to the three characteristic elements indicated above, there are one or more peculiar structures. In this case in the midst of the other houses is a structure called the 'coaching school'. It is described as a place where older people teach to young and inexperienced ones how to be more efficient in Pokemon fighting.

In the game, this building remains marginal. Its symbolic meaning will later be illustrated and expanded in the TV series based on the video game released in 1997.

In fact, in episode number 9 "The School for Trainers" the same building is depicted as in the video game. In this episode Tajiri tells a little about himself, giving new meaning to the structure found in the video game. Wanting in some way to represent the Japanese school system, it is an elitist school that demands the best from its students. Satoshi, the protagonist of the anime, who in this case also represents the fate of Satoshi Tajiri, in this episode fights against one of these model schoolchildren. Despite the fact that he does not shine in intelligence and does not attend any major school, he wins against his opponent. This fight represents how Tajiri, despite not being an excellent schoolboy, managed to be more successful than people considered better than him. It is, besides a retelling of Tajiri's story, a veiled criticism of the Japanese school and social system. It is indeed very rigid and is based on the assumption that only those who excel in school can then excel in life.

The case of both Satoshi, however, belies this idea. Both of them are the bearers of an alternative path. Their success is not necessarily linked to a life of schooling and excellence, but can instead be driven by passion and direct experience.

Another video game and animation character connected to Satoshi's life is Shigeru.

It is defined as the rival of the player. Basically, it is a childhood friend of the protagonist/player who harbours a sense of competition with him. The character and name are based on Shigeru Miyamoto, the designer who helped Tajiri in the creation of Pokemon.

Probably also the relationship of the two characters is based on the bond that also binds their counterparts in the real world. Despite the fact that there have never been any problems between the two, in some of the interviews Tajiri has given, it is noted that the video game designer has sometimes been annoyed to share the creation of his idea with others. In addition, they are both video game designers, so they are, in a way, driven to positive competition with each other.

Several times in the video game the two protagonists will meet and clash as they both pursue the same goal: that of becoming the strongest coach of all.

Besides Shigeru the player will meet other non-playable characters (abbreviated as a NPG). They are characters controlled by a computer using algorithms or predetermined behaviours that respond to stimuli given by the game. They are scattered along the routes and in the various towns for three main reasons:

1. Constructing a coherent reality within the game consisting not only of a landscape but of people who inhabit it and who can provide player with information about it;
2. A ploy to explain to the player certain game functions that are foreign to him or her by avoiding the use of an external narrator;
3. Being battle buddies to level up the player's Pokemon so that they can exceed the game's level limits.

Usually, these characters fall into categories found in any country town such as old people and children of the player's age.

Passing through a forest, the second town encountered by the player is Nibi City. Its name is derived from *nibi-iro*, dull grey, and emphasises the typical colours of the city. As if to represent the phases of Tajiri's life, the second city is presented as a city greyed out by urbanisation. The city's slogan also refers to its colour, calling it grey like lead.

Like the previous city, it has the three places common to all places that will be presented to players as cities (Pokemon centre, market, gym). In this new city, however, the player can finally access the gym and discover the inner workings of this structure. Thus, the player discovers that each gym specialises in a different type of Pokemon. In fact, the Pokemon are divided not only by race, but also by type. In fact, the fantasy Pokemon are typologized according to the habitat they are linked to, with a schema that also structures the powers each one holds. The types are linked to the element most akin to the little monsters and they are: normal, fight, water, fire, grass, flying, electro, earth, psychic, rock, ice, beetle, dragon. Obviously, there are types that are weaker or stronger towards others. When the player enters this gym, he will see a place similar to a *karesansui*, a type of garden in

Japanese culture that can be defined as a rock garden or dry garden. As with the creation of the Pokemon, seen in the first chapter, Tajiri also wants to blend tradition and innovation in the setting of his world, giving this metaverse its own history, but nevertheless connected to the author's culture and lived experiences, and thus also passed on to players.

Recalling the type of Pokemon present within this gym, this garden consists mainly of rocks in the midst of which challengers await the player before he reaches the figure placed on the pedestal in the centre of the gym, who as his prominent position implies, is the head of the gym. The player must defeat this opponent if he wants to proceed in the game map and thus in the subsequent levels. In fact, if this figure is not confronted, one of the NPGs will stand in front of the player and escort him back to the gym.

Another peculiar structure, which refers to the concept that at the basis of Pokemon which entails the desire to create a video game as well as the universe in which it will exist., is the science

museum. It, unlike the gym, has no real purpose. Whether or not the player enters this space in order to complete the game, there will be no advancement. It is one of the elements added to give the player extra information about the Pokemon universe. Players are therefore not obliged to enter this building, but usually out of curiosity and a desire to enrich their knowledge they visit it anyway. It costs 50 coins to enter. On the first floor of the building there are Pokemon fossils, which are supposed to belong to prehistoric fossils. This introduces Pokemon to the presence of a natural history peculiar to this universe, with characteristics similar to ours but also with some differences.

In fact, it will later be discovered in the various video games and animation that the world of Pokemon was actually born from an egg of these creatures. So, the world in which the player lives is essentially created by a Pokemon. They, like our dinosaurs and animals, have evolved over time and their ancient counterparts can now only be found in the form of fossils. Thus creating a story that can be divided into : creation of the world, prehistory, recent history and contemporary history. All available data indicates that Pokemon first appeared on Earth around 2 million years ago. They were, according to the internal history of the game, initially examined in the eighteenth century by a French count, whose work quickly spread to other European nations. *Pokemongaku* did not arrive in "our nation" until later, though. But when it did, a Japanese researcher made the significant discovery that Pokemon can change into new forms in 1899. As a result, the study of Pocket Monsters was substantially improved, and ever since the publishing of his thesis, "Reflections on Pikachu's Evolution," Japan has been considered a "leading country" in the field. At the forefront of this study today is Professor Oak, a professor of Pocket Monsters at the Scarab Beetle University.

On the second floor of the building is a display case with meteorites from the moon found on the mountain on the route the player will have to take after leaving this city. In fact, the mountain takes its name from this event, being called Mount Moon.

The second floor is therefore a tribute to space exploration and in particular to the moon landing. In fact, near the shrine one can talk to an old lady who will tell us something about the moon landing. She will say: " July 20, 1969. The first lunar landing! I bought a coloured TV to watch it".

Connecting to the event of the moon landing, in the same room there is also a space shuttle called space shuttle Columbia, in honour of the real American space shuttle that made one of the largest numbers of space flights. After the tragic accident in 2003 where the shuttle was destroyed and the passengers on board died, this attraction changed its name in the Pokemon video games to just shuttle. This is one of the other elements that create a link between the reality of the Pokemon universe and the outside world. Thus, the universe that is created, in which players and fans of the title can immerse themselves, never loses touch with the reality around them, prompting players, as

in the case of the shuttle, also to delve into events outside the video game without becoming an alienating reality.

On the way to the fourth city, one encounters what are referred to as the 'bad guys' of the video game.

Team Rocket presents itself as a sub-species of criminal association. Their main aim is to accumulate money and power through the exploitation of Pokemon. They frequently commit bad deeds like stealing Pokemon or priceless items, even going so far as to commit extreme crimes like killing Pokemon. Team Rocket also finances and carries out cruel experiments on Pokemon for research purposes. Its motto, posted on the wall of one of their many bases, is 'Steal Pokemon for profit. Exploit Pokemon for profit. All Pokemon exist for the glory of Team Rocket.'" Its ultimate goal is world conquest through Pokemon.

It is in Mount Moon that one of these recruits tells the player, who of course has the task of defeating him in order to make good prevail over evil, that he and his companions are carrying out illegal excavations from which they obtain extremely valuable fossil Pokemon. Instead of donating them to the museum to help cultural development, the team of miscreants want to sell these precious objects to make a profit. They are a representation of how very often the exploitation of the earth and its inhabitants is the basis of profit. In the video game we see that in the end all the things in Team Rocket's possession come from theft or kidnapping and that therefore their power is based on nefarious deeds. Despite the fact that some of their goals, such as having more Pokemon, would also be attainable through non-harmful actions, they always choose the less ethical path. They thus represent another kind of path to success in society. Having in mind only the goal of being considered powerful and to rise to the top of the hierarchical class, some individuals proceed a climb that does not take into account its consequences. Thus, for example, multinational corporations destroy the pristine nature of the author's childhood by replacing it with more profitable shopping malls, without taking into account the causes of this forced urbanisation, but thinking only of the higher economic returns.

Not only does this speak of the direct destruction of nature, but also of the creation of changes in the lives of the people living in that area. In fact, an area that becomes peripheral from the countryside suffers an increase in property costs that are sometimes unbearable for people who have to leave the house they have lived in for years. Unfortunately, sometimes the consequences on people are more direct but power clouds the judgement of these types of individuals. So, to achieve their goals, these individuals, like those of Team Rocket, have no qualms about people's suffering. The most relevant case as far as Team Rocket is concerned concerns the killing, the only one in the game since Pokemon, as mentioned earlier, do not die from clashes with other Pokemon, of a Marowak.

The various facets of the Team Rocket are examined within the animation. Here, not only is their leader presented, who in the video game will be met as the narrative conclusion approaches, but also various recruits who follow the above-mentioned personality pattern. However, Team Rocket in the animation are different. They represent a different category of people. In fact, they are not evil and very often, apart from trying to capture the protagonist's Pikachu, they do not do much else. On the contrary, in some episodes they help the protagonists in situations that are also considered wrong for them.

This is due to the fact that they stand for the kind of individuals, particularly young people, who are left to fend for themselves and try to find their path by taking detours that entice them in with empty promises and the prospect of group membership.

In addition to new interactions, the player experiences new landscapes as the game progresses, thus creating a complete and realistic map.

After the two towns and the path through the tall grass, the player discovers the existence of mountains, which are not only in name but also in fact. In fact, the landscape visible on the screen changes to a rocky environment with all its features and the inside becomes dark, as in a real mountain.

This is where the adventure part of the game comes out. In fact, the map of the place will not be fully visible, and the interior of the mountains will be built like a labyrinth. It will therefore be difficult for the player to figure out the right path to take to reach the end of the route. Assuming that the player is a little explorer like Tajiri was, the game requires the player to explore the entire map to find objects, shortcuts and new Pokemon.

Hanada City whose name is derived from *hanada iro*, the light blue colour of the flowers of the *Commelina communis* commonly known as the Asiatic dayflower is the third city, excluded the native city of the player, that appears. Here a new element is introduced, that of water. In fact, the city is characterised by outlets on a river and is described by the map as surrounded by water and full of water resources.

By unlocking more and more elements that allow player to explore new areas of the game, the player will then be able to cross bodies of water and fish. In particular, Tajiri in the interview with Nakazawa in "The lure of Pokemon" emphasises the importance that a feature that may seem very trivial, such as being able to fish, has within the video game:

“Particularly good ideas , if they impact the game as a whole , are worth implementing even if they are modest in size. One example of this occurs in the development of Pokemon around the autumn of 1995. It was already settled that when a player went into a wetland area of a field, a water type Pokemon would appear. It was only after this that I thought of adding a fishing rod as a tool. If the player had a fishing rod

when entering a wetland area, he could use it to catch a water-type Pokemon. Whether or not to do so would be left up to the player's discretion. Because the game's map had always had areas with water as an attribute, like swamps and the ocean, this development increased the quality of the game design."⁶

The freedom of being able to do or not do an action that gives the player room to manoeuvre is very important in order for him to experience belonging and control over the reality in which he is playing. Thus, simulating an experience similar to that of real life, where each person can make different choices and paths.

In this city, one can also purchase another item very similar to a fishing rod, namely a bicycle. There is a shop on the map called Miracle Cycle. Upon entering, the player can admire a number of different bikes. Here, however, is one of the game's bugs, which, given its resolution, it is not known whether it was intended or not.

Upon entering the shop, the seller will inform the player that the cost of the bike is 1,000,000 coins, but the game allows the player to own a maximum of 999,999, so that he will never be able to own one by paying coins. However, a resolution to this problem was also introduced in the game, which makes it difficult to tell whether it was an intended problem or not. Continuing in the adventure, the player if he talks to a specific NPG, the president of the Pokemon fan club, will get a bicycle voucher, which allow him the take item without having to pay an impossible amount of money.

This emphasises, as with the fishing rod, the player freedom of choice, choices that will influence the continuation of the game. In fact, if the player does not talk to this character because he is focused on other objectives, he will miss the opportunity to obtain a bicycle.

Also in this shop, if the player talks to the manager and makes him finish his speech, he will receive an item as a gift. It seems that the game wants to reward the player for being sociable and interested in other characters. In this way, the game encourages sociability, which even if in a fictitious form, creates interest in others. It reflects a type of social interaction lost due to urbanisation. In fact, these dynamics seek to replicate what Tajiri experienced in his hometown. In a place that follows the rhythms of nature and not the frenetic rhythms of industry, more time is spent with others.

The game seems to want to remind us that this time, although according to the dynamics of industrialisation, is considered wasted time but in reality, it is not. By talking to the various characters, one discovers important information about how the game works, about the world around them, and receives useful gifts.

Exploring the rest of the city, one will find a house with a character in front of it who identifies himself as a police agent. The policeman will tell the player that the famous Team Rocket has come

⁶ Nakazawa the lure of pokemon page

by to break into the house to steal a MT (short for technical machines, objects in the game that allow Pokemon to learn useful moves outside or inside fights). By continuing in the game and achieving certain objectives within the story, the player will be able to return to the same place to which he now has access. In fact, only after talking to Bill in his cottage on the way back will the policeman no longer block access.

Unlike the other towns the player has visited before, this town has many more possible interactions. Visiting the houses in the town you will find several characters whose interactions complete the plot of the game.

In addition to the victim house of Team Rocket there are two other houses that can be visited. One is the house of the medal expert. These medals are earned by the player every time he defeats a gym, as a testimony to his victory. They are necessary because without them one cannot advance to the next gym and finally to the Pokemon League, the ultimate goal of the game character who wants to become the strongest trainer of all.

Inside this house is a character who explains, if required, to the player what is involved in obtaining each medal. Upon winning each of them the head-coach will also hand the player a MN (acronym for hidden machines). They are machines that like the MTs that teach Pokemon fighting moves.

The owner of the house will tell the player that:

- ⑩ The first medal, the Boulder Badge, will give the player the MN flash that allows Pokemon to light up dark places within the map;
- ⑩ The second medal, the Cascade badge, will give the player the MN cut that will allow the player to cut some shrubs that unlock some hidden paths;
- ⑩ The third medal, the Thunder Badge, will give the player the Flight MN which allows the player to move from one part of the map of the region to another between cities already visited;
- ⑩ The fourth medal, the Rainbow Badge, will give the player the Force MN which gives the Pokemon the ability to move boulders that block hidden roads;
- ⑩ The fifth medal, Soul Badge, will give the player the surf MN which allows the player to swim across bodies of water finding Pokemon and hidden locations;
- ⑩ The sixth medal, Marsh Badge, will give the player the MN marsh badge that allows the player to smash some boulders on the map that block certain passages;
- ⑩ The seventh medal, Volcano Badge, will give the player the Waterfall MN which allows the player to climb waterfalls;
- ⑩ The last medal before the Pokemon league, the Earth Badge, given to the player by Giovanni the head coach of the first city visited and the rocket team, will give the player the Rockfall MN which will allow the player to climb up some slopes.

The other house that can be visited is Melanie's house. Upon entering it, the player will find an elderly couple who call themselves trade lovers. Talking to the elderly gentleman, he will ask the player if he wants to trade one of his Pokemon for one of his rarer ones.

The town's gym will look like an indoor swimming pool, representing another of the typical places in Japanese culture.

In fact, most Japanese schools are equipped with swimming pools and learning to swim is a fundamental part of the physical education given to children.

After finishing the video game there will be another place accessible to the player, the Hanada cave. In fact, only coaches who defeat the league can enter this cave. In fact, it is said by the video game that it is under the custody of the coaches in the league because of what it guards. At the entrance an NPG called a fantasy coach will check the number of medals obtained by the player.

The cave presents itself as a collection of limestone rocks in which, thanks to natural causes, a favourable environment is created for the proliferation of Pokemon of different species of a higher level than those usually found in nature. The game explains how the Pokemon in this place uninhabited by humans had to adapt to the habitat and this made them stronger. Their high levels are probably the reason why access is forbidden by the super-four to normal trainers, who if they captured these Pokemon would have Pokemon of the same level or higher. Due to a programming problem in the video game, this area is referred to as the unknown zone. The cave presents itself inside as an intricate, multi-storey labyrinth. In the deepest meanders of the cave, the player can find Mewtwo, the legendary Pokemon of the video game.

It represents a very important element. Mewtwo is a unique Pokemon and is the strongest of all in this video game. Its uniqueness comes from the fact that it is not a natural Pokemon. It is in fact the result of a genetic experiment carried out by humans inside a mansion hidden on the map.

The scientists wanted to create one of the strongest Pokemon ever. With this dream in mind, they began experimenting with Pokemon. Specifically, they decided to genetically modify a Pokemon considered extinct, called Mew, which is also the 151st mystery Pokemon. This Pokemon is a representation of the effects of experimentation carried out by humans on creatures considered by them to be inferior and/or exploitable. The Pokemon Mewtwo is in fact used as a lab rat and despite scientists becoming aware that it can feel pain and feelings, they continue to test it. This triggers in it an ever-increasing anger stemming from its exploitative condition, which then leads it to destroy the laboratory and the crew of scientists inside it. In the game after its escape it comes to protect itself in the Hanada cave where the player will find it.

Its complex figure finds greater expression outside the video game. In fact, one of the first Pokemon films is dedicated to it. It plays a dual role in the film. Initially it is considered the main enemy as its

only goal is to take revenge on mankind by destroying it. As the story progresses, however, its role as a victim is revealed. Its rage is in fact only a consequence of his powerless victim status. It will be discovered how before it was the antagonist of the story who goes around destroying streets and cities Mewtwo was used as a lab rat. Here it represents both how very often anger and negative actions stem from previous abuse and the harsh reality behind the experimentation.

The Pokemon's anger is in fact rooted in its previous treatment and it will be an act of love that will stop it. Seeing that outside the lab, relations between Pokemon and humans are also about love and not just abuse, the Pokemon decides to quell its fury and try to change its outlook and build relationships based on friendship. The reality it presents is that of the abuse inside laboratories by animals and lab rats who are exploited to death.

Next you arrive in a new city, Kuchiba City. Kuchiba presents itself as a port city, surrounded by the sea. This city is based on the Japanese port of Yokohama. The port of Yokohama was the first to be opened to trade with foreign nations in 1859. Like the port of Yokohama, Kuchiba City also has a working harbour where several ships dock.

The first ship visible is the motor ship Anna, a cruise ship that travels around the world. The player can board the ship after receiving a ticket from Bill. Bill is an NPG who appears frequently in the continuation of the game and serves the player for various advancements. He is credited with the system whereby the player can deposit Pokemon inside a kind of computer called Bill's pc.

After exploring it to receive a move needed to continue in the story, the player will get off the ship and it will depart. The video game has a glitch whereby the player can walk through walls and reenter to explore the structure.

In the port of the motor ship there is a truck that seems to have no specific purpose, except scenic one. Many legends have arisen around this, the most famous being the one concerning Mew. In fact, by using Force (a Pokemon move) on the truck, according to such rumours, it would be possible to find a Pokeball containing the Genetic Pokemon. When accessing the M/V Anna for the first time, the player cannot yet surf and reach the truck. However, if a Pokemon that knows the move Cut is exchanged for it, it is possible to not board the M/V Anna and still enter Route 10; once the MN03 Surf has been obtained, it can then enter the harbour and reach the van.

Another way to reach the van in the first-generation games is to obtain the MN01 from the captain and then be defeated by any Trainer on the ship. In this way the player is teleported to the Pokemon Centre in Kuchiba without the Motorship Anna setting sail but in possession of the MN Cut. Player can then return to the dock at will, but if he boards the ship, when he disembarks it will set sail. Precisely because of these peculiarities, in the third-generation remakes, a Sink (it is a remedy introduced in the third generation) was inserted under the van as an easter egg (it is a content that

developers hide in a video game in order to add content for fans), a tool that cannot be found in these games and therefore extremely rare.

In the city, in addition to the gym, the Pokemon centre and the market that are everywhere, player can visit the Pokemon fun club. This is an organisation where many NPG gather to meet and talk about their favourite Pokemon. Many non-playable trainers in the game refer to themselves as Pokefans because they belong to this club. By talking to the head of the club you will be able to get a voucher to buy the bike in the shop seen earlier.

Next to this building is a house. Upon entering it, the owner of the house named Elyssa is introduced. Thanks to her, the player will have the only chance of obtaining a Farfetch'd. In fact, within the video game this will be the only chance to obtain this Pokemon.

In another house, the player will meet a character who identifies himself as Guru Fisher. After telling the player his story he will give him a very useful tool, the fishing hook called the old hook.

It is used by the player to fish Pokemon by dipping it into pools of water he finds.

Picking up on the idea of this gym as a place of foreign exchange, the gym leader of this town is defined as non-native, although the nationality of the player is not identified.

The gym leader is defined as the enlightened American, due to his nationality and his use of electrictype Pokemon.

Matis is the name of the gym leader. This name has its origins in a flower from the temperate zones of America and China called Clematis, which means good success and commitment to what you are doing. The gym leader is presented as a soldier who participated in an unspecified war, during which electric Pokemon saved his life. As a member of the army, Matis was a rather cautious commanding officer. He was an aircraft pilot, and used Electro-type Pokemon to power up his aircraft; a technique that saved his life at least once. In addition, Matis saved the life of a Trainer in his Gym, who was in the army with him.

Because of his character described as slightly paranoid, probably due to the war, the gym is littered with traps.

In the first room, the one before where the gym leader is, there are a series of electrical traps that block the player's passage. He will have to find the right sequence of switches behind bins to block the traps and advance in the path.

The switches are located inside bins scattered around the gym; if even one switch is wrongly ordered, the mini-game will be reset.

After defeating this trainer and obtaining the flash move all subsequent paths through mountains and/or tunnels will be in the dark, player will need to teach this move to a Pokemon to see inside the passage.

After passing other paths through rocks and tall grass, the player will encounter a new city: Tamamushi city. The name comes from *tamamamushi-iro*, the iridescent colour of buprestidae, a species of beetle with iridescent colours.

This city has many more buildings than the others and in fact the player discovers that it is the most densely populated city in the Kanto region, the region in which the story takes place, named after the Japanese region with the same name.

Skyscraper-like buildings tower up here, structures that were not present in the other cities populated instead by small dwellings.

The largest skyscraper is a shopping mall, called Tamamushi *Departo*, which in this case replaces the convenience stores found in the other cities more similar to *konbini* (derived from the contraction of the transliteration from English of convenience stores, small to medium sized shops selling various products usually 24/7).

Its morphology highlights the differences between a rural town and a more developed urban city. Probably tracing the evolution that took place in Tajiri's city, the shopping centre represents for him a fundamental element in both the city's transformation and its own internal transformation. Having discovered his love for video games here, which led him to design the same one that the player is playing, Tajiri seems to want to pay homage to this place. If the player enters the mall building and goes up to the second floor, as a reminder of the author's experience, there will be a video game shop where the salesman displays some models to the public. Just as in Tajiri's teenage years, there was a video game shop inside the mall.

Next to this skyscraper is another one called Tamamushi Maison which is in the shape of a multistorey apartment block. It too is a tribute to a place very dear to Tajiri. In fact, the structure is intended to represent the headquarters of the Game Freak production company.

In this place the player will be able to interact with characters who are supposed to represent the staff of the game developers. The character representing Tajiri himself will give the player a diploma when he has completed the Pokedex.

On the roof of the building, the staff members will make another gift to the player. Here, in fact, there is a Pokeball in which an Eevee, a fairly rare Pokemon, is imprisoned, which will thus become player's property.

Also, in memory and as a tribute to places important to the author in the city, there is an arcade. It is called the Rocket game corner, highlighting links with the Team Rocket criminal association. Inside the game corner there are about thirty slot machines, with eight of them having people already sitting on them, one that is labelled 'out of order', one that says 'reserved', and one in which someone has left the keys. The player needs a piggy bank in order to play, in which he has to put

coins in to make the games work. Each win earns players coins, which they can then exchange for prizes at the prize collection office. In this case, the player can exchange the coins either for MT or for different Pokemon, depending on the version of the game. Although it seems to be a popular place with travellers and tourists, citizens who take pride in the beauty of the city feel that the arcade is negative to their image.

However, as the name suggests, the arcade has links to Team Rocket. In fact, the arcade is a cover for one of Team Rocket's hideouts.

By carefully examining the room, the player can find a secret button that will lead him to the basement where the gang's criminal activities take place. Although the game does not explicitly state objectives to be achieved but lets the player follow his own path, one of the implicit missions is to defeat Team Rocket, as they personify the negative agents and the players impersonate the good and positive ones. So, whenever the player runs into the Team it is best to discover their plans and sabotage them. As the final boss of the hideout, we will find Sakaki, the leader of Team Rocket as well as the gym leader of the first town visited by the player, which in fact was closed due to the absence of its gym leader. After the player defeats him here, in another hideout of Team Rocket and finally in his gym with his role as gym and Team Rocket leader will be disbanded.

Although this city is very urbanised the gym looks like a huge greenhouse and the gym leader specialises in grass-type Pokemon.

The inside of the gym is a labyrinthine garden full of female trainers that you have to fight against if you want to reach the gym leader. Precisely because she uses grass-type Pokemon, her name Erika is derived from a plant.

Continuing on in the game player arrive at a town that is very famous to fans of the game, Shion town from *shion-iro*, the purple colour of the asters' flowers. In the meantime, it can be seen that unlike the places seen before it is called town and not city, this is probably because the name city is only given to places where there is a Pokemon gym.

The place is in fact famous within Pokemon geography for the Pokemon tower.

It is the largest building in the city and looks like a very tall seven-floors tower. Upon entering it, the player discovers that it is a cemetery, as the floor is covered with coffins.

The player is prevented from accessing the top floor until he receives a special instrument called a wraith, which can detect and recognise the wraiths that inhabit the tower. In fact, many wraiths live in the tower as it is a graveyard. Along with the spectres, this is the only place where Cubons can be caught. This is because the tower houses the body of one of their specimens killed by the Team Rocket.

On the seventh floor, which is inaccessible at first, the player will find Mr.Fuji (a npc representing an old man who cares for abandoned Pokemon) kidnapped and threatened by the Team Rocket for blaming them for killing the mother of the Cubon.

This spectre haunts the tower because she was killed here by a member of the Team Rocket while trying to protect her child. They are in fact being hunted down to remove the skull they wear as decoration and sell it on the market.

In order to defend and look after these and other mistreated Pokemon, there is a building in the city called Mr.Fuji house that serves as a shelter for Pokemon.

The Pokemon town is known, unfortunately, for creepypasta (horror stories circulating on the web) called 'lavender town (the english name of this place) syndrome'. It has been rumoured that millions of Japanese children between the ages of 10 and 15 have committed suicide because of their visit, as players, this town. The assumption is based on the fact that the town's music influences people's moods so much that it leads them to suicide. The music is characterised by high pitched tones and binaural beats, sounds that are too low to be audibly perceived but are formed in a way that triggers chemical reactions within the human brain. Some accounts assert that Satoshi Tajiri, the game's director, intended for the game's tone to 'annoy' rather than hurt children, while others contend Nintendo worked with the Japanese government. Obviously, the more news of the syndrome spread, the more testimonies were found to add details to the story. Shortly afterwards, some users claimed to have seen a Pokemon not present in the game called the 'buried alive model', which is considered to be the true boss Pokemon of the city tower later replaced in production by the Marowak but with the possibility of appearing in the presence of some players. Unlike the other Pokemon, this spirit Pokemon would eat the player if defeated.

All these are just web theories, never credited by more authoritative sources. The only thing that was done was to change the musical theme of the city in later versions of the video game and in some versions to remove the presence of the tower directly.

The city itself, legends aside, has a darker and different tone from the rest of the video game. Here the theme of death is introduced, a theme that, given the absence of blood and violence, seemed banned within Pokemon. Instead, it seems that the intention of the designers was precisely to softly introduce the concept of death to the players, without the use of macabre scenes but reminding them of its existence.

In the next City visited by the player, the atmosphere present throughout the game will be restored. Sekichiku City, deriving from *sekichiku-iro*, the pinkish colour of the Chinese carnation, is a normal city, with no music or creepy bugs.

Inside is a gym that brings to the fore a very popular theme in Japan, that of ninjas. The town's gym leader identifies himself as a ninja and so the gym resembles a traditional *dojo* (traditional place where martial arts are practised).

In fact, the gym has a parquet floor with Koga, the ninja gym leader at the centre, waiting for the player. In addition to being a master of Pokemon, Koga is a master of ninjutsu (ninja fighting techniques). In fact, the name Koga is derived from the name of one of the two main schools of ninjutsu Koga-ryu. Based on the assumption that this place is run by a ninja, the gym has hidden traps. The player will see an empty parquet floor but in reality, there are invisible walls set up by the gym leader to obstruct the player's passage.

The peculiarity of these fake walls is that using the model of Game Boy following the one for which Tajiri has programmed this game, they will become visible due to the addition of colour in the new Game Boy colour.

In the next town, despite the ninja master Koga living in Sekichiku, there is a Karate Dojo. In the game, it is portrayed as a sort of second gym in Yamabuki City, from *yamabuki-iro*, the golden colour of Japan's rose. As the game progresses, it is revealed that this and what is referred to as the official gym were in conflict to obtain the gym title and the *dojo* lost. However, wanting to be home to fights and training has never closed and has become a place where karate masters and NPG who identify as black belt fight willingly with those who ask them to test their skills.

The interior looks just like a dojo with wooden floor and walls decorated only with two parchments inscribed respectively "maximum dedication" and "compound fracture".

The second mini gym is located in Yamabuki, a very large city full of palaces and modern shops.

The plan and history of the city are inspired by Tokyo, so the city is full of streets and buildings. It is called the largest city in the region although the most inhabited remains Tamamushi City. Together they represent the most developed and modern poles of the region.

Taking up this idea of development and modernity in the centre of the city stands a skyscraper belonging to the Sylph Company, a company producing Pokemon technology. It is in fact this company that produces the famous Pokeball and MT taught moves and provides to supply the markets of different cities. Because of their status as a major multinational corporation, they will be attacked by Team Rocket who wants to take over their technology to make a negative use of it, pursuing their evil purposes.

Exploring the venue to defeat Team Rocket, the player can read several notes that inform him of some of the game's curiosities. A sheet informs him that four Pokemon, referring to Kadabra, Graveler, Machoke, and Haunter, can only evolve by exchanging them for another player. Another report confirms that Pokemon can learn over 160 techniques.

In the last hidden note, the player discovers that Porygon is the first virtual Pokemon created at the Guren Island Laboratory. So, the Pokemon grown in the lab become two: Porygon and Mewtwo. The major difference is that Porygon becomes an animated object while the aforementioned Mewtwo is treated as an object.

In addition, the player discovers the existence of a laboratory on the island not yet visited.

In the island different subplots will intersect. In fact, this is the place where:

- ⑩ defeating the gym leader, you have the opportunity to beat the head of Team Rocket, thus leading to its dissolution;
- ⑩ You will find the laboratory where they were experimented Pokemon and of which the player had only summary information previously.

Retracing the map, the player will find himself at the starting city. This is a way to emphasise a continuity of the game, which does not exhaust what it has to offer with the end of the central plot but hides many other goals achievable even after finishing the narrative arc. In the starting city the player will find a hidden street that will take him to the last city where he will have to defeat the last gym leader.

The island of Guren, from *guren-iro*, the crimson colour of the red lotus. The island is only reachable by the player after he has learned to pass the waterways, with the move surf, and is hidden at the end of a stream that flows into the ocean surrounding Kanto. It is visible to the player only when it is not far from docking on the island, so to be found the player must have the will to explore the map. As for the whole game, Tajiri wants to push the player to explore and unravel the mysteries of the place that surrounds him as he did discover different places and micro ecosystems in his hometown. Although the island is very small it houses two large facilities along with the usual three (market, Pokemon-centre and gym). The first visible structure is the Villa Pokemon.

The player is obliged to visit it because inside there are keys to access the penultimate gym to defeat to get all the medals. The last will be obtained by defeating the head of Team Rocket. The building is now abandoned but visiting its interior the player discovers that before being abandoned it was the residence of a famous scientist.

In fact, scattered around the villa, there are diary sheets written by its old owner, which bear the following inscriptions:

- ⑩ July 5: Guyana, Sud America. It was discovered a new Pokemon in the middle of the gungle.
- ⑩ July 10: I called Mew the newly discovered Pokemon.
- ⑩ February 6: Mew gave birth to a new Pokemon. I named the little one Mewtwo.

⑩ September 1: the Pokemon Mewtwo is too powerful. it's useless... i can't control it! The diary pages are attributed to Doctor Fuji who may have corresponded with the elderly gentleman rescued by the player at Shion, who never mentioned his past as a scientist.

Reading these pages, the player learns the existence of this new Pokemon, born within the laboratory located on the same island.

In fact, the other large building in front of the villa is the Pokemon lab. Inside there is a portrait of Dr.Fuji, which feeds the suspicion that the elderly gentleman found earlier is actually the doctor in question. Reading other documents, it turns out that the technological Pokemon, Porygon, was also created here.

Since the scientist who lived on the island has now gone inside the two places players will find only npg useful only to fight and level up their Pokemon.

On this island there are several glitches. The most famous is the appearance of Missing.no. The name "MissingNo." is used for invalid Pokemon with valid Pokemon index numbers and is an abbreviation of "missing number", derived from the Japanese name, *Ketsuban*. This Pokemon glitch is the remnant of Pokemon programmed into the video game and then removed. In this case some data remained inside the video game making these Pokemon appear the same to the player. However, this glitch often also corrupts the player's bet slip that will display pixels from other Pokemon. Also, some items, including the player character will be duplicated.

The official Nintendo website had an official MissingNo. description in the "troubleshooting" section:

“MissingNo is a particular programming error, and not a real part of the game. When you get such a Pokemon, the game changes a little, especially the graphics, which becomes "scrambled". To fix the graphical problem, try to free the Pokemon MissingNo. If the problem persists, the only solution is to restart the game. This means deleting the current game and starting a new one.”⁷ Many of these problems will be solved in later games.

The player, as previously done for this island, must retrace the map to defeat the last gym leader and head of Team Rocket. Defeating the player will end Team Rocket and stop their evil actions. Winning all the medals the player is close to fulfilling the desire of his character, that is to become the absolute champion of the region.

To do so he will have to beat the Superfour. In fact, to become the champion players have to beat the designated coaches who follow a very precise hierarchy. In different cities there are different gym leaders, players have to beat them and collect their medals as evidence. After beating them, the player must defeat the Superfour, considered the strongest coaches in their region. Finally, player have to defeat the coach who before him defeated all of them and holds the title of champion of the

⁷ <https://wiki.pokemoncentral.it/MissingNo>. Visited: 22/04/2023

league. Once the player has defeated all these NPGS will become champion and the narrative arc in which he wants to beat all the coaches to become the strongest one will end.

Despite all the plot goals (become the strongest coach, defeat the Team Rocket) will finish this does not mean that the game itself is over.

To achieve the goal of collecting all the Pokemon, the player must continue to explore the map, which makes the game difficult to complete in a short time.

The world inside the screen becomes a real world to explore and meet new characters that you had left out previously.

So, the distinctive aspect of Pokemon is the mapping of a (nearly) limitless network of objects, locations, monsters, and relationships that break down and reassemble into an infinite variety of components, powers, traits, and weapons. Although the lines between these things are porous and adjustable, the goal of this game environment is to create a complete world, or perhaps an empire, out of little components that feels as home and warm as it does knowledgeable and empowering. The key is weaving relationships in addition to obtaining, that is. In Pokemon, these two merges into one, since obtaining both necessitates and fosters relationships, albeit with counterparts that are both real (monsters) and virtual (other children).

Chapter 3: The world outside Pokemon, overview of Japanese society

The enthusiastic response Pokemon garnered from the Japanese people was undoubtedly a key reason in its success. By playing as them in a video game, Tajiri appears to have understood the wants and needs of Japanese society, particularly those of the game's primary target demographic, children and young people and the situation they live in.

The 1990s Japanese society is shown as a complicated society coming to terms with its inherent issues on both an economic and social level as the new millennium approaches.

In this chapter, I will try to provide a comprehensive overview of the social climate in Japan in the 1990s with a special emphasis on young people, who are the primary demographics for Tajiri's video game.

To better understand the Japanese scenario of the late 1990s and early 2000s, we need to take a step back. First of all, it must be emphasised that Japan strongly felt its status as a country defeated in the war and thus prolonged the feelings that accompany the post-war period. This vision of Japan itself meant that the main aim of the nation was to economically surpass other nations and create a wealthy nation where its inhabitants could aim for abundance.

With this idea in mind Japan underwent, between the 1950s and the turn of the millennium, the "Japanese miracle": an era of rapid expansion during which the economy doubled in size every year. After experiencing growth that averaged 7.0 percent between 1954 and 1958, 10.8 percent between

1959 and 1964, 10.9 percent between 1965 and 1968, and 9.6 percent between 1969 and 1973, Japan's GNP was the second largest in the world by the mid-1970s, trailing only that of the United States. Between 1955 and 1975, production increased significantly across practically all sectors: five times in commercial shipping, thirteen times in steel production, forty-nine times in machine manufacture, and one hundred and thirty-three times in auto manufacturing. ⁸This was possible thanks to a number of domestic and foreign factors that include: a skilled and disciplined labour force; industrial experience; the need to completely rebuild industry; the early demand created by the Korean War; a stable currency with a cheap exchange rate with the dollar ; access to global markets; low-cost raw materials and rapid technological advancement. These factors were to considered for the high-speed growth Japan experienced after the war. Although the 1973 oil crisis slowed the economy's expansion,

⁸ Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 67-68

Japan's transformation into an industrial powerhouse and one of the world's richest nations continued unabated. Japan effectively established itself as a *kigyo shakai* (business society) throughout the 1970s.

In this period, thanks to the establishment of a powerful economy that can sustain the society, the Japanese objective of well-being shifted from the society to the individuals.

The way of living of the people changed in these years. It is in this period that the huge urbanisation that transformed the nature of Tajiri in an urban city was. With the expansion of the industry more people abandoned the countryside and started to live in the city centres. Also a cause of this expansion, industries required more space, so what was a periphery became part of the expanded city, link to it for allowing people to go to work. In fact, whereas in 1955 half of the labour force were self-employed farmers, 70 percent were wage labourers by 1975, with 34 percent involved in manufacturing and construction, 52 percent in the tertiary sector, and only 14 percent in agriculture⁹. Not surprisingly, urbanisation quickly took root in the postwar years, and though the cities had been emptied during the war, 72 percent of the population lived in urban centres by 1970 (roughly the same percentage as in the United States). Thanks to the industry expansion also the tenor of life changed. With higher incomes families became able to consume more, starting to create a more consumerist society. The nation's model was big business, which was structured on a vast network of corporations comprising big and small businesses that were affiliated with the government (*keiretsu*). The principles and practices of labour management used by large corporations expanded throughout the nation, creating the perception of Japan as a single corporate entity.

This was pursued thanks to the principles of Japanese management: promised lifetime employment, raised based on seniority, quality control cycles, and all companies' unions. In exchange industries expected that employees give all to them, their identities, their time, and their commitment. Another characteristic of Japanese middle-income earners is their willingness to self-sacrifice in order to gain good feedback from others. When asked to do anything by a colleague, these men find it tough to say no. Furthermore, they are more likely to feel bad if they do not work overtime or take a break while others are still working. The more typical "Japanese" worker they are, the more they will strive to meet others' expectations, even if it means sacrificing their own frustrations, worry, and fury. In Japanese society, well-adjusted corporate soldiers—or even those who go too far—have been the norm. But because society appears to have their best interests in mind, they eventually come to have a very narcissistic, self-centred, and almost childlike perspective on the work world around them, believing that they are the ones who govern the business and that they are irreplaceably valuable employees. Additionally, they are exempt from any other duties, such as providing for their families or being a decent husband or father.

⁹ Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 68

This created a particular pattern in society whereby the most sought-after figure became the salaryman. Childrens start to be educated by their *kyoiku mama* (educational mother) to become disciplined and hardworking like a salaryman in the hope they become one when they become adults. Mothers, since the post war, started to occupy the role of controller and educator of the child, ensuring that the children grew up as society demanded: disciplined and ready to follow in the footsteps of "the average Japanese man". Also, a mother role is done by the hostesses in the countless "snack bars" and clubs that serve corporate warriors, the way salaryman are called. The role of these women is to pamper these men and support their otherwise frail egos. The negative aspects of these traits were disregarded while the economy was growing and material prosperity kept increasing. In fact, they did not emerge frequently enough to warrant careful consideration. However, the 1990 economic bubble changed the situation. Many wholly dedicated workers experience severe despair and eventually commit suicide when their corporate identities are taken away from them.

This system started to collapse in the 1980. Both Japanese society and politics ignored the situation, prolonging a system that led to the bursting of the economic bubble in 1990. It was already too late when the government decided to step in. As a result, the year 1990 marks a turning point in Japanese society.

For the Japanese, it represents the collapse of both their economic system and the societal resources that support it, making it more than just a financial problem. During the 13 or so years of economic stagnation in the 1990s and early 2000s, Japanese consumers underwent a significant and protracted emotional adjustment. A succession of key "psyche shifting" events, such as the end of lifetime work and the uncertainty surrounding business and government pensions, compelled Japanese consumers to adapt to a new reality throughout this time.

Since then, many people have had to find new employment or start their own businesses in order to support themselves.

The recession that hit Japan in the 1990s was therefore related to the country's unique economic system, which is based on the growth engine supported by the iron triangle (industry, bureaucracy, and single-party politics) as well as by the ethos of harmony and tenacious work ethics of a homogeneous and highly disciplined population. Systems that once helped Japan achieve material success have also been put under pressure. These include the high expectations put on people to work hard and study hard, demands that, while producing a nation of skilled and diligent workers, have had negative effects: high stress, overwork-related deaths, bullying and burnout at schools, and an unbound individualism, as many people now believe. Even the presence of the bubble.

The deadlock caused by the country's massive export-dependent economy, which has left its domestic sector largely underdeveloped, is sometimes believed to be at the root of the so-called Japanese disease. The 1990 has been a period of national concern. Unemployment and layoffs, which were previously unheard of, increased drastically during this time period.

Suicides increased, with many persons jumping in front of trains; 228 deaths were reported in eastern Japan alone in 1998, when the national suicide rate increased by 26 percent.

The assurance of lifetime security and employment for people who thrive in school (*gakureki shakai*, literally "educational pedigree society") was a concept of a previous era that now seems to disappear. According to this pattern there were people devoted to their jobs (*kigyo shakai*) that now have been rapidly destabilised. A majority (68 percent) of respondents to a Hakuodo study in 1998 reported being frequently worried or nervous (up from 38 percent in 1990), and an even higher percentage (74 percent) acknowledged feeling frequently angry or irritated (up from 46 percent in 1990).

Everyone seemed to be stressed, both those with employment and those without.

Karoshi, meaning "death from overwork," is a phenomenon where workers pass away unexpectedly due to physical ailments like heart attacks and strokes brought on by cumulative stress. *Karoshi* typically affects employees in their forties and fifties. *Karoshi* is caused by more than just physical illnesses. The most difficult to discern *karoshi* phenomenon is *karo-jisatsu* (suicide by overwork) caused by extremely stressful working conditions. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons for a person's desire to commit suicide, it is especially difficult to establish a causal link between the person's motivation to commit suicide due to an unpleasant work schedule and surroundings. One of the distinctive features of *karo-jisatsu* is that persons who commit suicide frequently blame themselves for failing to complete their objectives. These people's suicide notes are frequently laden with words of apology and remorse for causing their family and company "a lot of trouble." Since the late 1990s, there has been a significant increase in both the number of *karoshi* cases that have required worker's compensation and the number of outstanding applications. *Karoshi* (reportedly kills ten thousand Japanese men each year) has been much in the news, when media start to report it in the late 1980s, particularly since Prime Minister Obuchi's death in April 2000 from a stroke caused by it. It was widely assumed, by the fact that he had only taken three days off in the twenty months he had been in office. This is a national trend that has been exacerbated by the recession. Workers took an average of 9.1 out of 17 paid vacation days in 1998, down from 9.5 in 1995.¹⁰ Another example is given by Junichi Watanabe, a forty-one-year-old middle manager of a major steel manufacturing corporation, who jumped from the top floor of his company headquarters.

¹⁰ Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 75

He had had no more than two days off during the previous six months. In order to meet the demands for increased production as well as to train junior staff, he would get home at midnight almost every day and also went to work in the holidays. He was not a workaholic by nature. He was a friendly person who enjoyed his social life and was also a respected supervisor at work. His peers regarded him as a mentally-balanced person with a high sense of personal integrity¹¹.

Just as the propensity for suicide of “corporate warriors” who gave up their lives for the company, *karoshi* was another to the image of Japan.

Other important elements can be found in the funding from Japanese households into industries as a cheap source of money, primarily through commercial banks, has consistently been squeezed by conditions like an extremely high cost of living rigged by an overregulated and inefficient import, distribution, and retail structure, the inadequacies of social security, and a tax system that punishes consumption.

In addition, the relationship between the recession and a variety of foreboding occurrences and phenomena observed in the country during the decade has increased the impact of negative psychology and a pessimistic outlook on the country's economic future.

One could argue that children are particularly affected by the current state of ambiguity since they are unable to receive assurances regarding the benefits or purpose of hyper performativity due to being overburdened by the demands of the "academic pedigree society" which has become the norm. The future is unknown to them because they can see through the struggles of their parents (for whom the "managed society" now provides unemployment, restructuring, and layoffs in place of stable employment). Given that children are the future by definition, this lack of stability not only affects today's youth's sense of well-being by making them feel removed from their parents' worlds and more rooted to the present than to clear goals or visions of/for the future, but it also casts a pall over the mood of the nation. This has accentuated the problems present in the youth population even more, creating a reflection on both the economic and the social and educational systems.

However, the bursting of the economic bubble is only one factor that worries Japan in 1990. Two other important events began to worry the nation not only about its economic performance but its future in general. In fact, in 1995, only a year before the release of Pokemon, Japan was shaken by two news events: the Hashin earthquake and Aum shinrikyo's sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway. These two events, which may seem disastrous, but which will not be particularly significant for Japanese society, represent the rupture of two fundamental structures: Japanese politics and the myth of the 'average man' or 'good boy'.

¹¹ Yuko Kawanishi, Mental health challenges facing contemporary Japanese society the lonely people page 40

The Hanshin earthquake was one of the strongest earthquakes in the history of Japan with a magnitude of seven point on the Japan meteorological agency seismic scale. The worst affected area was Kobe where 4,600 of the totals of 6,434 people whose deaths were attributed to the earthquake died in the most intense 20 seconds of tremors. With all these victims the Kobe or Hanshin earthquake was the deadliest earthquake of the 20 centuries, second only to the great Kanto earthquake with 105,00 victims in 1923.

Because of the earthquake approximately 400,000 buildings, numerous elevated road and rail bridges, and 120 of the 150 [quays](#) in the port of Kobe were irreparably destroyed, blocking not only the lives of millions of people but also the economy of the entire region. The tremors also triggered the occurrence of 300 fires and the disruption of water, gas and electricity supplies. In the hardest-hit neighbourhoods, one in five of the structures were completely demolished or rendered uninhabitable. Over half of the homes there were deemed unfit for habitation, and about 22% of the offices in Kobe's central business district were rendered useless. High rise structures constructed after the 1981 building code experienced less damage, despite the fact that some were completely destroyed and others had significant damage. Those that weren't built to these specifications experienced significant structural damage. Only 30% of the Osaka-Kobe railway tracks were still in use after the earthquake. Part of National Route 28 was destroyed when the Kobe Rapid Railway station at Daikai collapsed. The Shinkansen high-speed rail line's wooden supports fell inside ostensibly sturdy concrete pilings underneath the tracks, forcing the closure of the whole route.

The most visual depiction of the earthquake was the devastation to the highways and subways, and pictures of the elevated Kobe Route of the Hanshin Highway collapsing were featured on the front pages of newspapers all over the world. A link that carried 40% of the Osaka-Kobe Road traffic was blocked when ten spans of the Kobe Route elevated highway were knocked over in three locations throughout Kobe and Nishinomiya.

Because of the steel-reinforced concrete construction, the majority of people in Japan thought that the buildings were comparatively safe against earthquake damage. Although it was initially thought that the construction had been done carelessly, it was later established that the majority of the collapsed structures had been built correctly in accordance with the building codes in effect in the 1960s. The steel-reinforcement requirements from the 1960s had previously been found to be insufficient and had undergone multiple revisions. The most recent adjustment, made in 1981, proved to be successful but only applied to new structures. This incident highlighted the Japanese bureaucracy's incompetence to prevent and respond to crisis situations like the one the earthquake presented as well as the still insufficient earthquake-proofing measures in a nation at high danger of

earthquakes. This is supported by the fact that the Yamaguchi-gumi¹² provided the first effective assistance following the earthquake, which was vital precisely because state aid first failed to organise adequate relief to the area. In fact, as part of a massive relief effort for earthquake victims, the Yamaguchi-gumi began distributing food and goods. The Kobe people needed this assistance because government assistance was uneven and disorganised for several days.

A social fault line that runs beneath the surface of the ostensibly homogeneous "mass middle stratum society" (*chikan taish shakai*) was brought to light by the disproportionate amount of hardship the earthquake inflicted on the economically, socially, and politically vulnerable segment of the population.

The other shocking event that occurred the same year was the Aum Shinrikyo¹³, attack at the Tokyo subways. These events shocked the population because of two main elements: the effectiveness of dangerous and atrocious activities they do and that these activities were perpetrated by who was pointed as a perfect example of a successful person.

Before becoming well-known for its terrorist activities, Aum Shinrikyo was a religious movement founded in 1984 by Shōkō Asahara, whose real name was Chizuo Matsumoto, that blended Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and parts of the Japanese Shinto culture. This new religion, officially recognised by the Japanese government in 1987, became very attractive to Japanese university students, especially from the upper classes. In fact, the internal structure of the cult was somewhat reminiscent of the Japanese school system. It was based on the accumulation of knowledge from writings approved by the cult leadership and physical endurance tests. Reminiscent of the Japanese school system, each new level of education, and therefore also hierarchical, is passed through specific examinations, similar to the dreaded university entrance tests. In fact, the Japanese students face, from the age of 15 to 18, sections of hard study in order to be able to pass respectively the entrance exams to secondary school and university, so much so that these exams are known as *jiken jigoku* or infernal exams.

Many of the sermons delivered by the organisation attracted ordinary people as they spoke of the very problems that society, and individuals with it, were experiencing as interpersonal and relationship problems. In order to attract the elite population as well, the speeches were filled with scientific theories and references to modern science as the symbol of modern society. Based on some reinterpretations of Buddhist principles, the cult based its teachings on an estrangement of the individual from modern society, considered full of vices and deviant. However, for some of the

12 Yamaguchi-gumi is Japan's largest *yakuza*, a type of gangster organisation typical of Japan, who have its original base in Kobe.

13 オウム真理教 *Oumu Shinrikyō*, where Aum is the Japanese romanisation of the sacred Sanskrit syllable Om and Shinrikyō is the three kanji whose meaning is 'teaching of truth.'

followers, this ascetic vocation took on aggressive aspects that pushed them instead to act directly on society.

So, the group in May 1995 decided to attack with sarin gas ¹⁴ and hit some of Tokyo's underground stations.

The train system to Tokyo was and remains one of the epicentres of the lives of Japanese, who spend internal hours on trains to reach their workplaces, schools or other places of association.

In order to carry out the attack, the five chosen members of the sect entered the metro as ordinary passengers carrying plastic bags wrapped in newspaper that contained the nerve gas. When they arrived at the appointed places, they left the bags on the ground and punctured them with the tip of an umbrella.

Anne Allison in her book states that in this and also the regime of control by which it demanded absolute subordination from members, Aum Shinrikyo upheld not so much an alternative to postwar corporatization as extreme manifestation of it. Also, there is a citation of Marilyn Ivy, that pointed out: "Aum pushed the logic of Toyotism and Japanese nationalism to its limit, replicating with a hypermachinic intensity the production of loyal subjects and workers devoted to the corporate endeavours of Asahara Shoko"¹⁵.

The lines targeted were the Chiyoda Line, the Marunouchi Line and the Hibiya Line. The focal points of the daily commute for Japanese commuters.

The attack, ordered by the sect leader, left 13 people dead and over 6200 intoxicated. The attack on the Hibiya line train leaving Naka-Meguro Station was the worst, leaving eight people dead and 275 others critically injured.

At Kasumigaseki station (Chiyoda Line), the sacrifice of an underground worker, Tsuneko Hishinuma, save the lives of all the passengers. He discovered one of the bags containing the toxic substance in the car of a train that had just arrived, picked it up, attempted to absorb the leaking liquid with newspaper, and moved it to the latter's office with deputy stationmaster Kazumasa Takahashi, where the two reported the discovery to the authorities, only to die, helped to lessen the impact.

No Japanese person would have imagined the underground to be dangerous until this incident. In fact, due to the lengthy travel times in Tokyo and the hectic lifestyles of the Japanese people, trains are like a second home to the majority of the population. For this reason, it was believed that there was very high security within the subway before the attack.

One of the greatest claims to fame of contemporary Japan is the low degree of security worry brought on by a low crime rate.

14 A nerve gas classified as a weapon of mass destruction.

15 Anne Allison ,Millennial Monsters page 78

After catching the perpetrators of the terrorist attack, the police discovered that the members of the organisation were the perpetrators of other crimes known to the press. The severity of the threat that a single cult organisation managed to pose to public safety, the failure of the Japanese police to stop the group's meticulous planning and execution of sarinisation as well as other violent crimes, and another attack akin to this one that occurred in Matsumoto a year earlier in which seven people were killed and 144 injured shocked a populace used to violent crime, shock the population and break their sense of security. The poison gas assaults of Aum Shinrikyo broke this false sense of security that permeated both the mundane daily life and the idea of normalcy. Although there were far fewer deaths than those brought on by atomic bombs fifty years prior, the sense of violation was intense and searing.

This sense of violation and loss of security was increased by who were the perpetrators of these actions. In fact, the police discovered that the perpetrators of the attack, and more generally the main members of this cult, were young men and women from the Japanese upper- middle classes who were considered unremarkable. They were graduates from Japan's most prestigious universities. They would have had to put in years of hard work and discipline in a study regimen that resulted in entrance examinations that were so difficult that some students had to retake them for years before passing in order to be this successful. But just as they were about to start enjoying their rewards, these members of the elite class left their high-status jobs as physicians, business leaders, and public workers, and joined Aum Shinrikyo.

So, these young men and women had not only accepted but also attained the *gakureki shakai* standard, which has served as the cornerstone of postwar reconstruction.

These young adults were the reincarnation of the perfect subject for modern Japanese society. Not only did they belong to prestigious families, already being classified as privileged, but they were also members of prestigious universities. In Japan, in fact, those who can enter in the determine university (the most prestigious is the one of Tokyo followed by the Kyoto one), are guaranteed to find rewarding and remunerative employment at the end of the course of study. Both the public administration and private companies, when making selections to recruit the personnel they need, give great consideration to the educational background of the candidates, or rather, they attach the utmost importance to the schools or universities of origin of the candidates. They generally tend to recruit graduates who have studied at the institutions they consider most prestigious. Universities distinguished from each other by selectivity and teaching efficiency are ordered according to a precise hierarchy that, although informal, is well known to all.

The school system is indeed viewed with great importance in Japan. Education is therefore taken as a benchmark of an individual's prowess both in terms of study and morality. This is because to even

get into university by passing tough entrance tests requires a lot of discipline and dedication. Two qualities very much cherished by the Japanese in the Japanese themselves. Schools are actually taught fundamentals to students in addition to the fundamental ideals that underpin Japanese society. Specific attitudes and behavioural patterns that are regarded as positive by the majority of society are instilled in students by their encounters with teachers. Additionally, a particular viewpoint on how society runs is gained. To the most fundamental level, children are taught how to establish cooperative relationships with their peers and to be to school on time. Stress how the foundation of the Japanese workforce is cooperation. By the end of their education, students will have learned that admission to higher education institutions is based on "merit" and is therefore "equitable"; that everyone who works hard has an equal opportunity to receive an education; and, implicitly, that those who fail in school and beyond are solely accountable for their failures.

This theme of "equitable" education for all is also reflected in the subsequent employment situation, where to get a good job, one must deservedly study for it.

So, the exams are seen as a rite of passage that teaches young people to develop self-discipline and defer gratification, dividing who is ready for adult and prestigious work and who are committed to remain at lowest levels. Based on this reasoning, only those who are committed, those who behave well and those who more generally respect the standards of society manage to reach certain levels, building a society based on a standard pattern to be followed if one wants to reach the top of society. In this case, the youth of Aum broke the pattern that was perpetuated to them. Despite being considered 'good boys' from whom only prestigious jobs and impeccable behaviour were expected, they were instead terrorists.

This terrified the Japanese because everything that had followed a definite pattern before, giving them the illusion of control over the whole of society, had now crumbled before their eyes. What might have been labelled as normal before was now something to be feared.

After the bombing, there was an increase in reports of young Japanese, often teenagers, considered normal by society who instead committed terrible acts. All these articles emphasised the normality (*futsu*), or sometimes even the good behaviour, of these individuals who were identified as role models before the violence committed.

Throughout the late 1990s, the number of young people arrested for murder increased. This wave of violent crimes committed by children in Japan in the late 1980s and early 1990s have attire attention trough the lives of Japanese children from the public, educators, and the media. The family (most often the mother, but occasionally the father), as being careless, indulgent, or otherwise dysfunctional, as well as bullying by other kids, have been the most common targets of blame. The school system has consequently been the focus of various revisions. The "baby-killer" phenomenon

reached its maximum level in 1997 and doubled over the first half of 2000 over those for 1999, going from twenty-seven to fifty-three.¹⁶ Childrens belonging in this age group were then only 9% of the population, yet they were responsible for 34% of crimes such as murder and robbery and 45% of violent crimes such as assault 25% in that year. In the first two months of 1998 alone, according to estimates by the National Police Agency, 38 crimes were committed by young people armed with knife, including 7 murders, 12 robberies and 11 assaults. In 19 of these cases, junior high school students were arrested. In the school year 1999, which ended in March 2000, for the first time since 1997, when cases of school violence were included in the Ministry of Education's annual survey, they exceeded 30,000. In total, there were 36,600 cases of violent behaviour by students in primary and lower secondary schools and high schools, 3.8% more than the previous year. The violent incidents were most common in lower secondary schools, 28,100 cases, followed by those in upper secondary schools, 6,800, and primary schools, 1,700; 18,900 cases involved attacks by students on other students, 10,700 cases of damage to school property.

The number of student attacks on teachers rose to 5,000 (11.2% more than the previous year), while 2,000 were against members of the public. In the Yomiuri Shimbun of 4 August 2000 appeared an article entitled "The number of young people arrested for murder doubled to 53' and in fact compared to the number of juveniles arrested for murder in the first six months of 1999, 27, the first six months of 2000 recorded first six months of 2000 showed a considerable jump, especially with regard to high school students, 14 compared to 5 in the previous year¹⁷.

The children suddenly became strange, creating the expression "*kodomo ga hen da*" (children become strange) well-known and too common, subjects from whom adults no longer knew what to expect and of whom to be afraid. In some cases, the parents of the children themselves began to claim that they no longer knew their children, and that up to that point they had deceived them by pretending to be 'normal'. According to research from the early 1990s, many seemingly quiet and attentive students, who were considered "normal," were in reality living a double life. In 1992, Japanese police detained

14,700 youths on suspicion of inhaling or spreading solvents or other dangerous chemicals. In 1993, 10% of the 34 billion cigarettes sold were counterfeit. Minors unlawfully smoked cigarettes sold in Japan. According to the same period's estimates, 12% of high school students in the Tokyo and Saka regions had alcohol problems, while more than 60% drank on a regular basis. Almost 3% of middle school students had tried solvents, marijuana, sleeping pills, stimulants, or other drugs, and one in every six had shoplifted.¹⁸

¹⁶ Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 78

¹⁷ Daniela de Palma, *Il sistema educativo giapponese* page 61

¹⁸ Daniela de Palma, *Il sistema educativo giapponese* page 39

An example of this double life Japanese teenager is represented by the case of Shonen A. In 1997, illustrated in “Japan after Japan” by Tomiko Yoda¹⁹. Shonen A was a fourteen years old murderer who killed a sixth-grade boy (about 12 years old) named Jun-kun whose head was found in May 1997 on the gate of Tomogaoka Junior High in Kōbe. Before the arrest of the 14-year-old boy, the police suspected the culprit to be a man in his thirties to forties, never would they have suspected a schoolboy.

Soon after was captured, taken into custody, and then put at a juvenile mental health facility. Before begin arrested he describe at the police why he has done such a terrible action with a letter:

“Thinking ‘I’ll do it,’ I was able to enjoy killing someone, alone, without anyone noticing it. The fact that I’ve purposely gathered the attention of the public is that I’d at least like to have my self-recognized as a real, living human being, even if only within the fantasies of all of you—I, who until now, and from now on, continue a transparent existence (*tōmeina sonzai*). At the same time, I haven’t forgotten, too, the revenge toward “‘compulsory education” (*gimu kyōiku*) which made me a person of transparent existence, nor the society which gave birth to “‘compulsory education”²⁰.

In this letter, the killer points out that the reason for his violence is the very condition in which society has led him to live. The school system, defined in this case as 'compulsory education', supported by Japanese families has led the boy to exasperation and to lead an existence that he himself defines as transparent, devoid of motivation. The only thing that seems to give the boy joy is the killing of other people, as a form of amusement and a challenge to himself and others, to get out of an existence that becomes invisible to him and useless to live. The school system that imprisoned Shonen A is perpetuated at home by his parents, especially by his mother as an educational support figure. It is she who will later speak about the affair in a book dedicated to the boy, '*Shōnen A: Kono Ko wo Unde*' (that sell over 350,000- issue soon after its publication). It will be in this book where, in addition to apologising to the victim's family and to society in general, she will admit to knowing another version of her son and to knowing nothing about the person who turned out to be the killer. The mother describes how her son, or at least the son she knew, was a 'normal', regular person who suddenly turned out to be abnormal, without her suspecting anything. The person who perpetrated these crimes is now only known to himself; his parents are now not familiar with him. In the book his mother wrote:

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20 Tomiko Yoda, Japan after japan page 205

“But the “A” I knew, I was too fond of him I suppose, was demonstrative in his feelings, a delicate child with a kind spot. . . . The “A” that comes out in the memo (to the newspaper) was not the son that we had an image of all along. The memo includes the stories of the slaughter of cats, and of the violence towards his fellow students, of which this child (*ano ko ga*) never spoke to us. The things that he spoke to us about were completely different. He knew us, we only thought we knew him, but I can’t help thinking that we were deceived by this child. We were watching this child all along, could we have been so fooled? Can a child of that age so completely deceive their parents?”²¹

This is one of the tragically many instances where parents openly disown their child. They frequently use the same terms to express their surprise and dismay at not having realised argues that an even lie that one earlier that their normal family actually contained a member who was far from normality. The slogan that became frequent for these situations was “*futsu no ko, kireru*- normal children are rending [Japan] asunder”. The writer Kawakami Ryōichi, argues that it is no longer possible to criticise schools only; instead, parents must take responsibility for their own behaviour and behaviour of their children. In his book he wrote:

“With this incident, it wouldn’t be at all unusual that parents who have devoted even the smallest amount of thought to it would embrace a strong sense of uneasiness about what their child is thinking, or what he/she might do.”²²

Out of the blue, all the negative sides that surrounded the world of children and adolescents who were previously submerged in the aura of superficial normality emerged. The panic derived from this situation was also related to what that implicitly means. In fact, the restricted space of the "normal child," thus, not only serves to conceal facts, but also participates in the enactment of these separations and fetishizations, which perpetually reproduces this space as one of safety and, above all, certainty. Examples of violence, like the one of Shonen A, started to dominate the Japanese media.

A sociologist of education, Hirota Teruyuki, who worked to dispel the anxiety caused by the event of Shonen A, underling how, according to reports, the outpouring of emotion surrounding this occurrence is unmatched in Japan's history of teenage crime. Hirota Teruyuki is perplexed by the almost anxious response after meticulously investigating the historical record of prior youth crimes as well as claims that child raising in the home has declined (*suitai shita*) and is to blame for creating this type of youth. Despite reports concerning the collapse of the residence being refuted by

21 Andrea g. Arai, Japan after japan page 226

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historical evidence, this incident gave rise to what Hirota regards as "a serious problem" (*daimondai*).²³ Along with the Shonen A case and similar others of violence, came scenarios of violence even at low levels, including an increase in bullying (*ijime*) and another subsequent disruption, young people abandoning school (*tokokyohi*).

This mechanism is created in children from middle school age up to high school (approximately 12-19 years). According to a recent study of 1,916 Japanese students in elementary and middle school, 65.5 percent stated they occasionally or frequently felt angry with friends (and about as frequently with parents and teachers). Furthermore, nearly 40% of Those polled said they could "never" or "rarely" control their anger.

It is possible that the emergence of violent behaviour in children starts at this time because that is where the selection and evaluation process for the future begins. By categorising "the child" into the desirable and unpleasant, the variability of children exceeds their idealisation. Plus, the secondary school is compulsory, so no one can be expelled. In fact, rates of violence are lower in high schools, as admission tests and the possibility of being expelled from school create a skimming off of violent individuals. According to Rios-Ellis²⁴ the number of elementary school with reported *ijime*, that for Morita and Ohsako is defined as, 'a type of aggressive behaviour by which someone who holds a dominant position in a group-interaction process, by intentional or collective acts, causes mental and/or physical suffering to others inside a group'. There are 7626 cases in elementary school, in junior high schools are 5810 and high schools are 1564. Additionally, from 1993 to 1994 cases of *ijime* increased from 9421 to 35762 in elementary school, 18496 to 38458 in junior high school and 3750 to 6825 in high school. This statistic underlines that *ijime* increases from first grade throughout the first year of junior high school coinciding with the process of children's adaptation from elementary to junior school. In the period between the last year of elementary school and the first year of junior high school cases of *ijime* increased from 6426 to 10861. This is evidenced by the fact that one study shows that a total of 13444 junior high school students surveyed 43.3 percent stated that they had participated in *ijime*-related behaviour. Analysing the population of the first-year junior high school students, the 50,4 percent of the boys and the 41,9 percent of the girls stated that they had engaged in *ijime* that directly addressed another student. Some of them change their behaviour by forming groups and starting to bully selected individuals, who often end up having serious psychological disorders and/or start to stop showing up at school, end in the worst-case scenario they commit suicide. During the 1993-94 school year, the police reports indicated that a

23 Andrea g.Arai, Japan after japan page 222

24 Rios-ellis,Bellamy,Shoji ,An examination of specific types of *ijime*

student committed suicide every three days; in 1992, 159 victims of bullying chose to take their own life.²⁵

Often these bullies do not only have the hobby of tormenting only their schoolmates but also their teachers, creating a restless school climate. Violence is in fact used to create an apparent state of superiority both towards classmates, who are likely to hold higher social roles than bullies in the future, and towards teachers who already hold a higher social role. This situation has created a new social phenomenon that goes by the name of schoolroom collapse (*gakkyu hokai*). Also, some dates show that the major part of the bullying act take place in classrooms, in fact according to a survey conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Justice and Civil Liberties Bureau in 1995, 61.9 percent of *ijime* occurs within the classroom and 68.7 percent of the perpetrators are classmates. Here again, the boys motivate their behaviour as a rebellion against the school system, and more generally over the traditional Japanese education system that was in force until then, which imprisoned them in a heavy and overwhelming routine.

In many Japanese schools, keeping discipline becomes an obsession. The regulations to be followed are numerous, and as a result, the opportunity to break them are unavoidable. The students' revolt only adds to the tension in the school and the dissatisfaction of those tasked with enforcing regulations. Some instructors' violent outbursts are frequently the consequence of accumulated and restrained rage that is then exploded on any pretext. In fact, in 1998 of the 4,352 teachers who took sick leave, a record number of 1,707 (39.2 percent) had done so for reasons of 'mental suffering'. To worsening the situation teachers, fail to provide a good example for their student because corporal punishment, even if a 1947 School Education Law prohibited them, still be perpetuated. The number of teachers who received official reprimands for administering corporal punishment increased fivefold (from 78 to 436) between 1981 and 1995. In 1995, 1026 cases of corporal punishment were reported, involving 1027 teachers and 1766 students at 846 schools, slightly up in number from the previous year. On average, 2.1 per cent of government schools practised corporal punishment. The largest number occurred at middle schools: in 1995 occurrences of corporal punishment were officially reported at 4.5 per cent of middle schools, involving 0.02 per cent of students and 0.2 percent of teachers. Corporal punishment most frequently occurred during classes (34.2 per cent), followed by after school (4.3 percent), breaks (13.4 percent), club activities (13.1 per cent), school activities (8.2 percent) and others (16.7 percent). Most punishment involved hitting with the hand (66.7 percent). Other forms included kicking and hitting with sticks. Sixty per cent of students did not suffer any injury, but some cases resulted in bruises, damaged eardrums and broken bones. One of the problems is that the official reprimanding of teachers who are reported to have conducted corporal punishment is not well done. In 1995 less than one-third of the reported

cases resulted in official punishment of the teachers concerned (286 cases, among the 1026 reported cases). About 80% of these teachers were given 'instruction' (*kunkoku*) rather than official discipline (*chokai shobun*), violating the directives of the above-mentioned 1994 law (the school educational law)²⁶. The students frequently have no idea that corporal punishment is prohibited and have mixed feelings about it, not knowing whether to report the incident or endure in silence. Some of them believed that, in certain circumstances, such as when a verbal warning is ineffective, some form of corporal punishment could be appropriate.

Who suffer the most in this situation are the innocent victims of this system of bullying.

A Ministry of Education study published in early 1995 showed that out of 10 children interviewed 4 stated that they had been victims of bullies. The cruelty of bullies does not only manifest itself through aggression and beatings, it often goes directly to the emotional sphere of the victims, through real psychological torture.

A survey tries to identify that different form with which the *ijime* manifests itself. The different experience placed within the *ijime* phenomenon are: verbal threats, teasing and/or making fun of others, hiding and stealing others personal possession occasionally resulting in actual robberies, violent acts, blackmailing, extortion of money and different act that have as a goal to create a sense of isolation toward others.

Teasing is popular in elementary school. The survey conducted by the Ministry of justice and civil liberties bureau indicated that the number of teasing in the elementary schools in the period between 1993 and 1994 increased from 2405 to 9923 and in junior high schools from 4342 to 9982.²⁷ Also in this case even if the victim of bullying try to get the attention and help of parents, they usually minimises the problem telling them that they are not victims of bully but they are only innocent jokes between kild. People appear to be at risk for teasing upon early admission into the school setting due to two risk factors, which are particularly concerning for the Japanese society. Lack of social experience is the first, and any outward distinction that makes them stand out from the other kids is the second. Due to the goal for uniformity and homogeneity among children, adolescents, and adults, these elements are of grave concern to the Japanese family and educational system.

Act of violence instead is more frequent in high school settings. Nevertheless between 1993 and 1994, aggressive behaviour in primary schools surged from the fourth to the third most common form of *ijime*, with violent behaviour increasing by over 400 percent in a single year. Acts of violence grew by more than 215 percent between 1993 and 1994,²⁸ making them the second most common type of *ijime* in Japanese schools. Expert says that one factor that can be fuelled and create

26 Kaori Okano and Monotonori Tsuchiya, Education in contemporary japan page 209

27 Rios-ellis,Bellamy,Shoji ,An examination of specifc types of ijime

28 Rios-ellis,Bellamy,Shoji ,An examination of specifc types of ijime

this type of bullying can be found in the rise in violent video games and total media exposure to violence may have an impact on the extent to which violent acts are accepted as normal.

It seems that one of the privileged forms of violence to which bully victims are often subjected is exclusion from the group. From a survey, it appears that physical isolation is the second most common form of *ijime* in elementary schools. Any student could become the victim of bullying. Bullies in primary schools made up 40% of the population, whereas middle school bullies made up 30% of the population. There are also those who bully and be bullied at the same time.

Many children are marginalised by their peers and cannot participate in games and common activities of any kind. Bullying happens among "friends" and "regular classmates" the 60 percent of the time, therefore the relationship between the attacker and victim is not one of one-way animosity.

The life of bully victims is usually made even more distressing by the loneliness to which they are condemned.

Instead of one person becoming a focus of bullying constantly, bullying students and the tormented frequently switch places. Their peers hardly help them, they do not feel like sticking up for them because they risk being targeted themselves and becoming the object of bullying. Statistics report that bullied students' reports to the school are only 34 percent.

This system of exclusion not only causes sadness to those who suffer it, but also psychologically causes those who are excluded to lose their sense of identity and belonging.

Victims are typically hesitant to raise *ijime* with the parents because they assume that their first reaction may be to call the schools causing the situation to escalate and thus drawing the bullies' bullying even more on them. For the same fear of being sentenced to a worse state of isolation, victims avoid the argument also with their instructors that in any case do not give any school assistants (70 per cent at primary schools, 80 per cent at middle schools, and 90 per cent at high schools) even if student who have reported the situation to teachers state that their internment resolve the situation. Even if students do it, they blame more instructors and institutions for their academic inadequacy, rather than their alleged friends. Indeed, they are particularly cautious not to anger their peers, because they are scared of being disliked by their "friends," and then being rejected and left alone.

An example of the situation described above can be found in a text of one of the victims of *ijime* , Hiroyuki, that explains his situation in an essay written by a 17-year-old boy in which he recounts the bullying that he received three years prior to his writing in the book *education in contemporary Japan* written by Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya:

“The bullying started at the end of the second term of grade eight. It was not until the third term, though, that I was seriously suffering from it. It started as frivolous teasing, which gradually developed into what I call bullying. The perpetrators were my ex-friends. They often kicked and hit me for no reason. More painful was a sense of psychological oppression which prevented me from telling them to stop. I used to hate the end of classes, because I feared that they might bully me again during breaks. I felt secure during classes. When teased, I often did not talk back because I feared that they might tease me more. That Sometimes happens. The bullying became more tormenting over the next few months. Kicking became more frequent and intense. The three major perpetrators said to me, 'Commit suicide' and 'Disappear'. Several more students often joined these three boys. I was at a loss as to what to do. It took a long time to settle down emotionally once I returned home. Let me reflect on how my perception of bullying changed over time. In the beginning I found it simply unpleasant. As it progressed, I desperately sought ways to have them stop. Naturally at first, I considered asking the perpetrators to stop it. But I didn't think that they would accept such a simple request from me; I feared that, given that they had greater numbers, it would aggravate the situation, and decided that going against them alone was not feasible. The second option was to talk to somebody, but this was difficult, partly because I feared that I might be bullied for revealing the incidents to teachers. But more significantly, I did not want to acknowledge that I was being bullied. I wanted to believe that I was not the kind of person whom others want to bully. To me, acknowledging that I was bullied was tantamount to acknowledging that I was a weak and worthless person. I would be deeply ashamed of and sad about it. That acknowledgement was humiliating. This is why many of the bullied children deny it when asked, 'Have you been bullied?'. When I realised that neither option was feasible, I thought that I would be able to escape from this misery if I were dead. In fact, I gradually came to think that I was an unpleasant person, who deserved to be dead. I am positive that many bullied children follow this psychological path leading to suicide.”²⁹

Fortunately, however, Hiroyuki unlike many of his classmates had the courage to report the situation, albeit with great difficulty to his mother and later to the school, which intervened to eliminate the situation.

Numerous students feel trapped in this state of isolation since they are frequently ignored by both instructors and parents. Also, thanks to these dynamic parents and teacher might not be aware that their charges or children are being bullied. As an example, home-room teachers erroneously believed that bullying did not occur in their courses (40% in primary schools, 30% in middle schools, and 70% in high schools).

Changing schools is one of the drastic answers to this issue. Even this frequently results in greater isolation due to the same dynamics existing in a different setting rather than a solution.

Many children, since 1970, react to this situation of terror, isolation and intimidation by refusing to go to school. School rejection (also known as *toko kyohi* or *futoko*) typically refers to a prolonged

29 Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya, Education in contemporary Japan page 199

absence from school for causes other than hardship or illness. Those who miss 30 or more days of school due to factors other than poverty or illness are included in the operational definition of school refusal used by the Japanese Ministry of education to gather statistics. This practice is expression of anxiety and fear of having the self-hurt. There are four main categories of school refusal: "school phobia," "mental illness like schizophrenia or depression," "regular truancy" (caused by laziness and frequently accompanied by delinquent behaviour), and "intentional refusal of a positive kind". Although the category lines are frequently hazy, they are crucial because various forms of school refusal frequently result in diverse post-school lives. Those who had school anxiety typically acclimated to adulthood more readily than those who displayed mental illness or delinquent behaviours. Most of them recognise they should be in school, but they are unable to do so, leaving them frustrated and ashamed. These emotions are shared by their parents, who are equally distressed by the fact that they cannot find valid reasons why their children are unable to attend school. They, particularly moms who have experienced the phenomena of *kyuoku mama*, frequently blame themselves for their children's troubles.

There are five reasons for voluntary absence from school: social pressure, school work, peers, family, and personal problems. They were also roughly grouped into two sources: pressure coming from one's private environment (family and self) and from outside (society, school, friends). Usually, Japanese children feel more pressure from the external, also thanks to a phenomenon called "*manazashi*" or the "public gaze", that is a way to express the sensation of being continually judged by others. However, they also feel very stressed by the internalised academy expectation. So, they have both internal and external cause that hold them in this feeling of continuous anxiety. An increasing number of children have come to refuse school since 1966 when the Japanese ministry of education started collecting data, reaching a peak in 1994. In the school year 1993/1994, as many as 75,000 primary and secondary school students stayed at home for 30 or more days. The percentage of primary students that voluntarily stay home jumped from 0.04 in 1985 to 0.09 in 1990 and to 0.20 in 1995. The equivalent figures for middle schools were 0.41 ,0.75 and 1.42.

Very often building the wall of silence around violent incidents are the schools themselves. If one that bullying is taken in a particular school the news certainly has a negative impact on the school's reputation, which risks being downgraded. A study by the Ministry of Education on school refusers points out, concerning this related syndrome, that children who retreat to their rooms are not necessarily doing so because they want to stay home. Rather, they cannot find a "space of their own" in the world outside—the environment of school, *juku*, and post-industrial performativity (the regimen of endless study, endless memorization, endless exams) that exacts and extracts such expenditures of body and soul.³⁰ The Japanese Ministry of education performed research on the

viewpoints of parents and students who had more than 30 absence days as an official response. When asked what caused their absence, primary and middle school children, respectively, listed "events at school" (44.5 and 43.8 per cent), as opposed to "individual problems" (27.8 and 36.9percent) and "family problems" (14.8 and 4 percent). When asked what the causes were, the majority of elementary school and middle school children cited "individual problems" (such as a lack of sociability), which was then followed by interactions with friends and classmates at school. However, the students' instructors and parents did not recognise any of the 'individual difficulties' they believed they had. While middle-school students were naturally more concerned with academic achievement than primary-school students, poor academic performance did not rank highly in their justifications. Instead of going to school these young people state that they: do nothing (70 out of 237), going on their favourite outings (35), being sick in the morning and staying home (29), and going to special places (like the sick bay in the school) (20).

According to Hiroyuki's essay above, students who skip class frequently end up blaming themselves unduly for the issues they encountered. Second, a child's school life depends heavily on their interactions with peers and classmates. Other studies have backed up this claim as well. According to Shimada's psychological study, issues with connections with other kids lead to more compounded kinds of reaction (such as anger, anxiety, apathy, and withdrawal) than issues with relationships with teachers or academic results. An account of the situation is given by Wataru who recounts his experience in an interview for the book education in contemporary Japan written by Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya:

“I quit high school six years ago, and am now 24 years old. I don't exactly know why I ended up like this, but my family environment is perhaps a factor. We have a little intimate family conversation at home. In fifth grade, children started to develop 'friendships', beyond being just playmates'. I was neither outgoing nor talkative, and didn't know how to talk to classmates. I stopped playing with them. They started calling me 'a dark person', and I started to think that I was indeed 'a dark person'. But I didn't notice that I was any different from other students at that time. At middle school, I felt even more awkward and reluctant in making friends, since everybody was then expanding his or her relationships. In grade nine, several friends still invited me to join them, but I kept declining their invitations, saying that I wanted to study for entrance examinations, since I did not know how to relate to them. Gradually they stopped inviting me. When I completed middle school, I was determined to change myself at high school. I was too optimistic about high school. How could I manage to relate with classmates there when I couldn't manage it in middle school? Although I attended classes every day, I did not talk to anybody during breaks, went home straight after school, and watched television or listened to music. I spent two years deceiving myself like that. In grade 11, school became like a hell to me. Since I did not talk much, some kids bullied me, forcing me to do things for

them. I was the kind of student whom classmates either disliked, sympathised with or were indifferent to. Not motivated to study, I slept during classes. I soon started questioning why I went to school. Then my elder sister married and left home. My mother and hard rock music were the only support that I found in those days. The music made me forget everything unpleasant. In grade 12, after the first day I could not bring myself to leave for school, although my homeroom teacher came to see me at home. I did not feel like doing anything. For several months I did not go out, take a bath or have a haircut. My father ignored me. I felt like killing him. In the end I quit high school. I entered a correspondence high school, but did not last due to my fear of attending study sessions. At 20 I was still the same. I could not go out since my appearance was terrible and I was scared of meeting neighbours. I could only trust my mother and the music. Around that time, my mother attended a lecture on a cooperative institution called 'friend space', which welcomes youth who refuse school and employ, rent. After one of its counsellors visited me weekly for eight months, I finally found the courage to visit the 'friend space'. It took over a year before I gradually made acquaintances there. I now feel that I am making progress slowly”³¹

Following the 10 student suicides brought on by *ijime* that occurred between November 1994 and November 1995, the Japanese Minister of Education launched a series of initiatives to identify the issue and *ijime*'s characteristics in order to better understand the issue. From a survey emerge that 57,000 cases of *ijime* were reported in Japanese schools and 12.4 % of students stated that had been the victims of bullying. More over the 17.4% of Japanese students stated that they had engaged in *ijime*- related behaviour. From April to October 1995, the Japanese Ministry of Education reported an average of 3.9 cases per school in 21,899 schools for a total of 155,066 cases. By 1991 the number reported cases of *ijime* had declined to a mean of 0.6 cases per school in 7172 schools, totalling 22,062 cases.³² However, according to this research these statistics underestimate the actual prevalence of *ijime*. Indeed, the number of bullying incidents should be much larger however, the surveys conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Education only included the events that specific schools designated as such and submitted to regional education boards.

In fact, in 1984 a questionnaire distributed to a sample of 1718 fifth and eighth graders studying in Osaka and Tokyo determined that *ijime* was present in 11.3 percent of the sample, compared to the 0.88 percent reported officially by the Japanese Ministry of education. In 1995, the Japanese Ministry of Justice and Civil Liberties Bureau conducted a study to find out that the total numbers of schools with *ijime* increase from 7046 to 15,00 from 1993 to 1994.³³

Also, many young people wind up creating robbery gangs or, worse, joining mafia groups in addition to committing solo violence. In particular there are three categories must be included in a

31 Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya, Education in contemporary japan page 205

32 Rios-ellis, Bellamy, Shoji An examination of specific types of *ijime*

33 Rios-ellis, Bellamy, Shoji An examination of specific types of *ijime*

description of the present gang phenomenon in Japan: young gangs, *bosozoku*, and *yakuza*. These represent various gang phenomena and abnormal life-worlds: youth gangs resemble street gangs or neighbourhood gangs in Western nations. Although they may contain females, these organisations' primary priorities are prowess and masculinity. Ages of members range from 14 to 20. *Bosozoku* are males between the ages of 17 and 20 who ride motorcycles or drive modified vehicles.

They engage in nightly high-risk, high-speed rides while being pursued by authorities. Some *bosozoku* activities are carried out by well-organized organisations, and some *boso* drives are seen by large crowds rather than by specific gangs. *Yakuza* gangs are networks of male adult criminal organisations with bosses, hierarchies, and a corporate structure that includes connections to powerful politicians and involvement in illegal, semilegal, and legal businesses. *Bosozoku*, *yakuza*, and juvenile gangs all have some overlap. The proportion of adolescent offenders belonging to certain criminal groups, including the *yakuza*, reveals strong relationship between youth gang involvement and the juvenile crime problem faced by the official Japanese control strategies. Another component of Japan's young gang in terms of style. Japanese youth organisations stand out from the crowd due of their visible different style of appearance and demeanour, as well as their desire to end their rebellion against designated carriers in the education system and the labour market. Japanese society places a high value on uniform attire and appearance, as well as regimented behaviour and frequent supervision. Schools not only controlled what students should wear and how they should behave during school hours, but some schools also governed students' after-school behaviour. Students are not allowed to smoke, and it is advised that they avoid going to cafes, bars, or amusement arcades. Before the summer break, some schools distribute pamphlets outlining appropriate behaviour. In this environment of conformity, even the slightest indication of deviation—such as smoking in public or at school, changing one's hairdo, or changing the uniform design—becomes a rebellious indicator.

Yakuza gangs are primarily made up of adults, with individuals from younger age groups filling positions of apprentices or novices. Juvenile gang membership is viewed as a step of apprenticeship for a more sustained criminal career. Focusing on *yakuza* groups, young thugs frequently view *yakuza* gangs to be a feasible alternative for their career path. Not only does school performance not matter here, but young people are assured that they would be able to earn the same amount of money as their more qualified peers. Furthermore, because the *yakuza* is a criminal organisation, behaviours like as bullying, hazing, or other forms of verbal and physical aggression are usually celebrated rather than penalised. As a result, young people might feel free to express themselves through violent acts and free from the burden of the school, whose judgements no longer affect their chances of success. Furthermore, the mafia road not only portrays itself as a path to salvation and

liberation for these reasons, but it also sells itself as a possible surrogate family with the promise of helping young people to build new and enduring bonds. The *yakuza* structure is a feudal-type system in which members become members of the feudal family to which they belong, which is why members call each other 'brothers' and their superior 'father'. As a result, the *yakuza* make promises to young men that they will accept them into their family and treat them like sons or brothers. The young people decide to hunt for a family in this alternative who will accept them for who they are and consider them after frequently becoming orphaned by their real family, which consists of fathers who are too busy working and mothers who are too busy stressing out their children. Because of this, some of the young people involved in the mafia are willing to go overboard and commit violent crimes right away after joining the gang. Young individuals commit violent activities to obtain support inside the mafia family since it is obvious that they must also get the "affection" of this surrogate family. They do so without even being aware that they are continuing the same methods. Young males are the majority of those that join mafia movements. However, despite the fact that many of the subjects of the violent acts published in the media were male, criminal phenomena do not only concern the male population. While children are associated with violent acts and bullying, their female counterparts are linked to various forms of prostitution. There is also a male counterpart of this prostitution act, that consist of women paying men, known as *gyaku enjo kosai*³⁴, that is less common, but do exist.

Schoolgirls start to increase their sexual behaviour and create new practices that resemble, and sometimes coincide, with prostitution. The practice of *enjo kosai* became known and very popular. It is a social phenomenon practised usually by girls from 12 to 17 years old (so not yet considered legally adult) that in exchange of money or gift pass time with an adult man. Some of them receive treats for only spending time together chatting or eating at restaurants while others go so far as to sell their bodies, thus creating a phenomenon indistinguishable from prostitution. According to Japanese authorities, almost 5,000 school girls between the ages of 14 and 19 were detained for prostitutionrelated offences in 1995, and more than 1,000 schoolgirls were detained in Tokyo alone in 1996. According to research conducted by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 3.5% of girls in middle school and 4.4% of girls in high school practised *enjo kosai* at least once each. Along with this occurrence, there has been an increase in teenage pregnancies, as well as cases of sexually transmitted diseases. Over 4,000 teenagers reported working for erotic phone lines or posing for softcore pornographic services in their spare time.³⁵ In this case, the girls in question are looking for money to buy designer clothes or to spend on fashionable pastimes such as going to karaoke. In fact, the phenomenon of *enjo kosai* is often linked to female fashions such as those belonging to

³⁴ Gyaku meaning "reverse"

³⁵ Daniela de Palma, Il sistema educativo giapponese page 39

subcultures *Gyaru*. It is a fashion subculture that is regarded nonconformist or rebelling against Japanese society and beauty standards at a time when women were supposed to be housewives and fit the Asian beauty standards of pale skin and dark hair. For Japanese women who witnessed individuals who engaged in this trend during its emergence, it was a fashion style that was excessively racy and carefree; others felt it generated a commotion, juvenile delinquency, and frivolity among adolescent ladies. It was most popular in the 1990s and early 2000s. In particular in the 90s, the Kogal Girls born dress in outfits inspired by Japanese school uniforms, especially because they are usually school-girls that have to put uniforms at school, so for the majority of their time. The girls may also wear loose socks and scarves, and their hair may be coloured in fake colours, like blond or pink, and usually they also have the habit of tanning their skin to a deep brown. This phenomenon is also a response to the condition of school girls who already know that they cannot expect much from the school system. In fact, even if they study like their male counterparts, they will not receive the same treatment. The emphasis placed on education for women is very different from that for males due to the genderspecific expectations around family obligations and the limited opportunity structure in the job market for women. In comparison to their male counterparts and to two-year junior college female graduates, four-year university female graduates have severely restricted work possibilities, with the exception of a few professions where women have historically been employed (such as teaching). Plus, facilities for the care of dependents, including the elderly and children, are not enough or acceptable, so it is assumed that women who work will work for small periods. Additionally, it is challenging for women to juggle a profession and family obligations due to the long working hours and transfers expected of individuals with a long-term career commitment. Their male counterparts, whose wives handle home duties, have traditionally been expected to be similarly flexible. Assuming that they would leave their jobs after getting married or having children, employers have employed young women fresh out of high school or two-year junior colleges for clerical labour while avoiding university-educated women for the same positions because they are more expensive and had fewer years to work for them. Based on their period of continuous employment at a given organisation, women have been denied promotions and pay. Despite the fact that the Equal Opportunity Act of 1986 increased the number of career possibilities available to women (such as career track posts, or *sogosioku*), workplace cultures and hiring and promotion practices continue to be barriers for women to overcome. Additionally, the early 1990s economic slump led to reductions in work options for women with four-year university degrees. As of June 1996, companies were looking to fill 1.8 times as many positions for male graduates in 1997 as there were expected to be graduates, compared to 0.64 for female graduates. Schools girl respond to this situation at school in different

ways, there are girls who, knowing that the role society sees in her, aim to rely on her male counterpart by trying to become the full-time wife of a well-paid man, those who, on the contrary, try to reach the top of society and obtain a well-paid job and independence, those who are content to find a job intended for women or simply to become the wife of someone who can support her, and a few cases of women who try to fight this stereotype by also going against the school system.

This means that the remuneration that men are supposed to find in first educational and then remunerative success, in women is replaced with a consumerist reward that in this case is met with money or the gifts received through dating.

As their male counterparts they once were normal school girls, but now something happened to them and changed their behaviour. The problem with this phenomenon is once again the hitherto unnoticed deviance in Japanese society. Not only are the people who practise these appointments often girls from good families, but their clients are often the same salarymen who are seen as role models for Japanese society. So the pillar of the salaryman as a model figure in modern Japanese society is also missing. In actuality, rather than the unproblematic category of the regular (*futsu*), the range between desire to a middle-class position and the ongoing anxiety about the incapacity to preserve or reproduce this social standing better defines the environment of the post-bubble 1990s. The idea of "Japanese culture" continues to conjure a stability of knowledge that is firmly related to the reality of ever-sterner socio-economic realities and their impacts at the site of individual households. The sense of a sensibility-in-common, which is anticipated to "naturally" emerge from membership within a typical family and through the primary vehicle for which the family has responsibility, child rearing or "putting beauty into the body," one of the coveted renderings of the famed *shitsuke* (disciplining), is at the heart of this concept of the *futsu*. The result of this process is a fully developed set of senses, which determine the internal similarity of the Japanese to one another by virtue of their intrinsic distinction from those of subjects of other modern (that is, Western) nation-states. The place where this difference locates itself, the family and the child within the family, must be continuously reproduced in order to maintain this category of the regular.

This situation also increases the manifestation of both physical and psychological disease. In fact, a survey carried out by the government in 1991 found that 22% of junior high school students and 13% of primary school children showed signs of pathological depression, as a result of following the stress of examinations and family problems; 7 children (aged between ten and eleven) out of ten declared, in 1992, that they were suffering from chronic fatigue as a result of studying at night. studying at night.³⁶

36 Daniela de Palma, Il sistema educativo giapponese page 44

For Daniela De Palma in “il sistema educativo giapponese”³⁷ the causes of this situation are many and interconnected: undoubtedly the hierarchical organisation that exists in the education system (between professors and teachers, between professors and students, between students and students); a bureaucratic, distant, impersonal bureaucratic, distant, impersonal pupil-professor relationship, also due the high number of students that make up the classes (40) which prevents even dialogue; a rigid and authoritarian relationship, in which physical punishments are still present, supported by both teachers and parents and tacitly approved by the school authorities; the inaction of teachers in the face of bullying; a very high number of rules which sacrifice the individuality of students and push for conformity; the assessment not only of academic but also of the attitude in the classroom and of the student's personality, which has been introduced since 1993 for pupils in upper secondary school and which has become a central part of the student profile, assessed together with the results of high school entrance examinations; the uniform and unattractive curricula uniform and unattractive curricula; the persistence of the meritocratic conception as the 'driving force' of Japanese society; a significant drop in motivation and interest on the part of young people in the will to learn, a drop, however, that is not homogeneous but linked to the social stratum to which they belong.

An explanation for this phenomenon is difficult to find, but it can certainly be found in the formation of traditional Japanese culture and its clash with the modernity that the country is undergoing. The generating point of this phenomenon can be found in the militant nationalism that developed between 1854 and 1945. In 1868, the shogunate fell, creating the need to create a new school system as well. Prior to that date, there had been a system in Japan based on two types of schools: the *Hanko*, where the wealthy part of the population, such as children from samurai families, were educated and taught subjects useful for them to later take their place in prominent roles in society as adults; the *Terakoya*, schools for common class children where literature, writing and mathematics were taught. The leaders of the new government issued decrees with the aim of reshaping the country intellectually, economically and morally. The ex-samurai who became the new leaders of the government decided to change the system completely and allowed themselves to be inspired by the west, creating a western-based education system. However, in this restoration the mistake was made of leaving too much power in the hands of the Ministry of Education, which, as we shall see later, used it to militarise the school and education system. In the midst of these reforms was the imperial rescript of education, a manifesto enshrining the divine mandate of the emperor to persuade students to show unquestioning obedience to the authorities and superiors and show the highest degree of loyalty through absolute faith to the emperor and his collaborators. The system that emerged during this time period intended to construct an educational programme that
37 Daniela de Palma, Il sistema educativo giapponese page 57

could impart the same knowledge to diverse groups of individuals, causing the bulk of Japanese society to act and think in the same way. During the war, this system was strengthened. This vote of faith towards the emperor, and consequently the entire Japanese system and nation, intensified in the years between 1930 and 1940, in a kind of preparation for the future climate of war. During this period, schools were placed under strict military control, inculcating the absolutist concepts of the Second World War into the pupils, such as the idea of the superiority and purity of the race and national culture and the consequent hatred and rejection of everything identified as foreign.

Based on this ideal of the elevation of the nation and rejection of all that was or seemed foreign, the society began to condemn all those who did not conform to a native way of life, even creating the Kempeitai moral police whose orders were to monitor social unrest. This climate of tension subsided, at least legally, with the defeat of World War II by Japan and the subsequent occupation by American forces. During the Japanese occupation, the Allied forces demolished the warlike aspect of Japanese schools. They demanded that all kinds of nationalism and militarism be removed from the school curriculum, and that they be replaced with activities that promote peace and the development of one's own personality and character without converting children to war machines. Indeed, The Occupation Government also banned textbooks in use prior to the second world war because they contributed to the nationalistic zeal that led Japan to defeat. However, the content of school textbooks continues to be a source of contention, notably in how it presently depicts periods of conflict and imperial expansion.

Also in the immediate postwar years, the accompanying Shinto philosophy was likewise prohibited in schools. For a time, the ideals that were taught were largely Western, mostly American, with heroes like Benjamin Franklin serving as role models for the pupils. Gradually, the substance of the courses has gotten more 'Japanese,' and appropriate Japanese heroes have been brought in to localise the value system being advocated.

Shortly after establishing themselves, the American forces changed and abolished a number of laws, including the above-mentioned imperial rescript. This meant that the military presence was eliminated from the schools and, in view of the defeat, certain principles were no longer inculcated in the minds of the pupils, but in spite of this, the entire educational structure remained intact, the teaching materials were still under the control of the Ministry of Education, mnemonic study was still favoured, with no particular involvement of the students in classroom activities, and the only objective seemed, even then, to be focused on studying for and passing the admission tests. Although the nationalistic principles of the wartime period had been eliminated by the Allies, the schools, in a less apparent manner, retained some militaristic aspects of management. In fact, schools, as part of "personality formation," have imposed quasi-militaristic principles that

emphasise specific behavioural patterns and the *senpai-kohai* hierarchy. These also emphasise group activity, which was thought to foster psychological homogeneity and consistency. It was also thought to enhance psychological consistency and togetherness. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, schools tightened control over and became more stringent about student regulations in order to prevent possible deviation and standardise educational achievements.

To strengthen the examination system in those years, the habit was established by industry and commerce to favour graduates of schools considered the most prestigious in the country. This helped to intensify the importance and difficulty of entrance examinations. Because of the examination-based system, they became the primary focus of scholastic study, engrossing not only students but also their teachers and parents.

This is where the *kyoiku mama*, so named because of their role in their children's education, were born. They, in reality, drive youngsters to study at an endless speed, without regard for their mental well-being, in order for their children to play future high roles within Japanese society by passing the tests. The phenomenon of *kyoiku mama* is also related to the lack of opportunity for women analysed before. Mothers, who are frequently denied a working future, focus their energies on their children, viewing them as a means of attaining their own ambitions. This intimate bond frequently excludes essential external characters such as the father, friends, and other relevant people, despite the fact that their effects are required for the child's healthy growth.

This system, where parents' and teachers' concern with school success as the main measure for evaluating the child's worth and only instil in children an oversensitivity to rank relative to others. As a result, they may lose their essential feeling of unconditional self-acceptance.

This also means that while "the child" and childhood serve as a site of national investment, serving as a location where concerns about the future of the nation might congregate, they also function as a site of anxieties about the future of one's own self ensuring future social standing and financial stability.

The Japanese after-school education sector, or the different types of Japanese *juku*, is one of the main outcomes of this system of labour and its fetishization of the idea of childhood as the "repository of stored value". An example of parents behaviour to their children is given by a treasury collected during a study on *hikikomori* reported in the book *Millennial monsters* by Anne Allison. The subject said:

“ As another *hikikomori* related: “My parents always asked me: Are you working hard at school? They never asked whether I was enjoying school. My parents just ordered me to sleep, eat, and study. And, if I didn't answer them, they'd ask, ‘Don't you understand our love?’”³⁸

38 Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 83

This behaviour is the result of *amae* (dependency) relationships that parents, especially mother, create raising their children, with practice like *kyouku mama*. Children who have relationships like these, as they grow up are more likely to internalise their moms' goals for them, making them more receptive to dependence on parental judgments and expectations. Actually, from the child's point of view, the mother is the one absolute requirement for survival. Simultaneously, the infant develops a high sensitivity to its mother's mood, ensuring that it can console her anytime she is upset. Harming the mother's sentiments jeopardises the child's safety and should be avoided at all costs. Even if the child feels anger and resentment towards its mother, the youngster will strive to hide such unpleasant emotions subconsciously and will instead blame itself for feeling such emotions. As this process continues and becomes a habit, the youngster will grow into a guilt-ridden, self-critical adult. Despite the fact that this scholastic mentality aimed at creating a compact Japanese society that moved in unison was very helpful in getting through the reconstruction period after the second world conflict, studies have shown that this system, while effective in learning science and mathematics, is detrimental to the development of a personality and self-respect.

The first discomfort with this school system occurred in the 1970s, when students began to rebel against the system by not attending classes; in the more moderate cases, the protest against the system was limited to not showing up or voluntarily absenting themselves during class. However, in some exceptions, students began to behave violently towards classmates or teachers, marking the beginning of this sad practice.

Always in the seventies the relations between the ministry of education and the teachers' trade union that felt less and less listened and frustrated by the situation, thus reducing their school performance. The incidents of violence only began to be recognised by the Ministry of Education in 1982, which in that year began to conduct a series of investigations to understand, as we did, the outbreak of these acts of violence. It emerged from the investigations that a recurring motive was to target kids considered to be different, both in habits and physical appearance. A behaviour that can be attributed to the aftermath of the ideology inculcated in previous years. Worsening the situation was the return of a multitude of Japanese families that lived abroad in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, in the 1960s many salarymen had been sent abroad by their companies. Many of the children/youths belonging to these families were, due to living abroad, inexperienced in Japanese traditions and spoke the language poorly. In an attempt to preserve the category of children living abroad, special public schools were set up. Shyness and unsightliness are two more basic differences that put youngsters at danger. The inability to maintain the quality of a teacher's behaviour or appearance related norms is a final aspect that contributes to isolation. For example, if a child is unable to

complete a task and the instructor insists on mocking the student for his or her lack of competence, the teacher's rigidity and insensitivity will almost certainly result in the child becoming a target for teasing.

The problem in the traditional schools persisted and worsened, bringing to the fore how the problem, although known to the population and the ministry, was still treated very superficially. In fact, despite the increase in the number of cases reported in the press, the incidents continued to go unreported, neither by the teaching staff nor by the parents of the victims. In a research conducted by Rios-Ellis, B.; Bellamy, L.; Shojic, J. all the schools president's interview stated that in their schools all the *ijime* cases were resolved privately, without the involvement of external agencies, like police but also without involving counselling centres to help the victims. One of them also stated that he would only cooperate with their interview if the information concerning the *ijime* remained anonymous, thus not affecting its reputation or that of the school. This happened because professionals working in a school context are promoted based on their ability to maintain the norms of the specific institute, so even the public appearance of a case of *ijime* could be considered as a detriment. However, if for a particular school no cases of bullying were reported, the school would look as if it was not taking bullying seriously.

The situation is also worsened by the Japanese law whereby people under the age of sixteen cannot be legally prosecuted. This makes the baby-killers as a response to their behaviour only expect to be reprimanded or vaguely punished. This situation makes it even more difficult for those who would like to take action to do so, knowing that even if they do report it, the problem will often not be solved but made worse. When the National Diet eventually made the decision to focus on this situation, this was one of the issues that were raised. In order to lower the age requirement for incarceration by two years and function as a deterrent for the next generation of teenagers, the government really advocated changing the law on juveniles so that they may already be imprisoned at the age of 14. In addition, a wide range of initiatives were propose, including this another changes to the juvenile law, a new law to protect children from abuse, new government guidelines for child rearing and home education, new education directives that promise "less competition," and initiatives to address the need for "*kokoro no kyiku*" ("education of the heart," a sort of civic and affectivity education) in the period of 2000– 2001.

A discourse of inwardness that emphasises the individual psyche and how it relates to the wider collective psyche of the country is inextricably linked to these shifts. In the latest report of the Ministry in 1996 were proposed to, in order to safeguard the victimised students, that the school contact the authorities if the incident entailed criminal behaviour, such as severe assault and blackmail and that the bullying student can be suspended from school. The ministry also proposed

that schools relentlessly hire nurses teachers in the school's sick bay since bullied students thought it was the least intimidating area of the building. However, several detractors said that the planned solution would prevent the bullied children from receiving the care they need from the nurse teacher because she or he has no official position in the school's student management. It advised schools to be more accommodating in allowing bullied students to take genuine leave of absence, rearranging homeroom classes in the middle of the school year, and setting up school transfers for bullied students.

In addition, Ryutaro Hasimoto, the Japanese prime minister at the time, suggested changes to the educational system that would minimise or do away with the feared admission tests. Despite the fact that the competition generated by these exams is indeed a problem for pupils' mental health, the commission formed to assist the Ministry of Education in solving the *Ijime* problem pointed out that the birth of the problem lay outside the school. They pointed out that the children's behaviour was actually the cause of a wider problem in the Japanese population at the time, namely a moral deterioration of Japanese society. As the morals of adults deteriorate, so do the morals of the children who are educated by them and take their cue from them. The council's solution is instead to reintroduce moral education in schools, aimed at correcting and improving children's civic education. These reforms are, however, only a starting point for solving the problem.

In this situation children isolate themselves, both for lack of time to socialise since they spend most of the time studying, both for the growing fear towards the next that could turn out to be out of the blue an unknown person to be afraid of. In *Millennial Monster*, the book by Anne Allison, a psychologist, Ikeda Yoshihiko, summarises the situation experienced by children in a brilliant way:

“We’ve never had an age like this, when people can live without contact with others. Children are growing up with fathers rarely home, mothers (con)fusing discipline with love, neighbourhoods leached of any community, and teachers who “don’t see the hearts of their students”³⁹

Increasingly, both children and adults find themselves in conditions of isolation, whether forced or not, which increasingly lead to a loss of the ability to form profound relationships with others, thus fuelling the vicious circle of loneliness, creating phenomenon known as Atomism or “orphanism” (*kojinshugi*). Children are especially susceptible to atomism, or what some have called “solitarism.” One study report that most Japanese ten- to fourteen-year-olds eat dinner alone, 44 percent attend cram school, and the average time to return home at night is eight.

39 Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 233

⁴⁰An association that helps hikikomori

This sense of isolation prompts those affected to look for a space of their own, where they can express themselves and find themselves. Very often this space is not found within society because of the environment of school, *juku*, post-industrial performativity, the regimen of endless study, endless memorisation, endless exams.

This isolationism is fuelled by the consumerist system that increasingly influences the lives of the Japanese. This consumerism is correlated with Japan's quest to conquer its modernity through consumption. This process was born with the post-war period where an attachment to materialism and individualism generated by consumption began to emerge in Japanese society that exuberance in the very depthlessness and transparency of the culture in the 1980s. Today, Japan is firmly entrenched in capitalism. Its national goal, as defined by postwar policies, has been material prosperity that fuels (and is fuelled by) personal spending. However, cultural traditions and nostalgia for these traditions have been rooted in a collective orientation: groupism, interrelationality, communitarianism. The alleged erosion of these values in recent years is frequently linked to Japan's current problems (ranging from the economic recession to the social pathologies of schoolroom collapse, refusal-to-go-to-school syndrome, Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attacks, youth crime, and amateur prostitution) that link to a lack of human relationship.

According to Tomita of Friend Space⁴⁰ in the Allison book⁴⁰, the foundation of this problem is communication since children who want to communicate but are unable to do so have lost the ability to connect with others. In these circumstances, communication refers to both personal and interpersonal interactions, as well as the ability to develop intimate relationships with others and with oneself. This condition is caused by the fact that anything youngsters or adults accomplish outside of school or work is not acknowledged or recognised, or because they are perceived to be failures at what they do. Furthermore, the crisis instils a sense of insecurity in people, who are increasingly seeking comfort and stability.

The Japanese are finding more and more ways to express themselves and feel secure outside of materialistic settings, but more and more through consumerist products, leading to a "commodified intimacy". Along with this, there is a new national myth about a post-industrial authority that has regained or kept relationality, as well as a mythical new capitalism that creates a market economy based on virtual accumulation and capital companionship. Nowadays, many items no longer serve as merely consumable things but rather act as transmitters of magic, joy, and connection. Companies use characters, like Pikachu in the case of Pokemon, to link customers to their brand and aid them in discovering a personal space where they may express themselves.

In this context, "closeness" refers to both broadening a product's range of use to make it as intimate for fans as possible in as many aspects of daily life as possible (for example, toys, food, clothing, 40 Tomita Fujiya, Millennial Monsters page 83

phones, and planes) and leveraging the appeal of an already well-known character to encourage an intimacy in others for the goods in question, whether this is a product, a company, or a country. Characters can be found on posters for public events or neighbourhood fairs, government notices or service announcements, and even bulldozers, in addition to commercial goods (hand towels, frying pans, book bags, pencils). Whether it's a Kitty-chan keychain, a Doraemon phone strap, or a Pikachu purse, these commodity spirits are "shadow families": steadfast, dependable friends who are consoling in these difficult times, and in these postindustrial times of stress, orphanism, and nomadism. In today's rapidly expanding information society—dubbed the "lifeline of human relationships"—characters serve as the totems, protectors (*omamori*), and "utility symbols" for its citizens. Children who are struggling with bullying, academic challenges, and financial issues find comfort in fictional characters who show them steadfast and personalised affection. Japanese toys circulate in a range of networks, including friendship, pop culture, businesses, and intimacy. They also serve as a medium for the communication of a number of concepts, including identity, coolness, intimacy, and comfort. As an example, Japanese *Sarary-man* are known for carrying Pikachu keychains, which are equally popular with young working ladies as they are with children. The way people create connections with fictional characters like Pikachu and use their virtuality to express identification or companionship is one of their main draws. T-shirts, phone covers, and whatever else you can think of become such a medium for bodily wear and self-expression because these characters accessories the things that are closest to bodies and "selves"—that is, they accessories them. Here, the psychological intimacy promoted by Japan's latest trends and attractive character item marketers converges with the physical intimacy. One of their main draws is that people grow connected to Miffy or Pikachu and use their virtuality as a source of identity, friendship, and enjoyment. So it stands to reason that these characters would be used as a platform for both apparel and accessory sales. In fact, the imagination is becoming increasingly incorporated into the process of commodification and is playing a key role in the world economy. By developing playthings that not only satisfy the needs and desires of postindustrial children, but also link those youngsters to a New Age capitalist vision, Japan is establishing itself as a toy producer and toy marketer of the millennium. More than anything else, two characteristics of Japanese play goods such as Pokemon account for their mix of appeal and profitability.

The first is what he refers to as their "healing" capacity, and the second is their portability, much like games played on Game Boys, which is so in line with our mobile lifestyles. The addictive frenzy fuelled by Japanese toys, as characterised by Anne Allison, is a third feature that is linked to these two and fuels the capitalist imagination.⁴¹ They stimulate consumers' appetites to play more

41 Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 110

and more and to purchase more and more of the goods offered in the marketplace because they serve as imaginative playscapes that polymorphously alter shape and perversely go on forever.

By "healing," mean that Pokemon and other Japanese children's products give kids a way to creatively engage a world other than that which is governed by the rules and rationality they must typically abide by. Children can engage in imaginative play, explore uncharted territory, go on exciting adventures, and encounter wonderful creatures here. Such a magical place is not just at odds with the neat, clean, and controlled lives that children typically lead; it is also particularly hard to find now that children's "play" has been eaten up by the demands of school and the hyper regularisation of daily schedules.

Today, claiming a solitarism feeds the interests and goods of an industry attempting to sell companionship as a means of compensating for this alleged shortage. Japanese playthings are notable for another reason. They typically come packaged in a portable form, allowing kids to connect with and feed their unconscious worlds in a way that is continuous and personal. Game ware is portable, making access easy, continuous, and customizable for individual use, in contrast to fantasy-making, which conjures up playmates that "heal" the ills of materialism while simultaneously creating an addictive frenzy that literally buys into the same thing, of playing, wanting, and purchasing more and more commodified stuff.

A child can travel through a fantasy world while carrying a Tamagotchi or Game Boy about with them.

These electronic gaming systems, such as the Walkman, are technical machines that transport the user (through sound waves, play waves, or visual waves) to another realm of his or her choice, the previously described safe place away from the oppressive society. Nomadic technology, a type of cultural technology, has become popular in the post-industrial period. Furthermore, Japan has traditionally been a market leader in terms of production, consumption, and consumer trends and fads. However, the concept of nomadism itself reveals something more worrisome about the late twentieth and early twenty-first century postmodern culture.

That modern postmodern children connect on multiple levels with fantasy properties like Tamagotchi and Pokemon, which have a technological interface to nomadic fantasy waves as well as a deeper, more all-encompassing nomadism. In terms of healing and portability, a plaything like Pokemon both resembles and outperforms the reality in which it is utilised.

The nomadic lifestyle of a post-industrial subject is embodied (and enhanced) by it, and it also miraculously "heals" the strains of being in a setting that leaves little room or time for imagination. Additionally, this takes the shape of a highly addictive commodity that is traded on the open market. The fundamental logic of fantasy itself is one of unlimited possibilities, and these play

creations are not only advertised with all the savviness of the most modern marketing techniques, where what is au courant is the very latest and most changing in fashion style. Playing with a Japanese fantasy good in this way replicates and reproduces the essential conditions of post-industrial capitalism, including its effects on subjectivity, such as anxiety, atomism, and alienation, as well as its fragmentation, speed, flux, and flexibility. It is the stitching together and animation of what would otherwise be inanimate, discrete objects, such as the pictures on the Game Boy screen, that makes gaming in these fantasyscapes appear "healing."

Also, ⁴²Anne Allison in her study in *Millennial monsters* have reported that many children that she has interviewed stated that in these kinds of portable games, like *Pokemon* and *Tamagotchi*, they experience a certain degree of control and comfort, underling in this way what we have above mentioned: thanks to these video games, children, but sometimes also adults, manage to create for themselves a world in which they feel comforted and free, compared to how they feel in reality. As a result, this is a sort of mimetic play in which young people study the world by imaginatively reenacting it—by mimicking disintegration (with potentially destructive, even violent, consequences), but also by forging connections. Postindustrial play technologies have the potential to restore to teenagers the capacity for experiencing that late-stage capitalism threatens to strip them of.

This concern with material items has given rise to a new sickness in humans, which Ochira Ken, a psychotherapist, refers to as "a person who talks about things" [*mono no katari no hitobito*]. This new pathology appears to be the outcome of a growing mindset, and the doctor's patients appear to place more significance on obtaining and learning about specific belongings (such as the Game Boy but also branded clothing or cutting-edge phones) than on developing strong interpersonal connections. According to Ochira, the "*mono no katari no hitobito*" is concerned with his/her status in the world and seeks to enhance it through the acquisition of brand-name products.

Acquisition, like a proclivity to categorise everything, provides the person a sense of control.⁴³ On the notion that acquiring and assembling things will make one happy, things are used to "power up" and concretize the inner self. Currently, this way of thinking is quite common in Japan, where a consuming public employs the language of commodities to describe everything from one's own identity and worth to close friends, intimate relationships, and interpersonal relationships. These folks don't enjoy being alone, so they're really looking for a way to communicate, even if it's through the only language they know: the language of material stuff. The Ministry of Education's findings regarding "school refusers," who withdraw to their homes not out of free will but rather because the outside world lacks meaning or "space" for them, are reflected in their predicament,

42 Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 30-31

43 Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 87

albeit in reverse. The problem at hand is a sort of intimate alienation in both situations: intimacy developed with artificial realities (brand-name products, video games) that are engaged when one is alone as opposed to intimacy formed with a social reality of people and labour (job, school). And one is left to ponder the language of intimacy and alienation at play here: whether or not this reliance on personal technology and dreams lessens or only amplifies the atomism that permeates millennial living. There is a fine line between "monstrous" behaviour of children who, once "good," retreat into their rooms or engage in random violence and that of so-called normal kids who fetishize brand-name goods and compulsively play with the fantasy monsters that are so popular in the Japanese marketplace today. It is becoming harder and harder to distinguish between communication and commodities, electronic individualism and human interactions (*ningenkankei*). The same set of factors are brought up in the discourse surrounding both phenomena in Japan today: a pressured educational system with constant tests and widespread bullying, an increase in alone time, isolation and the Japanese people's inability to "communicate," as well as the openness and superficiality of a materialist society.

Chapter 4: Otaku, a valuable resource

In this and following chapters, I will go through several sociological issues related to the Pokemon phenomenon in greater depth. Specifically, the *otaku* subculture, which has allowed this phenomenon to develop in Japan and increase its success in the rest of the world, and, more broadly, the success of the Japanese entertainment industry.

First and foremost, we have to understand the meaning of the subject. So, what is an *otaku*? This word is generally used to describe a subculture, or a person who is part of such a subculture, made up of fans of anime, manga, video games and related elements. In reality, this term, which in the west can be equated with the meaning of geek or nerd, represents in Japan a type of maniacal passion for something. Originally, *otaku* was used as an honorary second-person pronoun when addressing someone one did not know, but when used as a peer, it takes on a sardonic and/or mocking tone. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the phrase became popular among anime and manga fans as a distinguishing designation.

However, in the 80s, also thanks to the journalist Akio Nakamori, its semantic meaning changed. In 1983, the journalist published a column in *Manga Burikko* that is considered the first time when media identify manga and anime fans as '*otaku*'. In different articles, Nakamori discusses what *otaku* are, how they look, their passions, and their routines, all in disparaging tones, thereby establishing the valence of *otaku* as an insult or derogatory term. In this space he wrote a series of articles titled "An Investigation of '*Otaku*'. In the modern manga and anime fandom, Nakamori portrays himself as the voice of reason. He recounts his first-ever trip to the Comic Market, an event for sellers and purchasers of fanzines, in the first paragraph of the first instalment of his column. In this first article of his column, Nakamori goes to the Comic Market to criticise a variety of different social groupings that he has decided to gather together under the umbrella term "*otaku*." In his article he wrote:

“ Those guys who camp out before the opening day of anime movies; dudes who nearly get themselves run over trying to capture photos of the ‘blue train’ as it comes down the tracks; guys with every back issue of SF Magazine and the Hayakawa science- fiction novels lining their bookshelves; science boys with thick glasses who gather at the ‘*maikon*’ shops; those who get a spot early in the morning for an idol autograph event; a mommy’s boy attending a big- name cram school who is simply a sardine eyed dumbhead without his textbooks; an audio- nerd bro.”⁴⁴

44 Akio Nakamori, *Debating otaku in contemporary Japan* page 106

These people are described as being obsessively devoted to niche interests like anime and manga. However, he does not take into account the various passions that these individuals possess, instead classifying them all as *otaku* due to what in his opinion are their abnormal habits. In this regard Okada Toshio, Japanese director, film producer and writer who identifies himself as an *otaku* wrote:

“When the term ‘*otaku*’ did not yet exist, there were simply a lot of tribes. There were science fiction fans, anime fans, manga fans and fans of individual works and genres. When outsiders decided to call all of them ‘*otaku*’, our people were born. Not exactly a people, but rather ‘prisoners put in a camp’ by outsiders. At some point in history, ‘a prison camp for weirdos was built. There were many reasons to be thrown into that camp. In the first place, people who like manga, anime and games were thrown in, but then people who were ‘somewhat gloomy’ or ‘somewhat unsocial’ found themselves thrown in, too. The name of this prison camp was ‘*otaku*’.”⁴⁵

Nakamori makes it obvious who he is particularly criticising in the second part of "*Otaku* Research," which was published in Manga Burikko in July 1983. Rather than dedicating an entire episode of the column to trainspotters, idol chasers, computer nerds, or any other imagined group, Nakamori focuses on lolicon and guys who are sexually drawn to imaginary woman characters. His article's opening question, "Do "*Otaku*" Love Like Normal People?" establishes the pathologizing tone of his work. Because they are drawn to imaginary female characters, '*otaku*' does not appear to experience romantic love in the same way that other individuals do. Nakamori explains:

“‘*Otaku*’ . . . are content with carrying around pin- ups of anime characters like Minky Momo [from Magical Princess Minky Momo , an anime series for girls aired in 1982] and Nanako [from Nanako SOS , a manga by Azuma Hideo that was adapted into a TV anime in 1983]. Maybe I’ll call it a two- dimensional complex. They can’t even talk to real women. In less extreme cases, they gravitate toward idol singers who don’t display their femininity, or they become warped and get into lolicon. These guys will never accept nude photos of mature women.”⁴⁶

With this new description, the journalist, in addition to emphasising his contempt and incomprehension for this category, underlines how this type of person not only presents an obsession with inanimate objects, but also presents relational incapacities. In addition, by emphasising the inability of relationships to talk to or approach women, he assumes that only men can belong to this category of *otaku* person, completely excluding the female gender. Even if the

45 Okada Toshio, Debating otaku in contemporary japan page 165

46 Akio Nakamori, Debating otaku in contemporary japan page 27

proportion of girls attending the same events or passionate about *shojo* are the same as those of men, if not sometimes a majority.

Also, he stated that *otaku* have a typical aspect:

“Their hairstyle is either rumpled long hair clearly parted at the front, or a dowdy, close bowl cut. They tottered back and forth, smartly clad in shirts and slacks their mommy bought at the ‘all 980/1980’ rack at Itō Yōkadō or Seiyū, their feet shod in ‘R’-branded knock-off s of Regal sneakers that were popular several years ago, shoulder bags bulging and sagging. The boys are either skin and bones – borderline malnourished – or squealing pale-faced piggies (*warau shirobuta*) with chubby faces so fat that the arms of their silver-plated glasses dug into the sides of their brow. All the girls sported bobbed hair and were mostly fat, having tubby legs like tree-logs covered in white high-socks.”⁴⁷

With even this physical description that portrays *otaku* as unattractive and somewhat repulsive people, Nakamori makes *otaku* into out-of-the-ordinary people who are best to stay away from. Although his writings from 1983 did not have much of a following, this negative idea of *otaku* began to gain ground.

Due to public response and his personal discomfort with the topic, Manga Burikko's editor Otsuka Eiji chose not to print any more of Nakamori's pieces, but a final instalment of "'Otaku' 'Research' did appear in the December 1983 edition. This parting shot is advertised as a finale to the "'Otaku' Research' column and was written by Eji Sonta, who is identified as a member of Nakamori's circle. *Otaku*, in Eji Sonta's opinion, are men who are incapable of maturing and accepting reality. He uses the term "reality" to allude to the obligations and roles that come with becoming an adult and an active member of society. The youth's all-pervasive attractiveness and Japan's rejection of mature society are acknowledged by Eji Sonta. It is clear that in the six months since Nakamori first used the term, a situation had arisen where the term "*otaku*" might be regarded as discriminatory. The editorial staff of Manga Burikko played a significant role in its formation. The deletion of Nakamori's series and the choice to publish particular reader reactions are examples of how the editorial board's power extends beyond simply assisting readers and includes rejecting the term "*otaku*" as discriminatory. The real boom in the negative meaning of the term *otaku* came in 1989. In this year, following the wave of violence mentioned in the previous chapter, there was a big scandal. The arrest of a man accused of kidnapping and killing four young girls—who ultimately received the death penalty—sparked a full-fledged discussion on "*otaku*" in 1989. In his report on the subject, journalist Nakamori referred to the perpetrator as "the *otaku* murderer". This is because Tsutomu Miyazaki, the ruthless serial murderer, was so enamoured with *hentai* manga that he

47 Akio Nakamori, *Debating otaku in contemporary japan* page 139

stacked up thousands of video cassettes and comics to cover the windows and walls all the way to the ceiling, as seen by some images of the killer's chamber that were published in numerous newspapers. The materials in Miyazaki's room— books, magazines, and videos—attracted commentators and created the network of individuals and viewpoints that should make up the *otaku* discourse. Miyazaki would have been a "normal" serial killer if these objects hadn't been present. In addition, because of the age of the victims, the media linked the incident to *otaku's* appreciation of materials considered lolicon. However, there is a misunderstanding in this reading. In fact, the term lolicon in relation to *otaku* also used in the writings of Nakamori and Sonta refers to men, young or old, who desire is fond of two-dimensional girls, from anime and/or manga. As Akagi Akira points out "lolicon was used to identify an existence that seeks two-dimensional images"⁴⁸. Also, in the book of *otaku* feminist thinker Ueno Chizuko argues that "the Lolita complex is completely different from pedophilia"⁴⁹. Depending on the reader's background, this might sound obvious or absurd. While "lolicon" is often almost synonymous with "pedophilia" for critics today, Ueno, like many observers of manga/anime fans in Japan in the 1980s, understood it to be an orientation toward fictional *bishōjo* (the two-dimensional) and thus distinct from sexual desire for flesh-and-blood women (the threedimensional), regardless of age."⁵⁰In the case of the serial killer, the term lolicon referred to his attraction to girls. Miyazaki's own interests and preferences surfaced as a key to comprehending his string of heinous murders. The theme of the pictures changed as "lolicon" became a euphemism referring to Miyazaki being an "*otaku*" drawn to fictitious beauties who fulfilled his perverted fantasies in real life.

Miyazaki's personal interests and preferences were connected to his actions through remarks made about the state of his room. The name "*otaku*" arose, as did the glance that sought to penetrate Miyazaki's inwardness. The connections between Miyazaki's hobbies and the defining qualities of "*otaku*" were underlined and advertised. Despite the fact that these young people shared Miyazaki's interests, the media depicted his otherwise nondescript apartment as the "room of a girl murderer". By referring to Miyazaki as a "*otaku*," the line between the normal and abnormal was formalised. As it was discussed that manga and anime fans should come out of their "closed rooms," a perceived link between manga and anime imagery, the paedophile predator, and "*otaku*" was made in the public imagination. This protracted media dispute served as many people's first exposure to the term "*otaku*," which gave the term and the supporters associated with it obvious unfavourable connotations. Even if understanding a real *otaku* is difficult, Miyazaki's misdeeds were related to his '*otaku*' interests and then defined as an *otaku*. According to this viewpoint, the intensification of

48 Patrick W. Galbraith, *Debating otaku in contemporary japan* page 30

49 Ueno Chizuko, *Debating otaku in contemporary japan* page 141

50 Patrick W. Galbraith, *Otaku and the struggle for immaginataion in Japan* page 65

Miyazaki's passion for *hentai*, and thus for a manga and/or anime genre, would have caused him to lose the ability to distinguish between reality and fiction, causing him to cross the line into what is considered forbidden and leading him to reproduce his fantasies in real life. As a result, the need for this form of entertainment appears to be addictive.

The events surrounding the serial kidnapping and murder of young girls had the following consequences for the "*otaku*" category. The term "*otaku*" was associated with the idea of a criminal at the discourse level, despite the fact that "actual *otaku*," which is in fact a difficult concept to understand, was neglected. The *otaku* movement is challenging to identify and analyse from a sociological and quantitative standpoint because of how fluid and porous the boundaries of these activities are. However, in this instance, without taking into consideration complexity and without exploring what it may actually mean to be an *otaku*, the serial killer was defined using this term.

A manga author, critic, and editor named Otsuka Eiji published an editorial in the publisher-specific journal *Shinbunka* in which he used the term "*otaku shonen*" (literally, "*otaku*-boys") to defend video collectors from what he believed was the beginning of witch-hunt towards the category considered *otaku*. This is the first and only article in 1989 that uses the term *otaku* in this context. Before August 17, 1989, only an address 'you' could be made using the word *otaku* (written in hiragana or katakana). A more prevalent expression at the time was *mania*, which was used to describe someone who is extremely excited about a certain issue, whereas it alluded to the practise of collecting, it did not have any negative implications other than 'know-it-all'. So, apart from Otsuka's article, between August 1989 and December 1990, just a few of Japan's leading magazines profiled Miyazaki as a video collector or anime fan.

Otsuka was also questioned during Miyazaki's trial. Miyazaki's lawyers, having failed to have the killer deemed insane, tried to prove their client's disconnection from reality. They urged Otsuka throughout the trial to clarify the distinctions between Miyazaki and other collectors and Comiket attendees and to provide insights into the "societal background". Otsuka admits that he finds it challenging to separate himself from Miyazaki because of the perceived similarities between their rooms. Otsuka felt compelled to stand up for him because he believed that the police and the media were only seeking for a fall guy, and they had found one in the anime and manga collectors, as well as in the readers of his comic. Otsuka was not by chance the editor of *Manga Burikko*, a lolicon magazine that figured also in the images of the serial killer room. What bothered him was how the media dwelt on the graphic specifics of the case, creating 'narratively fitting' fact.

Rarely do journalists claim that anime fans are harmful, instead, they cite or speak with professionals like psychiatrists. In this regard, Hirai Tomio, a psychologist from Tokyo Kasei University, explains that "since more women are aiming for a career, the number of lonely men has

increased and the distortions reflected in horror videos are also spreading. Following the logic of cause and effect, most explanations of Miyazaki's motive focus on his parents; like so many others, he suffered from a father who was always at work and an overbearing mother."⁵¹

Instead of passing judgement or defending themselves, tabloid writers ask experts to weigh in on the issue. Philosophers rage against imported individualism, moms and lawyers bemoan the failing educational system and *ijime* (bullying), while risk managers emphasise drug abuse. Numerous experts began to denounce Miyazaki, and those who identify as *otaku* began to worry that this incident would portray anime and video game collectors as psychopaths.

In their immediate response, the amateur manga writers expressed concern about being mistaken for murderers or child molesters. They emphasised how Miyazaki distinguished himself from the "typical" fan, expressed their concern, and made a distinction between the suspect and others in light of the notion that Comiket⁵² is home to an army of Miyazakis-in-the-making. Through the use of the 'Miyazaki as *otaku*' tool, manga and anime fans and creators sought to set themselves apart from the erroneous image of *otaku*. The technique is akin to the disclaiming way of ordering, in which the fans constantly tried to control *otaku* culture by correcting or erasing a false impression that resulted from the Miyazaki Incident and severing any ties to him. However, and ironically, by repeatedly claiming that Miyazaki was not an *otaku*, these fans created a relationship between collecting popular culture and social inadequacy that they want to attack. Miyazaki's flaws are eliminated, and stories of excellent *otaku* are produced. It becomes necessary to alter erroneous representations when they are repeatedly used. A statement about *otaku* may be followed by another statement, either clarifying or rejecting the first.

Soon, having a particular personality type was associated with being an *otaku*. It was no longer about one's interests but rather an essential component of one's identity. The media will start to make connections between a crime and a person's use of video games or another medium if someone begins a killing spree at a school or murders members of their own family. In this regard, the *otaku* witch hunt of 1989 and 1990 is a product of the media. Misconceptions and biases against *otaku* were also evident in media talks of Kato Tomohiro, the twenty-five-year-old who murdered three random persons on the street in Akihabara by driving them over with a truck and then fatally stabbed four more with a knife. According to global reports, Kat committed the 'Akihabara Massacre' because he was an *otaku*, citing as evidence the fact that he posted thousands of warnings about his crime on a cell-phone internet site, spent most of his time shut in his home connecting with people online rather than in person, drew pictures in manga style when he was a high-school

51 Björn-Ole Kamm, *Debating otaku in contemporary Japan* page 60

52 A fair for manga and anime fans comparable to the Italian Lucca Comics

student, and owned several anime DVDs. As a result, hate crimes have even been committed because of prejudices against *otaku*.

For instance, the media frequently covered incidences of "*otaku* hunting", or the beating and mugging of male *otaku*, as well as a few instances of the rape of women serving as maids in Akihabara cafés, during the height of the discussion about Train Man, notably between 2005 and 2007. Instead of talking about his *otaku* identity in his posts, Kat lamented the fact that he was an unemployed temporary worker (*haken*) at a factory in Shizuoka Prefecture and that he did not have a partner. He believed that he lost his job the day before committing mass murder. The general public was made aware of additional causes, such as Kato's dissatisfaction with the Japanese educational examination system and his failure to secure a lifetime job with the corporation, that may have contributed to his heinous murders. However, the Japanese government decided to finally execute Miyazaki Tsutomu, the first "*otaku* murderer," probably in response to public concerns regarding Kato's crimes. By the early 1990s, two opposing viewpoints—*otaku* as criminals and *otaku* as something with potential—coexisted side by side

Densha otoko (Train Man), a love tale with an *otaku* as the protagonist that was adapted into a well-liked film and TV series, further normalised the image of the *otaku*. While *Densha otoko* promotes *otaku* stereotypes, such as not caring about their meals or how they dress, speaking differently, being unable to properly greet people, and spending a significant amount of time and money on manga and anime, it also prominently portrays *otaku* as mostly 'normal' or 'potentially normal'.

They are no longer perverts or prospective sociopaths. They are physically cut off from others but connected to them through technology. They have pals and they want to love and be loved in the same manner that 'normal' people do.

Tajiri also identifies himself as an *otaku*, as a fan of video games in particular but also of anime and manga. Many articles therefore begin to define him as such, making being *otaku* his main characteristic. Continuing to make the term *otaku* take on a negative connotation, many newspapers describe Tajiri as a person with a peculiar appearance, echoing the need to visually distinguish *otaku* as in the case of Nakamori, and with habits that are out of the ordinary.

An article in Tobin's *The Pikachu's global adventure*⁵³ describes him as follows:

“Now 34, Tajiri is an unimposing man, his face composed of sharp angles. His hands and lips tremble as he talks in a soft, shy voice. His eyes are bloodshot: dark circles ripple beneath them. He often works for 24 hours straight, then sleeps for 12. Tajiri is the kind of person the Japanese call *otaku*, those who shut

53 Christine R. Yano, *Pikachu's global adventure* page 130

themselves in with video games or comic books or some other kind of ultra specialisation, away from the rest of society.

They know the difference between the real and virtual worlds, but they would rather be in a virtual world”

The implication of this paper is that Pokemon, a product of an *otaku* misfit, contains key *otaku* practises: antisocial behaviours oriented on consumption. As a result, Pokemon may expose children to an *otaku* milieu, which is unusual even in Japan. Assuming once more that being an *otaku* is a form of social disease that is spread through specific tastes, Tajiri acts as though he has the power to influence new gamers and make them turn into *otaku* like himself.

It was thanks to Okada Toshio's work that *otaku* stories like this of Tajiri became synonymous with success. Okada not only wanted to defend himself and people with passions similar to his own from the current accusations of being problematic people, but also realised that there was potential in 'otaku' that no one had noticed yet. In fact, while in Japan there were still many prejudices about *otaku* abroad, especially in America, anime and manga culture was something cool. Here, anime and manga fans proudly called themselves *otaku* and the main hobbies of this category were not described. As a result, *otaku*'s popularity in Japan significantly increased. Foreigners who were into anime helped to relativize the oddity of those of us who live in Japan since Japanese have the strange tendency of valuing what is prized in other nations. The same Okada wrote:

“In Japan, there is a persistent image of *otaku* as gloomy, ugly and without friends. Overseas, however, *otaku* is accepted as something COOL. There is still quite a gap between Japanese *otaku* and those abroad. *Otaku* are certainly a culture in which Japan can take pride in front of the world”.⁵⁴

Okada thus began to propagate the hidden sides of the so-called *otaku*, showing the world their true potential. Through his research, he highlighted how many successful people could actually be considered *otaku* and how their being *otaku* had led them to success. He, for example, presented Michael Jackson, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas as world- famous *otaku*. Moreover, other successful people like Tajiri began to present themselves as *otaku*, transforming its meaning. Reached a point where the stereotype of *otaku* as losers and social outcasts was no longer relevant. Instead, the perception of *otaku* as possible success stories began to spread in the public. Also, in the book the soul of anime collaborative the example of Tajiri is defined as a good *otaku*:

“Good *otaku* has been recuperated as leaders in the new information society, again because of what they produce. The game designer Satoshi Tajiri, for example, developed the Pokémon handheld video game that

54 Okada Toshio, Debating otaku in contemporary japan page 168

eventually led to a global media bonanza. Tajiri's desire to use virtual worlds as a way to reconnect with other (living) people was part of what drove fascination with the Pokémon game, where players could not complete their collections unless they communicated with others"

In the United States, the term "*otaku*" is commonly used to signify "serious anime fan" (with a pretty good connotation), however in Japan, the term has a more nuanced spectrum of meanings. In general, the term refers to persons who are obsessed with cult anime, manga, computer games, military trivia, and other "geeky" domains of knowledge and activity. In Japan, images of *otaku* tend to oscillate between negative depictions focusing on antisocial behaviour and potentially dangerous habits on the one hand, and positive depictions of future-oriented, post-industrial sensibilities that contribute to the global strength of Japanese products in popular culture on the other.

Turning point for "*otaku*," when those thus labelled started to be seen as making positive contributions to the Japanese economy and society.

The '*otaku*' market was estimated to be worth 88.8 billion yen by the Yokohama Bank Research Institute in April 2005. Around the same time, the Nomura Research Institute, which was also estimating the market worth of '*otaku*' consumption, issued a figure of 411 billion yen.

Despite the gap between the two stated figures, some people argued that '*otaku*' will aid in the revival of Japan's faltering economy on the basis of the stories. These reasons are consistent with a broader argument that Japanese popular culture, such as manga and anime, will increase Japan's influence internationally.

Notwithstanding that the term "*otaku*" has a negative connotation in the Japanese media and in Western techno-Orientalist discourse, yet popular manga and animation critic Okada Toshio gives the term a positive connotation. He contends that a combination of Japanese computer games, manga, and anime produced the distinctive *otaku* culture that he proudly believes is sweeping the globe. Okada bragged that Japan's indigenous *otaku* culture will turn the country into a Mecca for culture. The new definition of "*otaku*" as having a positive connotation is not unrelated to a larger trend by the Japanese government to 'tame' pop culture for its own purposes. Total anime and related "*otaku* goods" sales increased to 2 trillion (US\$18 billion), surpassing Japan's steel exports.⁵⁵

The Japan National Tourist Organisation and other government organisations are alleged to have promoted tourism to the Akihabara region using the "*otaku*" stereotype. This is just what the Japanese government is attempting to bank on with all of the rhetoric and focus currently being placed on Japan's new "soft power" in the globalisation of Japanese pop culture, symbolising Japan

⁵⁵ Sean Leonard, Progress against the law Anime and fandom, with the key to the globalisation of culture, international journal of cultural studies page 282

as an enticing culture, power, or destination. Instead, the name "Japan" refers to a specific brand and assortment of fantasy-ware: products that conjure up a world that is both foreign and familiar, as well as a subjectivity that is continuously changing and movable, constantly moving into and out of new planes, powers, terrains, and connections. The cool Japan strategy or content industry policy is an example of how the Japanese government is attempting to use soft power to politicise its culture. The Japanese government uses public diplomacy to support anime as the main potential to increase Japanese soft power. Japan started to step up its nation branding efforts in 1980, with the establishment of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) Japan's pop-culture diplomacy was fully institutionalised at the turn of the century with the 'Cool Japan' policy discourse, which aimed to take advantage of the success of Japanese media culture in international markets, particularly Euro-American markets. The term "Gross National Cool" was first used in a report by Euro-American journalists about the rising popularity of Japanese media culture. The piece was quickly translated into Japanese, and in light of Japan's protracted economic recession from the mid-1990s, there was tremendous excitement over the country's strong cultural influence around the world. As a result, MOFA adopted pop-culture diplomacy. This was accompanied by active policy discussion and greater export promotion of Japanese media culture in a more institutionally organised manner than before. In 2006, MOFA formally introduced "pop-culture diplomacy," stating that it "is using pop culture, in addition to traditional culture and art, as its primary tools for cultural diplomacy" in order to "further the and portrayed the rise of Japan as a global cultural superpower understanding and trust of Japan." In the same year,, the then Foreign Minister Aso (who became prime minister in 2008) will make a speech where he will condense the essence of the Japanese soft policy related to the entertainment world know as the 'A New Look at Cultural Diplomacy' speech in which he stated:

“I think we can safely say that any kind of cultural diplomacy that fails to take advantage of pop culture is not really worthy of being called cultural diplomacy- here he stressed the growing importance of developing the image of Cool Japan through media culture dissemination for cultural diplomacy strategy-We want pop culture, which is so effective in penetrating throughout the general public, to be our ally in diplomacy ... one part of diplomacy lies in having a competitive brand image, so to speak. Now more than ever, it is impossible for this to stay entirely within the realm of the work of diplomats ... what we need to do now is to build on this foundation [the fact that Japan already has achieved a good image] and attract people of the world to Japanese culture, whether modern or that handed down from antiquity”.⁵⁶

56 Iwabuchi, K, Pop-culture diplomacy in Japan: soft power, nation branding and the question of “international cultural exchange.”p.424

The Japanese entertainment industry, and later Japanese soft power, have benefited from the creation and popularisation of *otaku* outside of Japan.

Although *otaku* fans were not actively engaged in the production of anime, their influence on how the medium is marketed, appraised, and consumed in other countries has been substantial. This global accomplishment in image, imagined character, and imaginative technical transactions demonstrates Japan's new standing in the field of what is commonly referred to as "soft power," also known as cultural power. This is what Joseph Nye refers to as soft power, defined as the "ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments," and it "arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies." This type of power stems from inspiring others' goals and desires by projecting images of one's own culture that are internationally appealing and disseminated over global communication networks.

This is a recent development, because even during the Bubble years and at the height of its economic superpower status in the 1980s, Japan's influence in the sphere of culture, images, ideas, films, publications, lifestyle pursuits, and novels was limited to its own national borders. Surprisingly, with the bursting of the Bubble, Japan has begun to rise in one sector of its economy: innovative commodities with external value.

The *otaku* community, which began in Japan, has spread throughout the world, generating a global network of fans. Nationality is irrelevant in this network; everyone plays their own role, resulting in a unified community. In contrast to the conventional image of the *otaku* as socially isolated, anime fan communities are extremely sociable and networked, relying on a combination of online and offline contacts. In this way, knowledge about Japanese culture can be disseminated through various communication channels and reached people who live far away. From 1976 until 1993, networks of Japanese animation fans imported and transmitted videos over enormous underground worldwide networks, representing what Leonard Sean refers to as 'proselytization commons,' or locations where material and ideas could freely exchange to serve a particular cause.

To interact with other fans, some fans even used earlier information networks such as CompuServe and GENie. Furthermore, anime bulletin board services enabled fans to communicate scripts, synopses, and photos with one another. As previously said, previous generations of Internet platforms such as FTP, Gopher, and newsgroups provided connecting points for geographically scattered fans, but it was the World Wide Web that enabled fandom to proliferate and expand throughout the 1990s and beyond. The fan-to-fan exchange of fan subbed VHS cassettes is credited with developing markets and audiences outside of Japan in the absence of commercial distribution elsewhere. Fan subbing and scanlation, which involves scanning and translating manga, have emerged as a means of widely disseminating anime and manga, dwarfing commercial efforts at

localization and international distribution, thanks to the increasing accessibility of digital production tools and Internet distribution. Fan subbing, a self-described non-commercial activity, is motivated by a variety of factors, including the need for high-quality localised content, a desire to participate in the global fandom, and chances for learning.

Otaku will give highly valuable information and items only when there is a clear advantage to them, whether in the form of a monetary incentive, increased visibility or reputation, or additional information in exchange for what was provided. subsequently it may be stated that *otaku* exchange more than they shares. Because of their concentration on information value, *otaku* are interested in trivia that others would overlook, and they create value where none previously existed. Instead of relying on licenced sources for product knowledge and distribution, *otaku* build their own self-defined networks of information and trade, giving things value regardless of indicated retail price.

Lawrence Eng describes his experience as an American *otaku*, highlighting the role of *otaku* subculture as a means of circulating information outside of Japan, following his passion. He says:

“Being *otaku* meant that we were instrumental in bringing anime to the United States on our own terms, independently and sometimes irrespective of commercial interests. It had to do with our sense of individualism, a do- it- yourself attitude, a philosophy and ethic that delineated right and wrong within our community, as well as best practices and high standards. It was a time when the media we dealt with were rare but common enough that we could form a community around them, and each of us could seek a meaningful role within that community”⁵⁷.

American *otaku* like Eng, in contrast to Japanese *otaku*, appear to be at least subtly aware of the odd postmodern and undoubtedly post national nature of their actions. The growth of *otaku* culture is also a result of this interest with Japanese culture. In reality, because of the *otaku*, Japanese entertainment products have a wider audience and can even be found outside of Japan thanks to unofficial networks. These goods are sold to individuals who seek them out as well as consumed by *otaku* overseas. Thus, even non-*otaku* become aware of these new entertainment options, which encourages them to learn more about Japanese culture and Japan itself. As a result, as tourism rises, *otaku* culture and the idea of Japan as a cool place are indirectly promoted.

In the case of Pokemon, the term was well-known in America even before the formal agreements were struck between Japanese and American Nintendo. In fact, the initial versions of Pokemon to arrive in the United States did so not through Gail Tilden and Norman Grossfeld's meticulous localization efforts but rather through unofficial consumption networks. Pokemon was already being consumed outside of Japan in 1997, before Nintendo of Japan authorised Nintendo of

57 Lawrence Eng, Fandom unbound page 87

America to initiate a localization effort for the game and before 4Kids Entertainment began work on translating the television series into English. By the autumn of 1997, just months after the television series initially aired in Japan, anime *otaku* was selling and exchanging pirated copies hand to hand, by mail, and over the Internet. It's almost as if the illicit sources were a "dark precursor" to the official worldwide marketplaces for Japanese animation. As a result, the Pokemon franchise benefits from an unofficial knowledge-dissemination structure based on *otaku* and snackers who congregate both physically on school playgrounds and in gaming stores and remotely in a variety of internet settings. Plus, Nintendo also benefits from the previously mentioned cool Japan policy by taking advantage of financial assistance and new contacts with the worldwide market.

Other descriptions of the spread of Japanese animation contain references to unofficial networks, illicit copies, and product distribution, as well as monetary success prior to the establishment of businesses that regulated markets. This *otaku* movement of anime imagery appears to have fostered or promoted the formation of the official market. Official networks precede the *otaku* movement, but they do not supplant it. Even while *otaku* activities are abandoned by the official networks, they continue in their own unique ways. *Otaku* appear to continue to be in some way unaffected by formal markets and corporate regulation. There is no reciprocal relationship between the *otaku* movement and corporate markets.

Although Nintendo complains about unauthorised tape duplication, illegal game and card imports, and the publication of Web sites using unauthorised Pokemon graphics, these informal and, in some cases, illegal methods of bringing Pokemon and other Japanese cultural products to other countries actually worked more to advance than to obstruct Nintendo's global marketing mission and, more broadly, the Japanese government's effort to promote its culture abroad. Therefore, it appears that companies accept the sale of pirated copies and translations of manga and anime because they believe that doing so will lead to the sale of the official versions. The corporate regulation, standardisation, and homogenization of the marketing process appear to foreshadow another wave of manga and anime products connected to the activities of so-called *otaku*. When a fan starts to resemble a cultural producer and is thus, in a sense, partially independent of the official output of the culture industry, fan culture turns a corner.

An impact on how *otaku* was portrayed throughout the course of the following years, was made by the global success of anime, video game and manga which led Japanese government officials to acknowledge media and fan cultures as strengthening Japan's soft power. The well-known Japanese cultural products, such as Pokemon, garnered a great deal of attention in Japan as a "social phenomenon," which helped to change the perception of *otaku* from socially reclusive to postmodern topics.

Pokemon can be seen as a representative of/for Japan's "cultural power" because it is a high-tech game that is currently gaining popularity around the globe and enhancing Japan's standing as a premier provider of innovative trade. Plus Pokemon, but especially the brand representative Pikachu, have become symbols of the Japanese entertainment industry and in a way symbols of the new Japan. Another example concerning Pokemon and soft culture is provided by Anne Allison in *Millennial monsters*. In her book she describes the scene in which she sees a Pokemon plane in the LAX⁵⁸ airport. She sees an airliner here with Tajiri pocket monster decals on it. A figure that even adults may recognise is drawn in a cartoonish manner down the side of the aircraft: yellow-bodied and redcheeked Pikachu, the iconic fantasy animal from the largest children's fad of the decade, Pokemon. However, it is not only the outside of the plane that is decorated by Pokemon, in fact the journey promises to be a whole poke experience. The pocket creatures are depicted on everything from headrests to napkins to food containers and cups, while attendants wear aprons with Pokemon designs. There are Pokemon films and videos for in-flight entertainment. A goody bag, much to those at a birthday party, is given to each passenger as they exit the aircraft. It is loaded with Poké-treats such as a notebook, badge, tissue box, and comb. Flying on an All-Nippon Airways (ANA) Pokemon jet is similar to going to a theme park; it involves complete immersion in Poké-mania, from the plane's interior to the passenger's own physical consumption of food and entertainment. An ANA advertisement for Japanese kids claims that such a setting provides not only entertainment but also intimacy and warmth:

“It’s all Pokémon inside the plane. Your happy Pokémon friends are waiting for you all!!!” (*Kinai wa zenbu Pokémon da yo. Tanoshii Pokémon no nakamatachi ga minna o matteru yo.*)”⁵⁹

Passengers will enjoy themselves on the flight because it is filled with adorable devices with a Pokemon theme, and they will also enjoy themselves in the country where they were born. Pikachu and Pokemon in general hence serve as representatives of fun made in Japan. In this case, the definition of fun has shifted, and Pokemon planes act as both fictional allies and promotional tools for seeing, experiencing, and selling Japan. This ANA Airlines advertisement, in addition to promoting domestic travel within Japan with Pikachu, makes a strong argument about the importance of the Japanese entertainment sector in a country where the economy has been afflicted by recession since the Bubble burst in 1991.

Japan's exports of fantasy and entertainment goods, such as comic books, animated cartoons, video games, consumer electronics, and digital toys, have skyrocketed in recent years, providing the

58 Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 2

59 Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 4

country with much-needed domestic revenue and transforming it from a place where people go to have fun (as the advertisement suggests) to one that now leads the world in producing fun. Japanese "cool" is penetrating the daily lives and dreams of postindustrial youngsters all over the world in a vast and lucrative way through things like the ANA Pokemon planes. These recent international flows of Japanese children's books demonstrate how capitalism, globalism, and fantasy are combined and reconfigured.

Chapter 5: Solitude and characters

Continuing on from the previous chapter, in this one too I will focus on a particular element of Japanese culture in the period between the 1980s and the early 2000s that allowed the Pokemon phenomenon to establish itself and then in the following years to consolidate and expand.

In this social context, prompted by various factors, people tend to alienate themselves from the rest of the world and see themselves as individuals disconnected from the rest of society. This leads people to develop a strong sense of loneliness resulting from not finding comfort and understanding outside themselves. This sense of loneliness is often filled by non-real external subjects, such as characters from animated films or, as in our case, video games.

In addition, in this chapter I will analyse how Tajiri, having realised the extent of this phenomenon, has tried with his game to remedy it as much as possible.

However, for other people, loneliness is a constant state rather than just a passing emotion. They experience extreme loneliness. This condition is neither reducible, nor is it necessarily a mental ailment or pathology. Regardless of how we classify it, it is a subjective disorder, which means that it is true in a person's experience but may not always be apparent to those outside the individual. Despite being surrounded by family and friends, a person can nevertheless feel extremely lonely. The fact that this is happening more frequently in contemporary societies should be cause for alarm. Most likely, when we think of loneliness, we picture a lonely person. However, loneliness is now considered a social problem.

This is particularly true in cultures that have advanced industrial technology, where public leaders are now referring to widespread loneliness as an epidemic.

One of the main causes of the emergence of more isolationism among people is certainly the emergence of a post-industrial, consumerist society. Materialism, specifically an overemphasis on the external, material circumstances of well-being while ignoring the social and emotive elements of well-being—those most strongly tied to subjectivity—is related to the tendency towards lonely societies. Everywhere, there are pernicious concerns of loneliness that are maintained and fed by a sense of values and standards, by a way of life that places a strong emphasis on acquisition and control. The priority placed on following rules, imitating others, people become more and more estranged from themselves as they try to fit in with others and pursue power and position. Prediction and mastery-based attempts to find security, order, and a lack of worry eventually give rise to emotions of inward hopelessness and loneliness. The individual in consumerist culture frequently

experiences a dread of nothingness because they are unable to live life genuinely, relate to their own nature, and relate to other people's self.

When followed to its logical conclusion, this unbalanced perspective reduces people to consumers and producers whose worth is based on their output and consumption rather than on their inherent worth.

Nowadays, it is commonly held, individuals value material possessions much more than they do the social connections that were once so important in social customs. However, this trend also has historical roots in the postwar era, with the democratisation that took place after the war and in accordance with the requirements of the "democratic" constitution imposed by the occupying forces in 1947, as well as the shift in the national polity from militaristic annexation of Asia to industrial production, with its aim of providing material abundance for Japanese citizens. There is a great deal of discomfort in Japan right now as a result of the present recession, which has exacerbated decades of corporatist performance-driven behaviour and consumerist inclination to pursue personal pleasures. There is now a deep disquiet in Japan following decades of a corporatist desire to perform and a consumerist tendency to pursue personal pleasures. This anxiety has been heightened by the present recession, which has increased homelessness, layoffs, unemployment, and suicide. There is nostalgia for a time that is remembered and (re)invented as utopically communitarian during this economic downturn.⁶⁰

In Japan after the war, a similar trend towards individualism may be observed in the development of consumer behaviour. It is described in Allison book identifying different stages of consumer behaviour:

"Baby boomers, the "worker bees" raised in the 1950s, valued safety and glamour over glitter, while *shinjinrui*, the "new breed," who came of age in the 1980s and grew up in the "new breed" culture, made wise purchases. The first generation of "corporate warriors" (who grew up in the 1940s and worked hard) also avoided debt. The first generation of "corporate warriors" (who grew up in the 1940s and worked hard) bought sensibly; baby boomers (the "worker bees" raised in the 1950s) sought safety and glamour rather than glitz; and *shinjinrui* (the "new breed" who, coming of age in the 1980s, grew up in an affluent society of national confidence) shopped for identity. More recently there are the *dantai* ("baby boomer juniors," who, becoming young adults in the 1990s, stay detached from others, "graze" in their consumption tastes, and think of the self as a "fenced-in paradise") and "*amenbo kids*," youth in the 1990s who, like water spiders, have multiple but superficial attachments to both people and things. While opinions vary on the escalating materialism and individualism of postwar Japan/ese, there was a certain exuberance in the very depthlessness

60 Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 14

and transparency of the culture in the 1980s. This was seen by some as a sign that Japan had finally arrived and, having bred its own brand of modernity (or gone beyond modernity altogether)⁶¹ ”

In fact, it is now a fact that the post-industrial society has brought with it as many positive as negative aspects. Along with technological development and an increase in wealth has come a greater tendency to isolate oneself and surround oneself only with material goods.

The new industrial society meant that human beings increasingly lost the concept of themselves as part of a group but began to see themselves as individuals. This can be seen by the increasing weakening of figures such as the extended family in favour of the individual member. In fact, modernity presents itself as a revenge of the individual.

This unquestionably applies to Japan, where the reification of life is extreme due to the country's intense labour demands, individualization, and consumerism. Neoconservatives like Fukuda Kazuya and leftist cultural critics like Miyadai Shinji and Murakami Ryu share the view that individualism today is unbound by the shared moral principles that formerly bound "Japan" together.⁶²

In actuality, the propensity to feel a part of the group when working in a group has been lost in contemporary Japan. Today, even when surrounded by other people who are forming a group, one still feels like an individual. If people are actually growing more isolated and lonely, we ought to be able to identify some of the contributing factors in society. There do seem to be indicators of this feedback loop or vicious cycle across Japanese society. The "precarious" scenario that Japan is in as a result of the economic crisis is frequently mentioned in popular Japanese literature, periodicals, television programmes, and online. Numerous academics and commentators on Japan point out a variety of factors, including very low childbearing rates, the declining willingness of Japanese youth to take risks, changes in the nature of relationships and intimacy, changes in the meaning and nature of work and corporate culture, decreasing trust in the government and large corporations, changes in the meaning and nature of employment, and shifts in the nature of relationships and intimacy. Another element of Japanese society that increases the sense of loneliness and leads to internal isolation (not being physically alone but not really feeling connected to the outside world even if it does not visibly appear to be an overt situation) or overt (such as *hikikomori*) is the drive to create a homogeneous society. Both mental health care and Japanese public school pedagogy emphasise the effects of the environment in learning and human development, minimising the consequences of innate abilities and predispositions. The assumption that, if the environment is healthful, children will thrive underlies the tendency to resist categories and labels. It also leads to the treatment of a vast array of psychological and social problems as correctible. The heavy

61 Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 71

62 Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 74

emphasis on “mainstreaming” and the powerful association of health with social integration creates a situation in which the line between the normal and the pathological—between a problem that is manageable through behaviour modification or socialisation and one that requires more specific or totalizing forms of care—becomes difficult to draw. The need therefore to be like others in a certain sense deprives individuals of their own personality, which like the rest of their lives must be average. Non-acceptance of oneself leads to never showing how one really is and not creating lasting and sincere bonds with others, thus creating a sense of loneliness.

An example of the damage caused by this post-industrialism can be seen in the daily routine that leads individuals to alienation visible in simple gestures such as train journeys.

Many people spend hours each day travelling by train to and from congested places, which frequently have several destinations. These days, this journey is typically done by commuters alone. However, most commuters travel alone, including small children as young as six, who are carrying rucksacks as they make their way to *juku* (cram school) or school. The daily detached connectivity practised by rail travel, which not only accompanies but also defines the postmodern lifestyle and subjectivity of Japanese millennials. It is stated that Japanese people are becoming more and more solitary. One may undoubtedly infer atomism or "orphanism" (*kojinshugi*), which is how the individuated nature of Japanese millennials is frequently defined, from behaviour seen on trains alone.⁶³ Loneliness is thus somewhat encouraged by the practices of modern life, such as train travel. People driven by modern consumerism are only concerned with what they have to do to reach the goal of the ideal life desired by society, leaving no room for human needs such as that of dialogue. Thus most of the people one sees on trains are alone despite being surrounded by other people, probably as alone as they are.

Not only the train but many other objects that have become everyday and a symbol of wealth increase this tendency to isolate oneself. Many of the new technological objects considered cool in postindustrial society can actually be seen as objects created to create an individual space for the individual, alienating him or her from others. Some of these objects actually come from Japan. We can monitor how this tendency was reflected in consumer preferences and consumption during the 1990s by seeing how people today seek to defend their own space while avoiding interfering with others. Surprisingly, a large percentage of Japanese people place a high value on things that give a feeling of safety, seclusion, and warmth. The Walkman, a portable tape player from Sony that allows users to stay connected to their own auditory worlds (of music, audio tapes, and radio) wherever they are, was invented in Japan. In addition to the Walkman, those years also saw the emergence of portable mobile phones, which allowed people to create their own world through the screen and to converse with people without the need to see anything other than the screen of the

phone. According to the engineer who designed the PHS (personal handyphone system—a low-powered wireless phone technology developed in Japan) for Motorola in Japan, 85 percent of Japanese owners are personal users who carry their cell phones wherever they go and conceptualise them also as play devices, fashion wear, and companions. Since phones, in a manner of speaking, are so sutured to the body, wearability is a keyword for Japanese consumers, driving fashions that stress compactness and style, along with the latest in technology.⁶⁴

Another entertainment accessory born and widespread in those years, very close to the main topic of this thesis, is the Game Boy. Like the other objects listed above, it also originated in Japan, produced and marketed by Nintendo the 21 April 1989. Also Anne Allison in her book recounts his experience in front of these objects: “Most of my fellow commuters on the trains I rode during my year in Japan were hooked up to such electronic devices: Walkmen, Palm Pilots, Game Boys, and cell phones”⁶⁶ highlighting how these objects of isolation have become commonplace and how the practice of isolating oneself in one's own world is now also a daily routine.

Japanese people spend an increasing amount of time alone, developing closer relationships with the products and technologies they use (such as cell phones, Walkmen, and Game Boys) rather than with one another.

Tajiri soon realised this mechanics especially in the world of video games, which was very close to him. He became aware, through his gaming experience, that video games were being designed to become more sophisticated and to be played alone, without the assistance of other players. As a result, the videogame was no longer a time for gathering but rather a new time for solitude, with the most involvement coming from idly seeing someone else play the machine. Games are frequently myopic and isolate children inside of their digital environments. Since the late 1980s, there has been an upward trend in complexity in game design, which calls for extreme concentration and draws players into solitary interactions with their virtual gaming worlds.

This situation increased with the advent of hand-held consoles, which allowed the gamer to no longer have to gather in common places to play video games (game rooms or in front of a television set in a shared room of the house), which also had a role of aggregation, but to be able to play anywhere alone. Only with their own screen, without anyone else being able to see through it.

Soon Tajiri realised how the mechanics of isolating oneself present in video games was not something confined only to that sphere but that society itself, especially the younger generation, was tending towards atomism. He observed that, in contrast to his experience, the young gamers did not use the game to form bonds with other players who shared their interests, as he and many other Game Freak members did. Instead, they remained isolated, secluded behind their screens, unable to

⁶⁴ Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 89

⁶⁶ Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 81

interact with others. Tajiri believes that the benefits of modern Japan have come at the expense of humanity. Japanese people spend an increasing amount of time alone, developing closer relationships with the items they own and technologies like the Game Boy, the Pokemon console, than with one another or other people. Children are particularly harmed by the "solitarism" of lives spent consuming literature at home, attending cram school, and taking public transport to go to school. As we've already seen, these mobile children struggle with connection and look for friendship in the "shadow families" of technologically mediated virtual worlds.

It was in the face of this scenario that Tajiri decided to make his contribution to society through Pokemon.

With his work, Tajiri not only wanted to give children a piece of his childhood, children who, as we have seen in the third chapter, no longer seem to have one, but also to find a way through his video game to rebuild the lost sociality among kids. Children can experience Pokemon alone (for example, while watching a television cartoon) or with others (for example, while trading cards or swapping via the Game Boy cable); they can experience it at home, on the street or playground, or while playing the Game Boy in the back of the car; and they can experience it intensively for long stretches of time, or more casually, in those in-between moments when there is nothing else to do. Because of the variety of media and activities, it can fit in isomorphically with many of the spaces and routines of children's daily lives. While some of these usage may reflect the social isolation of the *otaku*, the large majority entail social interaction

To begin with, Tajiri believed it was critical to provide children and all the lonely people bottled up in Japan's industrial society with a taste of life and daily routine prior to the arrival of industrialisation and the days filled with nothing but work and racing against time to achieve all of industrial society's goals. To do this, he attempted to include his childhood experiences into the game.

He sought to recreate something from his childhood in the fictional play world of Pokemon, nostalgic for a society not yet dominated by industrial capitalism. Tajiri used his personal experiences in a town where nature had not yet been overrun by industrialization to "tickle" recollections of the past. His favourite childhood activity had been gathering insects and crayfish, which encompassed interactions with both society and nature (exploration, adventure, observation, and gathering) as well as other children. Tajiri spent a lot of time studying, collecting, and trading bugs because he was fascinated by the variety and number of species in his natural environment. This play style, which is simultaneously entertaining and educational, is what Tajiri sought to record and impart to today's kids, for whom nature does not already serve as a playground. He decided to present his New Age insect collection in the virtual realm of computer-generated

characters, games, and monsters. Trying to incorporate his experience in modern ways (collection of virtual instead of real insects) Tajiri tried to make young people want to discover their surroundings, trying to broaden their vision outside the Game Boy screen.

Along with making the gamers understand that there is an outside world that deserves just as much attention as the world on screen. Tajiri created his game to encourage more interaction because he was troubled by the present trend towards atomism. He achieved this by initially designing the game so that even young children as young as four could complete it. Pokemon was rather basic compared to the current trend in gaming, which is geared towards older children and young adults. As long as a child was diligent in playing and mastering the game, the rules could be understood and success could be attained. The ease of the game therefore allows everyone to understand it and its fundamentals. Another very important element for the success of Pokemon is its completeness as a game-world. Becoming not just a flat game where you just continue levels, Pokemon is designed to be a world to be discovered as the nature of young Tajiri. This element becomes fundamental for the development of a relationship between players because they, as explorers of this unknown world, exchange information in order to reach their goals first. Players can also discover the world of Pokemon on their own but, following market logic, they know very well that it would take them more time and knowing that, especially in a consumer society, time is money. So it becomes more productive to exchange information with people, who can then also become friends. That said, given the abundance of information contained in Pokemon, young players are also driven to gather and share knowledge with their peers, turning the virtual world into a means of communication. The effective Pokemon player must have a thorough understanding of the many species and their distinctive traits and abilities, just like Tajiri did when he was collecting his insects.

When Pokemon from various categories (such as water, fire, psychic, etc.) compete, their unique strengths and weaknesses must be considered.

For example, in this way two unknown children travelling alone on the same train attached to their Game Boy, seeing that the other is playing the same game can start communicating by talking about Pokemon, the strategies to follow and the tricks they have discovered, reconnecting with reality. This serves a number of purposes in terms of audiences. To commit to Pokemon is to commit to a longterm engagement, which presents some big hurdles in terms of finding, processing, retaining, and applying knowledge. For the person, this results in a large degree of longevity. This amount of interpersonal complexity also gives Pokemon fans something to talk about in social settings. In fact, Tajiri and its marketers included the feature of communication in all of the written materials relating to Pokemon, from the guidebooks to the instructional manuals that go along with the game. In doing so, Tajiri builds meeting points for those who want to get to know other Pokemon fans. In

fact, by creating Pokemon-themed game manuals and books that can be purchased at newsstands and bookshops, Pokemon fans know that in front of those shelves they will be able to meet other likeminded fans with whom they can interact through shared knowledge of Pokemon.

The exchanges that are a key aspect of playing the game literalize this conversation even more. Exchanges were novel in Pokemon, setting it apart from other action games where combat is the norm (this is part of the reason why Pokemon is typically classified as a role-playing game rather than an action game per se).

Another key element in encouraging sociality through Pokemon is exchange. Tajiri, in order to induce players of his video game to collaborate and thus interact with each other, made the collectible Pokemon within the video game exchangeable. The possibility of this idea came to him when Nintendo developed an accessory for the Game Boy called the game link cable, which allowed two devices to communicate with each other. What everyone saw as just another accessory for the popular portable console was, for Tajiri, the ideal tool for developing his game and starting to connect not only the devices but also the isolated youngsters. Tajiri's initial idea was to allow players to exchange Pokemon, a bit like they used to do with figurines, swapping double cards (in this case Pokemon) for a new one.

Realising his intent and trying to make it possible, Shigeru Miyamoto suggested a change: instead of making this exchange voluntary, he made it compulsory to complete one of the game's objectives. Miyamoto liked Tajiri's idea, but was afraid that if the exchange was only an option for players and not an obligation, they would continue to lock themselves in their isolationism. So he proposed to create two versions of the game (red and green or blue in European and American versions) equal in everything except the types of Pokemon contained. In fact, the titles had the same number of Pokemon that could be found, but differed in 11 different Pokemon species that were unobtainable in the opposite file. In this way, players were obliged to exchange the different Pokemon if they wanted to complete their collection. This forces them to form a relationship with another player and find a compromise with him so that the exchange can take place. In this way, players both inside (in the video game the two characters are presented in the same room when they make an exchange) and outside the screen are connected to each other.

Tajiri intended for players to become entangled in webs of social ties as a result of the demand for exchange because one cannot play strictly alone due to the game's rules. And, as was hoped, transactions continue into various sorts of currencies and outside the confines of the game itself. Tajiri used the example of a child trading one of his Pokemon for a bowl of ramen or a coveted comic book as an illustration of how metaphors, economies, and pleasures might be combined. The ideal is a group of pals who communicate with one another through using Pokemon. Pokemon, in

this way, enables engagement in a variety of children's social environments by serving as a ticket to play, a pretence for negotiating friendships, and a vehicle for competitiveness and conflict. Exchange and communication are encouraged both inside and outside the game. Not only outside the game are players brought to the exchanges of information and Pokemon through the cable, but Tajiri, in order to teach how bonding with others is a fundamental thing, has included the aspect of exchange and communication with in-game characters as well. Communication, as we also saw in the second chapter, within the game is very important. In fact, Tajiri wanted to recreate the sociality that he himself found in his childhood in a society that was not yet industrialised. At that time, genuine interactions still existed, made to connect with others and not for market reasons. Even within the game the player has the opportunity to interact not only with his friends, who appear in the game thanks to the game link, but also with all the characters designed by Tajiri. Within the adventure Pokemon are not our only friends. Walking from town to town the player will meet many characters with whom he can talk. Again in order to get players used to interacting with people and hoping that they will emulate the same situation both inside and outside the game, some of these characters can be crucial to the success of the game. To know which character will give information, or gifts, useful or useless the player has 2 options: complete the game and talk to each character, if not he will let any rewards slip through his fingers, talk to a player who has already finished the game and can give him useful information. In both cases a social mechanism has been activated. In addition, this system highlights that although the protagonist of the game performs a solo journey, with no companions other than his/her Pokemon, he/she is not alone. Many of the characters the player will find on his way are ready to help him in case of need and to share their information with him. Tajiri hoped thus to make players on the one hand gain confidence in their fellow man and on the other hand become interested in their fellow man so as to get out of this situation of atomism. Obviously the starting point and meeting point of these atoms was, and still is, Pokemon. Pokemon were not created to be passively "consumed" in the passive meaning of the word. They were, on the contrary, intended to stimulate movement and social engagement. They are completely reliant on it. This is true not only of children's first encounters with the text, but also of what happens after that. The computer games were obviously designed to be "interactive," in the sense that in order to succeed, you must make decisions and predictions, remember important information, plan ahead, and so on. However, this level of active participation is demanded by the phenomenon as a whole: in order to be a member of the Pokemon culture and learn what you need to know, you must actively seek out new knowledge and new products, as well as collaborate with others in doing so. There is a level of cognitive activity required here, but there is also a level of social or interpersonal activity that is required for the phenomenon to exist.

Pokemon was designed to be interactive in a third approach, which is more directly related to the theme of cuteness. Anne Allison, thanks to several talks with kids specialists, discovers that Pokemon provide children with what child specialists referred to as a "space of their own": a play setting that is imagined but also emotionally real, and that shields children from the reality of school, family, and daily demands".⁶⁵ Pocket Monsters are the embodiment of this fictitious world. They are available as digitised icons in Game Boys, which youngsters can take with them wherever they go. These are pocket fancies, both literally and metaphorically. As a result, they straddle the line between phantasm and reality.

Children often have imaginary playmates, of course. Children take objects from their surroundings, such as twigs, wooden blocks, and dolls, and give them characters, tales, and lives across countries and time. Children establish ties to these items that aid in their survival and navigation of the rocky road of adolescence. Imaginary creations serve as personal resources, companions, possessions and realms of fiction, giving people a way to interact with and escape from the real world. By including "communication" into the Pokemon game concept, Tajiri intended for this kind of interaction to take place. His intention was to produce fictional beings that kids could interact with in a variety of ways (as friends, tools, pets, and weapons, for example). These fantastical beings are appealing not just for their appearance or behaviour, but also for the feelings they arouse.

Without realising it, Tajiri also created a fourth way to relieve people of their sense of loneliness. In fact, players not only create relationships through Pokemon with people outside the game by talking about the game's strategies and characters (explored in depth within the animation), but also find friendship with the characters and especially the Pokemon.

The Pokemon, but especially the brand representative Pikachu, chosen from all 150+1 creatures as the Pokemon mascot, have become true reference figures for many game enthusiasts. Through the video game and the brand's merchandising, Pokemon travel with their favourite people on lengthy trains, over extended periods of instruction and study, and during frequent lonesome meals at both school and home. Character branding is currently trendy and even fetishistic in Japan. This is a result of the adoption of cute characters as symbols of identity, whether it be national, personal, or corporate.

According to Dentsu, the "essence" of character merchandising is that it "glues society at its foundations. A character grows alongside a group, becoming a member of and a symbol for that group's identity. It goes on to say that characters are a device for self-realisation. Such personalities provide children comfort rather than inspiration. In Japan today, the word "healing" is frequently used to represent the social and psychological advantages of appealing character products and interactive products like Pokemon, which are believed to be able to alleviate stress and cure

loneliness. Unlike parents in the case of children or peers in the case of adults, these characters are always present in the lives of those who love them, accompanying them in their dark moments and listening to them when they need it. Children who are under pressure from bullying, academic challenges, and financial instability find solace in fictional characters who offer them an unconditional yet individualised affection. It is these characters who help children overcome moments of stress, not parents or institutional figures who instead, as mentioned in the chapter on Japanese society, only add stress to people who are already at the limit of their endurance. Pokemon characters become shadow families that provide constant and dependable companionship that spreads "unconditional love" in these postindustrial times of nomadism, orphanism, and stress for people who, regrettably, many in modern society feel abandoned or excluded from the subjects of their lives.

When close friends or family members are unable to meet our needs, these related patterns can have a profound impact on many elements of how we interact with the outside world. For instance, different attachment patterns are related to how engrossed we become in stories and how attached we feel to fictitious characters. This is most likely due to the fact that the social and interpersonal content of stories provides a practical manner of satisfying intimacy demands by providing a kind of proximity that is free of the risk of rejection that comes with intimate connections. Thinking about a favourite TV character might also assist to alleviate the negative effects of social rejection, indicating how fictitious characters can serve as stand-ins for real-life intimates.

The *kawaii* aesthetic of anime and video game characters like Pikachu has made it feasible for individuals to form this bond of love and relaxation with them.

The following part will cover the *kawaii* concept and how it contributes to the Pokemon franchise's success.

Here, however, we have had the opportunity to examine the different ways in which Tajiri, in his own unique way, has dealt with the sense of isolation and stress that are now regrettably common in industrialised society.

Chapter 6: The power of *kawaii*

Continuing the discourse begun in the previous chapter, let's look at one of the pivotal elements that has made Pokemon as successful as it has helped Japanese pop culture in general to gain worldwide fame: the concept of *kawaii*.

In this chapter, I will analyse the concept of *kawaii* as a cornerstone of Japanese culture and a fundamental element that has made Pokemon famous both at home and abroad. In addition, I will explain the birth and meaning of this word, which in Japan has become a way of being and a way of thinking about certain things such as the protagonists of animated series like our Pikachu.

First of all: what does *kawaii* mean? The word *kawaii* can be translated as an adjective meaning cute, in the sense of beautiful, adorable and tender. It derives from the word *kawaisa*, which is an adjective and in modern parlance essentially refers to objects, people, ways of doing things that can be considered sweet, innocent, pure, genuine, kind, but also childish and childlike. Exceptionally, the term is used in a negative sense, meaning "clumsy" or "stupid". The Nihon Kokugo Daijiten, a Japanese dictionary, defines *kawaii* as follows:

“kawai-i (adjective) (1) looks miserable and raises sympathy. pitiable. pathetic. piteous. (2) attractive. cannot be neglected. cherished. beloved. (3) has a sweet nature. lovely. (a) (of faces and figures of young women and children) adorable. attractive. (b) (like children) innocent. obedient. touching. (4) (of things and shapes) attractively small. small and beautiful. (5) trivial. pitiful. (used with slight disdain).”⁶⁶

The origins of the term can be found in the expression *kao hayushi*, which literally means "glowing/flushing face", commonly used to refer to a person's face blushing. In the dictionaries of the Taishō period until World War II, the term was reported as *kawayushi*, then changed to *kawayui* and finally to *kawaii*, while retaining the same meaning. In its original meaning, the term indicated the concepts of 'shy', 'embarrassed', and only secondarily those of 'vulnerable', 'dear', 'lovable' and 'small', but in modern usage the latter ended up taking the main meaning.

⁶⁶ Hiroshi Nittono, The two-layer model of '*kawaii*': A behavioural science framework for understanding *kawaii* and cuteness, page 3

According to Cristiano Martorella, on the level of aesthetics and conceptual meaning, *kawaii* derives from a mutation of *iki* (meaning grace) from its traditional coordinates set by Kuki^{67 68} .This underlines how *kawaii* relates to traditional Japanese concepts of beauty. Again according to Martorella⁶⁹ , *kawaii* has certain points in common with *iki*: a kind of liberation from convention through pleasure and a soul open to change. Unlike *iki*, *kawaii* shifts towards showiness and approaches the idea of sweetness, but like *iki* it retains a relationship with distinction. This link between *kawaii* and Japanese tradition makes us realise that *kawaii* is not a subculture at all, but an integral and fundamental part of Japanese culture.

Kawaii developed in Japan from a popular and commercial point of view in the early 1970s in very different areas. First of all, a particular attachment to animals took shape in Japan, in particular chubby and cute animals, which were considered cute. The boom in this craze was triggered in 1972 when Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka visited Beijing and the Chinese government presented him with two giant pandas. The two pandas, named Ran Ran and Kan Kan, were transported to Tokyo, unleashing a crowd of Japanese admirers. In the 1980s, the pandas were followed by a success with the animals that captivated the public⁷⁰. This helped in 1996 to increase Pokemon's success, as the little beasts were seen as a new species of animal to be adored.

Kawaii, besides being a word, expresses an entire ideological world. In fact, one does not speak of *kawaii* only as an adjective in relation to an object, but as *kawaii* culture. It is in fact a cultural category of Japan that runs through all the media and sectors of the commercial industry and youth trends. *Kawaii* is therefore not just a constituent element of Pokemon, but is an ideology about and of Japan that is more complex than we think.

Currently in Japan, the expression *kawaii* culture refers to the behaviour and scale of tastes of a generation of young people who identify with a lack of ideologies and prefer to take refuge in a childish world of puerile attitudes, kitsch fashions and details in clothing, trends and children's language, trying to detach themselves and distance themselves from the adult world and their participation in it. This way of calling young people came about when sociologists started writing about *kawaii* culture and pointing out different phenomena that had the same type of young people

67 Referring to Kuki Shuzo, a 19th century dandy philosopher

68 Cristiano Martorella ,Anatomia di pokemon page 189

69 Cristiano Maroterella ,Anatomia di pokemon page 190

70 Marco Pellitteri ,Anatomia di pokemon page 200

as their protagonists. That is why *kawaii* culture is placed in the context of the broader concept of moratorium, the refusal to grow up and enter the adult world and the attempt to remain trapped in a continuous state of infantility⁷¹.

At the level of anime and manga, *kawaii* occurs within two narrative genres that differ in content but are similar in some graphic recurrences, humorous comics and *shojos*, the manga that tend to be written for a female audience. The first to introduce the *kawaii* style into his design was Tezuka Osamu in the 1940s. He particularly liked Walt Disney's work, so he tried to imitate the graphic style of the American brand. In fact, in his works, all the characters have Bambi-like eyes to emphasise the expressiveness of the characters and a curvilinear module structure for the build of the funny or small characters. In addition, he began to use stylised decorative motifs such as stars and hearts to idealise certain atmospheres and symbolise the characters' moods.

A "cute" (*kawaii*) craze that began in the 1970s and peaked again in the late 1990s was grafted onto product lines like those of the company Sanrio, known for their vibrant colours, miniaturisation, and a tonne of tiny items as well as other pop cultural forms typically connected to girliness, fun, and childhood.

Kawaii on the other hand in Japanese children's humour comics was introduced by a duo of authors Fujimoto Hiroshi and Abiko Motoo known by the pseudonym Fujiko Fujio, admirers of Tezuka. It was they who invented iconic *kawaii* characters such as Doraemon in 1970. Graphically made up of a series of circles to form a funny silhouette and characterised by a clumsy manner Doraemon was instrumental in Japanese pop culture and in the spread of the aesthetics and characteristics of *kawaii* characters.

Another very important example of a character considered *kawaii* before Pokemon is Hello Kitty, which became famous in the early 1980s. The varied merchandising of Hello Kitty represents a prodrome of what happened with Pokemon⁷². Hello Kitty shows itself as the epitome of a *kawaii* object. In fact, she is small, defenceless, is represented with simple colours and pastel tones, and has the dimensions of a baby (big head on a small body).

So, if in the 1970s Doraemon had created the first prototype of *kawaii*, Hello Kitty in the 1980s defined them and adapted them to the new sensitivity of the public. Important in continuing to delineate what a *kawaii* character is will be Arale, from the comic series Slump & Arale written by

71 Cristiano Maroterella, Anatomia di pokemon page 187

72 Marco Pellitteri, Anatomia di pokemon page 195

Toriyama Aikra. In his comic not only the design but also the ideological motif is *kawaii*. In fact, in the comic the same message is subtended within the world of Japanese youth who identify *kawaii* as an escape from growing up.

These works have codified and institutionalised the *kawaii* aesthetic in Japan and the rest of the world. The evolution of *kawaii*, however, did not stop with Arale, evolving in the 1990s and flowing first into the Tamagotchi and finally into Pokemon. Most Pokemon respect and even amplify the concept of the *kawaii* character. Indeed, a yearning for "cuteness" as well as cute characters, which bloomed with Japan's postwar prosperity in the 1970s, has surged again (since 1997) in the millennial years of post-bubble distress—a craving for "cuteness" as well as cute characters.

We can therefore observe how the fact that these characters are regarded as *kawaii* leads to people falling in love with them and finding them comforting by linking with the previous chapter and learning about the importance of the new characters in people's life. Similar attachments and feelings are evoked by the Japanese "*kawaii*" fad, which dates back to the mid-1970s and has been resurging since the late 1990s. It features attractive objects and cute characters. Cute characters are consistently characterised by their relationships with people rather than merely their physical characteristics (large head, little body, big eyes, missing nose).

Pokemon is the ideal illustration of this modern zenith. Just think of Pikachu, the Pokemon mascot of the series, which has typical *kawaii* elements such as exaggerated roundness, defenceless appearance, large eyes, childish behaviour, simple colours. Like the aforementioned Hello Kitty, Pikachu and other Pokemon considered beautiful, such as Vulpix, are characterised by a studied project design, characterised by easy reproducibility in line with the tastes of the Japanese public and the current trends in the aesthetic taste of young consumers.

Pokemon therefore obey the pet rule: they mostly appear as small, round, pudgy animals with sweet and clumsy movements. They also obey modified and nipponised pseudo-Disney canons derived from characters like Hello Kitty and Doraemon.

Behaviourally, Pokemon behave like children, capable of temper tantrums and acts of unbridled love and rivalry among themselves. This because cuteness is frequently linked to childhood and childish qualities like innocence, reliance, and independence from the demands of the adult world,

even though, as we've seen, childhood actually involves quite a few diverse experiences. These have been added to and taken from the "play" of dreams and fantasy.⁷³

The Pokemons' way of speaking consists of the repetition of their names in different ways depending on the situation to make the viewer concentrate on the animal's emotions rather than on what it is saying.

Moreover, this way of speaking is the Pokemonian transposition of the Japanese youth's fashion of mispronouncing words in a childlike manner.

The *kawaii* ideology applies to Pokemon in a timely manner with regard to the theme of clumsiness, both as the main meaning of the term and as a widespread feeling within Japanese youth, who do not know how to cope with the adult world. In addition to being a psychophysical factor of childhood, clumsiness is also an element that many children and adolescents live with through their feeling of inadequacy towards the world. A prime example of this synthesis within Pokemon can be seen in Psyduck. His figure is clumsy and decidedly clumsy, but he packs an enormous power that he finds it difficult to express due to his inadequacy. He represents a cliché of Japanese fiction: the outcast. As well as being a literary cliché, it is also a category of person who, like Psyduck, contains within him an unexpressed power due to social conditions. It is therefore possible to link the theme of inadequacy to the concept of *kawaii* and the concept of isolation, as young people tend to isolate themselves from the rest of society. It is therefore possible to link the theme of inadequacy to the concept of *kawaii* and the concept of isolation, as young people tend to isolate themselves from the rest of the world by taking refuge in the protective dimension of childhood possessions and the reluctance to test themselves for fear of not standing up to adults.

Another Pokemon that embodies the elements of *kawaii* is Pikachu. Pikachu was designated as the protagonist of the television show. They decided on a Pocket Monster rather than a personable character like Mickey Mouse or an anthropomorphic animal. Such a prominent character inspires in the audience feelings of possession, camaraderie, and attachment—a new kind of fictitious tie essential to the creation of *yasashisa*. This is where Pikachu, the adorable yellow, mouse-like Pokemon with electrifying abilities and a squiggly tail, first appeared. Pikachu, who was only one of 151 monsters in the original Game Boy game, went on to become the main Pokemon and an international symbol comparable to the Nike Swoosh and McDonald's Golden Arches.⁷⁴

73 Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, page 90

74 Anne Alison, *Millennial monsters* page 226

Kubo Masakazu claimed that this decision was made after going through a checklist. The character needed a shape that could be recognised from a distance, a sharp silhouette, a basic colour—yellow would be preferable to red, which denotes competition, a face that could "pleasurably" show a range of emotions, including tears, a memorable name that children could say ("pika pika chuuuu," which sounds good and can be sung around the world without translation), and, most importantly, overall cuteness. Pikachu "grabs" people's emotions, as Kubo Masakazu puts it in reference to his incredible appeal. Children smile at it because of how cuddly it looks, and mothers feel secure. However, the fierce abilities Pikachu possesses, are just as significant. In fact, they are similar to those of modern-day Japan, whose "cultural power" manifests as disarming character/commodity cuteness.

In addition Pikachu even within the series is the bearer of different messages. For example, throughout the story arc he refuses to evolve, remaining in his childlike, *kawaii* state. Thus it, like the young Japanese, refuses to grow and transform into anything other than its *kawaii* and, in a sense, infantile stage.

Even the children interviewed by Anne Allison use the term *kawaii* or cute in English to define the creatures within Pokemon:

“Chiori conceptualised Pokémon more in terms of specific Pokemon she found “cute” (*kawaii*). Chiori liked those monsters who somehow amused her or seemed endearing. My two neighbourhood children in Durham,

North Carolina, were similar in detailing specific features of Pokémon they found “interesting,” “funny,” or “cute” (because of the unusual colour, shape, or odd assemblage of parts, such as a flower with lips that can speak).”⁷⁵

Also Okada Toshio, believes the quality captured by play goods like Pokemon is “cuteness,” which, because Japanese are particularly skilled in crafting it and because it is “one thing that registers for all people,” may well be the nation’s resource for “working foreign capital in the twenty-first century”⁷⁶

75 Anne Allison, *Millennial monsters* page 205

76 Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 22

Kubo Masakazu (the one who turned the Game Boy story of Pokemon into a comic book story) holds the same opinion, stating in his discussion of the Pokemon industry that a trait he called "cuteness" (*kawaisa*) or "gentleness" (*yasashisa*), as others in the industry also called it, provides harmony. Speaking specifically about Pokemon and its success on the export market, Kubo noted that cuteness offered Japan "cultural power", which the Japanese are "polishing" as both capital and prestige abroad. For example, when it debuted in the autumn of 1998, Pokemon was the top-rated children's programme on American television. According to the Japanese cultural critic Okada Tsuneo, cuteness is one quality that all people can recognise, and in his opinion, Pokemon is the definition of cuteness. This cuteness may be Japan's key to attracting global investment in the twenty-first century.⁷⁷ Pokemon shares the same data-driven flexibility, portability, and wonderful spirituality with broader postmodern play aesthetics that are characterised by the epithet cute. The very characteristic that, when introduced to the Pokemon game, helped turn a simple game for boys on the Game Boy into a worldwide phenomenon among children. The word used by Nagao Takeshi to characterise the sensitivity at the core of Japanese culture and by Japanese producers to describe the marketing of Pokemon in Japan is *yasashisa*, the "gentle" side of cuteness. Indeed, *kawaii* (cute) is related to the characteristics of *amae* (sweet, reliant), and *yasashii* (gentle).

However, as they noted, when Pokemon first debuted as a role-playing/action game aimed at males between the ages of eight and fourteen, this was not its original identity. The evolution of the story versions, especially the animation produced by Kubo and his team for Tokyo television, brought about cuteness. The main goal here was to broaden the Pokemon audience to include girls, younger kids, and even moms (who are just as crucial to the marketing of children's entertainment as the kids themselves).

⁷⁷ Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters* page 225

Conclusions

In this last concluding chapter, I wanted to pull the strings of everything that has been analysed so far and answer the initial question of the thesis, namely: why did Pokemon become such a successful phenomenon?

As could be seen within the thesis, there are several reasons.

First and foremost, the ability of its creator, Satoshi Tajiri, to realise the problems within society and the world of video games and create something new that could help both to improve. As far as the video game world is concerned, Pokemon managed to create a simple but entertaining game type that could therefore be suitable for a wide range of players. In addition, it added a new element that would become fashionable in the years to follow, namely the collection. By adding unique elements, he managed to introduce a new way of playing the game. Not only a new way in terms of the mechanical functioning of the video game but also a new 'social' way of playing video games. In fact, the creator of Pokemon, having experienced at first hand the hardships of Japan in the new millennium, tried to give his video game both a playful and social purpose. Tajiri has in fact based his video game on the possibility of relationship building both within the game, thanks to the player's collaboration with various non-playable characters, and outside, thanks to the use of the Game Link Cable. Realising the loneliness and difficulty in communication in Japanese society, especially in the youth population, Tajiri wanted, and succeeded in getting, young people to use the Game Link Cable not only to connect their devices but to connect with the outside world, using Pokemon as a starting point for the creation of new friendships.

In fact, Japanese society in the period leading up to and immediately after the start of the new millennium (1990-2000) presented itself as a complicated society that, due to the bursting of the economic bubble, questioned the foundations of society. In this period of profound social crisis, various negative phenomena such as death from too much work stress (*karoshi*), an increase in suicides and various youth phenomena emerged. Young people in fact are overwhelmed by this sense of loss and insecurity made worse by an education system that instead of relieving them weighs them down. It is during this period that the population also begins to focus on them but what emerges is a youth full of problems. Young people, and at times unfortunately also very young people, become bullies, murderers or turn to prostitution.

On the other hand, the victims of these violent acts often find a solution in suicide and isolation, giving rise to phenomena such as *hikikomori* (people who do not leave their homes for long periods or leave only when strictly necessary) or *toko kyohi* or *futoko* (young people who refuse to continue

going to school and often take refuge in their homes). In reality, both victims and bullies, who often end up becoming victims themselves creating a system where no one is really safe, both experience a strong sense of loneliness. Between the difficulty of making lasting friendships and absent parents who only care about school performance, creating phenomena such as *kyoiku mama*, young people find solace in the surrogate families created by characters like Pikachu. Indeed, in a world where young people do not seem to find their place in virtual worlds and the figures within them seem a reassuring place to belong and where they can finally find themselves. These characters seem to have the power to cure, in a way, people from their state of stress and loneliness. This healing power not only resides in their constant presence in people's lives in the form of video games but also accessories and various merchandising that they can always have close by, unlike real people who often seem distant, but also thanks to their *kawaii* appearance. It is thanks to their *kawaii* nature that Pokemon, especially certain types such as the famous Pikachu, have managed to make their way into the hearts of many people, from the little girls who watch them every day on television trying to collect the cutest, pinkest little monsters to the salaryman, a mainstay of Japanese society, who carries a keyring with his favourite Pokemon on it to bring along some childlike carefreeness during a hard day's work. The term *kawaii*, which can be translated as cute, actually carries a deeper meaning. It is used not only to describe an object but is a search for a childlike, not yet adult stage, away from the typical stress of Japanese society. In fact, it is also sought after in adulthood, by men and women, to seek an escape from stressful and unrewarding adult life, to seek a childlike carefreeness. Unfortunately, however, this childlike carefreeness is only an illusion, as in the lives of most Japanese, even childhood was punctuated by stress and performance anxiety. Children do not have time to play and live carefree lives in an education system that puts them under constant tests, where school results determine a person's life. Again, Tajiri tries to give fans of his video game an alternative. Not only does he try to make children relive, albeit digitally, a different reality from their own, a less stressful one where knowledge comes through entertainment and contact with others, but he also puts a bit of his own personal history into Pokemon. For Tajiri, considered an *otaku*, a failure by his parents and society, proves by his success that society's parameters are wrong, not him. Not only those who achieve excellent school grades or attend the best universities are destined for success, but also those who, like him, do not really like school but have a passion for something different. Both within the video game and, more articulately, in the animation Tajiri tries to give his viewers an alternative reality and path, made up of friendship, nature trips and fun. It is also thanks to the animation that the characters, especially the Pokemon not the human trainers, manage to develop and branch out their appearance and *kawaii* manner to enter into the viewers' sympathies. It is thus that *kawaii* and

characters with 'healing powers' become two of the strongest elements of the Japanese soft policy. Another key element for both Pokemon and Japanese soft culture, of which Pokemon is also a part by being used on several occasions as a promoter of Japan (think of the fact that even today there are manhole covers littered throughout Japan with pictures of Pokemon), has been the *otaku* subculture.

A word that started out as a disparaging term for anime and manga fans took on a positive connotation in the West with the arrival of and appreciation for Japanese multimedia culture. Indeed, *otaku* are a very important tool for multimedia culture. It is thanks to them that the Pokemon phenomenon, like in fact so many others, was first able to sustain and magnify itself at home, then land abroad, already finding a favourable audience waiting for it. In fact, *otaku*, especially thanks to the Internet, are able to spread, albeit in ways that are not always legal, the culture of their country, sharing their passion with others and in this case creating a favourable ground and a new mass product.

This is how Pokemon from the very beginning has managed to be a very successful phenomenon: by understanding the needs of the society in which it was born, finding its support and trying in turn to be a positive note for those who found in it something beautiful to play with, create new friendships and find their own space where they could express and be themselves.

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