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Pokémon as hybrid, virtual toys
Friends, foes or tools?

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Abstract
The *Pokémon* media mix (Steinberg, 2012) has been a worldwide phenomenon for more than 20 years. It started as a video game in which a boy sets out to discover a world, accompanied by fictional creatures called pokémons, in which he battles others to become stronger and achieve his goals. How does the hybridity of pokémons, as virtual toys in a video game and artefacts of a convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006a), shape the way people play? This paper is based on an exploratory study mainly focused on the way people learn how to play *Pokémon*. Ten semi-directive interviews were conducted with players aged 11 to 25 – during most of these interviews, in-game sequences were observed. The interviews led to analysis of content published online by fans, which served as resources for the players. The ways in which the *Pokémon* character and game design shapes the practices and experience of players are also explored. How transmedia franchising and fan participation (Jenkins, 2006b) transforms play is discussed further.

Pokémon, video games, virtual toys, transmedia, participation

Although Nintendo started as a playing cards company and then a major company within the toy industry (Gorges, 2008), nowadays, they are mostly known for their video games. *Pokémon*, one of their main franchises, debuted as a video game in 1996, has since evolved into mixed media (Steinberg, 2012) with products as diverse as video games, anime series, movies, trading cards, toys (Tobin, 2004), and even airplanes[1]. *Pokémon* video games consists of a series of iterations, in terms of mechanics, narrative and scenario structure. It takes place in a world in which animals are replaced by fictional creatures called pokémons[2], most

[1] A video of a *Pokémon* themed airplane posted on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJDpEfbk_5s

[2] The official stance of Nintendo and The Pokémon Company is that the creatures in *Pokémon*

of which look like real world creatures, objects, or common mythological creatures, such as unicorns. It is a role-playing game in which the hero is an eleven years old boy, who is offered a Pokémon. He then sets out to explore that world. The player has several goals, including catching a pokémon of each available species, in order to help the scientist who gave him his first pokémon. The boy aims to become the best trainer[3] by fighting opponents with his pokémons, so that they become stronger. In the meantime, the player must beat an evil, criminal team.

When playing *Pokémon*, one does not simply control a human avatar. Arguably the most important feature of the gameplay is determining the actions of your pokémons, in combat, and collecting more of them. In that sense, pokémons may be considered hybrid virtual toys, which, unlike usual derivative product toys, are at the core of the convergence strategy (Jenkins, 2006a) of The Pokémon Company[4]. The *Pokémon* video games were the beginning of the *Pokémon* media mix and are, as such, likely to be at the forefront of "gameic media mix" (Steinberg, 2015) .

How does the hybridity of pokémons, as virtual toys in a video game and artefacts of a convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006a), shape the way people play? In the first section, the research methodology is described and explained. In the second, the hybrid "rhetoric" (Brougère, 2012) of cute, cool and power of pokémons is discussed. The third, explores ways in which the game mechanics and the *Pokémon* narrative influence players to develop an affective bond with their pokémons. The final section focuses on the role of fan participation in a context of convergence culture in play modalities.

Methodology

The data presented in this paper was part of a research project which focused on how people learn to play *Pokémon*. The dissertation itself was an exploratory work inspired by multi-site ethnography (Marcus, 1995) principles. *Pokémon* was initially designed as a solo role-playing game with additional, although important, online features. Since *Pokémon* is to be played on a handheld console, its practice is geographically scattered. *Pokémon*-related practices are also diverse: one can play

should be called *Pokémon*. However, for clarity purposes, we call *Pokémon* the franchise and video games, and pokémon(s) the creatures that inhabit the fictional universe of *Pokémon*.

[3] Reference to the English opening song of the first seasons of the *Pokémon* anime series.

[4] The consortium which owns the *Pokémon* brand is composed of Nintendo and two video game studios, Game Freaks and Creatures. https://www.pokemon.com/us/legal/

Pokémon solo on their console while laying in bed, then watch the anime in their couch, and then trade cards with their friends at school. Since this was an exploratory study, little emphasis was placed on sampling, but focused on mapping players' practices rather than the *Pokémon* video games audience.

Ten semi-directive interviews with *Pokémon* players aged 11 to 25 were conducted, during which gaming sessions were observed. The interviewees were recruited from a local high school, via Facebook, and through acquaintances. The interview and gaming session observations were used to map the "participation territory" in which the *Pokémon* play took place; based on the player's "orientation" (Boutet, 2008) in the game, in "real life" and on the internet. Features and content of the game itself, as well as online resources mentioned by the players, were analysed in relation to their in-game practices. Other practices related to *Pokémon*, for example anime viewing habits, are taken into consideration, in order to produce a situated (Lave, 1988) understanding of the player's in-game learning and practices.

The rhetoric of pokémons: aesthetics and battle characteristics

The first thing that may come to mind when analysing toy choice, and, in this case, Pokémon, may be its aesthetic qualities. Brougère (2012) demonstrated that toys carry a rhetoric of fun through their looks, which could be understood as part of a spectrum, ranging from cute to cool. *Pokémon* promotes both cute and cool pokémon designs (Surman, 2009) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Mega Charizard, widely considered cool, and Eevee, generally considered cute.

Since pokémons are not simply virtual toys, but also playable video game characters, aesthetic properties are insufficient to understand the play rhetoric they represent. The main thing one does with their pokémon is to make it fight and not every pokémon is equal. While pokémons get stronger as they gain battle expe-

rience, some species are simply more powerful than others and thus more fit for battle. As a result, players' choices for their pokémon team are driven by both aesthetic taste and pokémon combat strength. For instance, Joëlle, a 16 years old high school girl, who has played pokémon for a decade, with several hundred hours of playtime in a single version of the game, faces a dilemma due to this duality. "I prefer cute and beautiful Pokémon, however, when they are too weak, I do not pick them because I can't do anything"[5]. When she says she cannot do anything, she means she is unable to use them effectively in battle and thus wouldn't be able to progress in the scenario – since numerous battles cannot be avoided. This suggests there is a tension between aesthetic pleasure and playability, which is likely not only specific to video games. An articulated physical toy offers more play opportunities than a beautifully painted figurine, much like a strong pokémon offers more playing opportunities than a weak one, because of game design.

The extent to which aesthetic and battle characteristics influence a player's choice for their pokémon team may vary depending on the player's style (Berry, Boutet, & Coavoux, 2014). Some players define themselves as "competitive", which may mean they participate in player-versus-player battles and attempt to optimize their team and strategy to maximize their chances of winning. Such players would be expected to care more about battle strength than aesthetics, in contrast to more "casual" players. However, things are not that straightforward in practice. Indeed, even competitive players may consider aesthetics aspects: "At start I choose [my Pokémon] depending on their looks and later on, towards the end of the adventure, depending on their power"[6]. Lyonix is a 20 years old spirited player met in a competitive *Pokémon* community. Rather than showing a strict preference toward using strong pokémons, he adapts his team depending on the situation. At the beginning of the game, a pokémon player can easily win battles with most pokémons, even the weakest ones. Lyonix for example takes advantage of this to play new pokémons whose appearance he prefers. When the game becomes harder, he switches for a better team battle-wise. His experience allows him to go by taste, at least at the beginning of the game, however, the fact that he plays competitively also means that when he is about to compete with other experienced players, he must favour strength over aesthetics.

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[5] Translated from French.

[6] Translated from French. The interview with was conducted on Discord, a conversation application/software, in a written form.

The rhetoric of friendship

The design of *Pokémon* video games seems to favour an engagement with pokémons based on a mix of utilitarian and aesthetic factors, since the core mechanics of *Pokémon* is the collection and the battle. However, *Pokémon* narrative suggests otherwise. The way trainers treat their pokémons and the bonds they build has been an important topic of *Pokémon* since the first video games of the series. Trainers who treat their pokémon like fighting machines are shunned. They are mostly antagonists to the hero, and the story goes that they end up losing because of the lack of consideration for their pokémons. This is likely not without link to the "power of friendship" trope[7] . The narrative of friendship in *Pokémon* video games go beyond the narrative though, as it also guides certain game mechanics. A friendship hidden characteristic influences the power of some battle moves and can make some pokémon species evolve, for instance, to become stronger. In the last generation of games, a feature called Poké Refresh allows a player to pet their pokémon to heal them from negative status such as paralysis, (Figure 2) and even provide the ability to potentially survive a "fatal hit" when their affection bar is full, thanks to giving them "Poké Beans"[8].

Figure 2. Eevee is paralyzed, and Poké Refresh cures his paralysis by manually brushing him with the selected tool.

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7 In many fictional stories, protagonists are empowered by their friendship. When facing a foe that has the upper hand, thinking of one's friends helps the protagonist "power up" and win in the end. TV Tropes, "The Power of Friendship" https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ThePowerOfFriendship

8 The page for Poké Beans on Bulbapedia, the main *Pokémon* Wiki. https://bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net/wiki/Pok%C3%A9_Bean

This feature has its use in battle and can thus be used in a utilitarian way, but players also enjoy it for the pleasure of petting their pokémons.

> **Léo:** And I'm also playing Poké Refresh.
>
> **Interviewer**: What's Poké Refresh?
>
> **Léo**: You don't know?
>
> **Interviewer**: No, please show me.
>
> *Léo opens Poké Refresh and shows me.*
>
> **Interviewer**: Ah I see! So yeah show me.
>
> **Léo**: **he turns the music of the game on** I can caress him, if I touch his waistband it burns my hand, and I can give him… food, Poké Beans
>
> **Interviewer**: And what are the effects?
>
> **Léo**: Well…
>
> **Interviewer**: Can I record how you pet him on video?
>
> **Léo**: Yeah… so there's this... these ones don't give too many points, these ones do, and these ones give two hearts, and the two hearts go there **he shows me a bar of five hearts on the screen**, and if you've got all of them, and if at some point your pokémon has 2 HP left and he takes an attack such as Hyper Beam he'll survive with 1 HP, and the game will tell you that he did not want to make you sad because he had five hearts.
>
> **Interviewer**: Ah it's great, and do you do it for the bonus or just because you like it?
>
> **Interviewer**: I like it! And it trains my pokémons well.[9]
>
> *Léo, 12 years old, male.*

Léo spontaneously mentioned Poké Refresh as one of the activities he performs during the game. As he started Poké Refresh, he turned on the music which he only did for certain areas and contexts, suggesting particular enjoyment. Added to this practice, he clearly enjoys petting his pokémons, aside from the bonuses he gets from doing so. The "hand burn" part does not do anything aside from a fun visual effect, and he spent some time caressing his pokémon in ways that did not give him any bonus, suggesting that the activity of taking care of his pokémons is part of the fun.

Since the first *Pokémon* video games, the player has opportunity to give a nickname to their pokémons. This feature, unlike Poké Refresh, has no effect what-

[9] Translated from French.

soever in the pokémon's behaviour in battle – it is a feature which permits customization, making pokémons more analogous to pets.

> What I like is to complete my pokémon list and give them somewhat strange names. For instance, this pokémon looks like a big rock, I called him *Pierre Caillou*[10], or a pokémon who's called Strassie, I called him *Strassiesauteuse*[11], a wordplay! Or often, I do somewhat bad wordplays, for instance we can have a *chauve-souris* [bat], I called it *Calvicieux*, because ***chauve-****souris*, and a bat, well, it's vicious[12].
>
> *Joelle, 16 years old, female.*

Naming can be a game in itself and some players have fun finding nicknames for their pokémons. While all may not be as creative as Joelle, many players rename their pokémons, even those who focus on competitive play (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The pokémon team of Lyonix. All of them are renamed.

Most of the nicknames given by Lyonix are references to his everyday life and some fictional worlds other than *Pokémon*. For instance, Nounou and Lizzy are the names of his real-life pets; Ashley is a reference to the witch[13], and Annika the first

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10 Pierre is the equivalent of Peter, but also means "stone", and "Caillou" is another word for "stone".

11 A combination of Strassie and "scie sauteuse", literally "jigsaw" in France.

12 This wordplay is a bit more complex to translate. "Chauve-souris" means "bat", but "chauve" means "bald". "Calvicieux" is a mix of "calvitie", which roughly translates to "baldness", and "vicieux" which means "vicious".

13 In some Nintendo games. https://mario.fandom.com/fr/wiki/Ashley

name of a Swedish singer and voice actress for the heroine of Frozen[14] in the Swedish version. Lyonix happens to be a big Nintendo fan, and, at the time of the interview, had Elsa, the heroine of Frozen, as his avatar (he still has a reference to Frozen in his current avatar). While this does not tell much about the depth of the bond between Lyonix and his virtual toys, it still shows he infused important parts of his life into them, although probably as a sort of play.

Convergence culture and play

The Pokémon Company and Nintendo do not only frame the way in which players interact with pokémons, through the character and the game design, they also frame the player's experience through a strategy of media mix (Steinberg, 2012), prompting fans to develop an affinity with the franchise characters, in this case, mainly pokémons. This is achieved not only through merchandising of physical toys and objects, but also through a convergence strategy (Jenkins, 2006a). Jenkins defines the convergence culture as the articulation of transmedia franchising and participation culture, a culture which emerges from the collective engagement of fans. "*Pokémon* isn't just something you consume, it's something you do" (Tobin, 2004, p.12). Fans of *Pokémon* navigate across the media-mix, using the knowledge they acquire from one medium with another (Vasquez, 2003).

> **Leo**: Yeah, I explain how to get Ash[15] and all.
>
> **Interviewer**: To whom?
>
> **Leo**: To Eva[16], because in fact it's not that she's very bad, she's not bad she's strong but… well she's lucky, very lucky… because she keeps finding shiny pokémons[17]... she doesn't know how to get Lycanroc[18] or Ash's Pikachu.
>
> **Interviewer**: How did you get to know about Ash's Pikachu?
>
> **Leo**: In fact, it's a QR scan, there's a Pikachu QR code and you have to scan it and once you're done it tells you to go and catch it somewhere.

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14 The Disney animated movie.

15 Ash's Pikachu actually. Ash is the hero of the *Pokémon* anime, and Pikachu is his main pokémon.

16 Eva is a high school classmate of Leo's.

17 Shiny pokémons or « shinies » are pokémons who have a different colour from their species. They are quite rare (one in more than a thousand chances to meet one with each encounter) and some players spend most of their post-scenario game time "shiny hunting".

18 He means a special, promotional pokémon, Dusk Form Lycanroc which was offered to early buyers who chose some and met a non-playable character in-game.

Interviewer: And how did you get to know?

Leo: At first it was an ad which told me.

Interviewer: Where was it? On TV?

Leo: either on TV or on the tablet, I don't remember, and at some point I looked and I didn't really understand what QR codes were for, so I clicked "*Pokémon* QR code" on YouTube and they tell you that you can get super rare pokémons that you can't catch normally…"
Leo, 12 years old male.

To acquire pokémons, a player usually catches or trades them with other players or non-playable characters in-game. However, in some cases, one may acquire pokémons as gifts from out-of-game events, most often legendary pokémons. In that case, Pikachu is just a regular and common Pokémon; however, it is the game's mascot and the pokémon of the anime's hero. The Pikachu collected through an out-of-game event is special in that it wears Ash's cap from one of the anime's seasons. It does not have any special battle statistics. The pleasure of owning it has to do with the fact that it is a direct reference to the anime. As a media mix, *Pokémon* relies on self-referencing, and playing *Pokémon* becomes more than simply playing the game, it is about navigating in a universe of references – more than a universe built by The Pokémon Company, it also means exploring a fan contructed universe. Most of the time, all that is necessary to get an event pokémon is to enter an alphanumeric code which may be found on the official website or some fan websites. The main case presented by Leo is a little different in that it required the use of an unfamiliar technology. To obtain Ash's Pikachu, he first had to understand what to do with a QR code. He looked for the answer on YouTube – a place where fans produce and share content about the *Pokémon* franchise and video games.

Participation culture aids players learn how to use The Pokémon Company content. Often players gather in online communities through which they discuss *Pokémon* and share fan-made content. One of such communities is the Bulbasaur fans subreddit[19], called "Bulbasaur master race", a reference to a starter[20] pokémon of the first generation. Starters are iconic to each generation as they stand out by

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[19] Reddit is an online forum in which people or communities may create sub-reddits on any theme of their choosing, such as scientific disciplines and political currents. Reddit describes itself as "the front page of the internet". Bulbasaur master race subreddit

https://www.reddit.com/r/bulbasaurmasterrace/

[20] Starters are one of the three pokémons offered at the start a game within the main series.

being the first pokémons a player may acquire and they are considered a rare species. The first generation of *Pokémon* holds a special nostalgic status. Nostalgia tends to be an emotion strongly tied to children's cultural consumption (Gillespie, 2012), including toys, and in this case characters like Bulbasaur. Nostalgia is omnipresent in *Pokémon*, as earlier generation games[21] are released on newer consoles as well as references to the first generation of *Pokémon* video games. Fans participate actively in furthering their bonds with pokémons, sharing fan-made arts and sharing their attachment for the characters. The "Bulbasaur master race" exhibits some feeling rules (Hochschild, 2003) likely shared by most self-identified Bulbasaur fans. For instance, there is a tendency for this fandom to extend its attachment to other Plant type starters (Figure 4). As shown in the top-left corner of Figure 4, the icon for the "like" button is a "Plan energy" icon from the *Pokémon* trading card game, and the "dislike" button refers to the icon of a "Fire energy", a type which has the advantage over Plant type. This, as well as many aspects about other Plant type starters, suggests that of being a Bulbasaur fan, strongly shapes the player's practices, influencing the choice for starters in subsequent games.

Figure 4. Bulabasaur (left) the first generation Plant type starter and Grookey (right) the *Pokémon Sword/Shield* (game to be released in 2019) Plant type starter.

[21] *Pokémon Red/Green,* the very first *Pokémon* video games, were remade as *Pokémon FireRed/LeafGreen*, and in 2018, *Pokémon Yellow,* another first generation *Pokémon* game, was remade as *Pokémon Let's GO Pikachu/Eevee.*

Pokémons as transmedia toys

Like traditional toys, Pokémon conveys a rhetoric of fun drawing on cuteness and coolness to appeal to a wide variety of consumers (Brougère, 2012). This rhetoric is translated through the visuals and overall game design. The narrative and game design evoke an emotional bond through the rhetoric of the 'power of friendship' supported by the game mechanics and features. While playing with traditional toy is limited by the laws of physics, the design of the toy, and one's imagination, playing with virtual toys is framed by the computer code.

However, simply defining pokémons as toys mitigates their hybrid nature in being more than derived products, but rather part of a transmedia franchise in which fans reinvent different play modalities. This calls for a more research on how media, such as the anime and manga on the one hand and fan-made products shared mostly online on the other, actually serve as a script for in-game play (Bernstein, 2009), like the Power Ranger animated series served as a script for toy play (Brougère, 2003).

Further study of actual play practices may facilitate an insight into various appropriation practices taking place in gaming culture and in *Pokémon*. In particular, from the usual use of glitch and cheats (Bainbridge & Bainbridge, 2007), to the production of fan games and even some more original cases like "Twitch plays *Pokémon*" (Ramirez, Saucerman, & Dietmeier, 2014) – multi-player game during which commands are entered via a live chat on the Twitch streaming platform - continuously reinventing what it is to play *Pokémon*, building new mythologies into the existing *Pokémon* universe.

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