

## **POKEMON: A CULTURE OF LEARNING? \***

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### **ABSTRACT**

The objective of this article is to make an exploratory analysis of the Pokémon game as a learning tool of a changing Japanese culture within the universe of children where American values prevail. In this article, using the analysis of the Pokémon universe as a starting point, we will try to clarify the premise that the game literally teaches how to evolve, since this is its primary objective: the quest for the evolution of these "pocket monsters".

Pokémon reinforces in its players this "sense of belonging", of being part of a tribe, which calls itself "pokemaniacs" and fights together to reach certain objectives. All the rules of the game, all the stories of the characters, all the relationship chains established by the Pokémon universe reinforce the traits of a family grouping, emphasising harmony, co-operation and conformity, putting pressure on the individuals so that they do not "miss the boat", in order not to become an outsider.

Within this atmosphere of conformity and harmony, Pokémon encourages the trainers to be partners and not figures of power, to be reliable and sensitive learning advisors. Within the Pokémon universe, one can see more than the mere application of **behaviourist** models. There are also **cognitive** models, in which symbolic aspects, beliefs and values are used in the process of apprehension of reality. Pokémon is an opportunity to include another element of cultural diversity in the universe of children. Pokémon offers another tool for the understanding and lateralisation of cultural diversity. Pokémon is learnt by its players as another important element one must possess in order to live in a globalized world, where we do not always win and do not always lose. However, it is always important to play well, with responsibility and maturity. Pokémon brings us the teachings of the Japanese culture where not losing is infinitely more important than winning.

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**\* I dedicate this article to my daughter Luiza, who has opened my new millennium teaching me how good it is to learn**

## POKEMON: A CULTURE OF LEARNING?

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

The objective of this article is to make an exploratory analysis of the Pokémon game as a learning tool of a changing Japanese culture within the universe of children where American values prevail.

In order to do so, using the study of the Pokémon (short for "*pocket monsters*") as a starting point, with its rules, characters and rituals, the concepts of human behaviour management will be analysed.

In this article, from the analysis of the Pokémon universe, we will try to clarify the premise that the **game literally teaches how to evolve**, since this is its primary objective: the quest for the evolution of these "pocket monsters".

In this game, with these monsters who "evolve", the participants must be mentors and trainers and they play a continuous role of individual and group learning experiencing what has been described by the philosopher Eric Hoffer:

*"In times of great changes, it is the learner who will conquer the Earth, whereas the learned and cultured will be elegantly tied in a world that soon will no longer exist."*

Our presumption is based on several examples of the Pokémon universe which we will describe now – in the television series, in all video game versions, in comic books and in the Pokémon film (which showed at Brazilian cinemas this year). In the story, "cloning" is questioned and decoded and, using a simple language, it is explained to the children that radical disputes do not make sense in a changing era. Breaking up a fight between clone monsters who join forces manages to build a better world through the alliances made.

In all these Pokémon products, the story always takes us back to the modern management theory of the era of uncertainty, where **partnership** is the word of command, where living with **ambiguity** is the **rule** and where the positioning of the other as a competitor is distorted in a world of mergers and acquisitions that demand **competence** and **flexibility** for the constant inversion of roles in the organisational game.

For the development of this paper, we will initially introduce the reader to the Pokémon universe, briefly describing: what is Pokémon, what is the content of the game, who are its main characters, its rules, its rites and its story.

From the Pokémon universe we will highlight some implicit values which will be analysed according to:

- (a) the role of the individual within organisations and societies from the changing point of view of Japanese and Western cultures,
- (b) the learning competencies and strategies in the search for power.

Finally, the Pokémon universe will be analysed as a simulation tool of the:

- (a) management of cultural diversity and of the education of "trainers" who preach the virtues of the "team" model, of co-operation and competition without reinforcing the absolutes that are usually present in children's stories.
- (b) development of abstraction, lateral thinking, creativity and innovation through a symbolic world full of metaphors and meanings.

## **2. WHAT IS POKÉMON?**

Pokémon is a game which is considered by many as the best game of all times. Due to its success it has been transformed into a cartoon. It was produced by Shogakukan Productions and broadcast in Japan by Tokyo TV in 1997. It started in the USA in September 1998 on the Warner Channel. In Brazil, it was introduced by Rede Record last year to a great audience.

The story is simple and follows the plot of the game. It begins in the city of Pallet, where strange creatures of different kinds live. However, they are genetically similar. This vast population of pocket monsters is known as Pokémon.

These monsters are captured by people and trained as pets, companions and guardians. Some of these people are bad trainers and belong to a "gang" called Team Rocket, which is a maleficent organisation commanded by Giovanni (Sasaki, in Japan). They are searching for rare and valuable Pokémon.

The stars of the Team Rocket are the clumsy Jesse, James and Meowth. Before they appear, they always declaim their poem which has become a "registered trademark". They are figures of fun generating lots of laughs and are always being ridiculed, never managing to achieve their goals. Every time they are defeated and ridiculed, they are thrown far away to the sound of the following sentence: "The Team Rocket is taking off again!".

In the game, the player is Ash Ketchum and his objectives are: winning the Pokémon League (where the best Pokémon trainers of the world are), becoming the greatest Pokémon collector and neutralising the Team Rocket so that they do not get in the way of his strategy.

In order to do this, the player must seek Pokémon in the region of Pokemap (which includes several cities, such as: Saffron City, Lavender Town, Seafoam Islands, Pallet Town, Viridian City, Viridian Forest, Mt. Moon, Pewter City, among others), capture them and train them. But it is not so easy...

There are 250 Pokémon altogether!!! They are divided into different species, such as: Normal, Fire, Water, Electric, Grass, Ice, Fighting, Poison, Ground, Flying, Psychic, Bug, Rock, Ghost, Dragon, Metallic, and others. Moreover, they belong to different games: the blue and red versions, the green and yellow, the silver and gold.

Pokémon was first published in Japan by Nintendo and soon became a national craze. The game sold millions of copies, became a cartoon series on Japanese television and a trademark for caps, T-shirts, pens, notebooks and even gum!

In September 1998, the "craze" came to the United States with the cartoon being broadcast by over 90 channels on cable TV. There were also caps and T-shirts, comic books and the video game, but only the blue and red versions.

The game is the same in the two versions, but there are a few differences: there are rare Pokémon and strong Pokémon. This is the main difference between the two versions.

In the course of the game, you come across the little monsters. Then you can fight them, capture them or keep walking. What happens is that the little monsters you encounter might be ordinary in the blue version, but hard, and most of the time impossible to find in the red version, and vice-versa.

In order to obtain all kinds of Pokémon, one must exchange their little monsters with a friend who has the same or the other version of the game.

For that reason, together with the game, an accessory called *Game Link* was launched. It is nothing more than a cable that links one *Game Boy* to the other. With it, it is possible to exchange monsters with your friends or fight against their little monsters.

To ascend in the Pokémon hierarchy, the player will have to capture all the monsters in their game version and train them so that they evolve and become other Pokémon.

Every time a player enters a battle and wins, their Pokémon wins experience points. When they have a certain experience score, their Pokémon is promoted to a higher level, thus becoming stronger, faster and more experienced and also learning new blows.

Reaching a certain level, your Pokémon evolves, i.e., changes size, appearance and name, however remaining the same species (or monster "family").

Each Pokémon has its own personality, which in a way reflects its powers. They also have their right evolution moment and can be promoted three times only (until a "seniority" stage). All the intermediary stages of this vertical hierarchy involve new names, new cartoons and new Pokémon, which explains why there are so many Pokémon.

Each Pokémon that is seen, captured or evolved will be registered in your Pokédex, which is no more than a "digital encyclopaedia" like a portable computer that stores information of all Pokémon.

Each time a player gets in touch with a Pokémon (captured or not), the little monster will be registered in the Pokédex with its respective name and number.

Every child from the city of Pallet receives a licence to capture and train Pokémon when they turn 10. This is when their journey starts: the player gets the first Pokémon from Professor Oak, the greatest and oldest Pokémon collector in the world.

They will have to choose 1 among 3 Pokémon they will be offered: *Bulbasaur*, *Charmander* or *Squirtle*. After they choose, they will go to their first battle with Professor Oak's grandson, Gary.

Later, they will receive the Pokédex to register the captured Pokémon. In order to do so, the trainers will play against the Pokémon gym leaders.

The best trainers will win badges (Stone, Cascade, Thunder, Rainbow, Soul, Gold, Volcano and Earth) which are related to the categories of little monsters and symbolise their competence and abilities.

### **3. POKÉMON AND THE JAPANESE CULTURE:**

Management in Japanese organisations, with its particularities in its Human Resources policies, is neither a new nor unprecedented subject. (1)

There is vast literature on the issue, which is often contradictory when it analyses stereotypes, myths and the realities of Japanese organisational success.

In spite of this ambiguity, we can notice that there is a common denominator regarding some issues of the comparative analysis between Western and Eastern cultures, which will now be dealt with:

#### **3.1 Orientation for the group in the Japanese culture:**

In general, we notice that the basis of the Western society is the individual, whereas in Japan it is the group – not any group, but an organised group based on the principles of a biological family with the following characteristics:

- the family is an organic community, where filiation is specific, i.e., who you are is more important than what you can do;
- there is a vertical orientation and a conscious hierarchy among the members of the group;
- there is a sense of a shared destiny;

- the individuals acquire a sense of identity and security through their affiliation to the group;
- there are mutual obligations;
- there is an insider/outsider mentality: harmony and co-operation are inside the group and there is a certain level of animosity and rivalry towards those who are outside the family.

In every society these biological family traits can be seen in functional social groups, such as companies, schools, government agencies, etc. However, in Japan, the depth in which these traits appear in functional social groups is intense.

The Japanese individuals belong to small groups, such as their families, their schools or their work teams, which in their turn make up bigger groups with the corporations. To the Japanese, "belonging" is something greater than just being associated to the group. To them, this affiliation leads to a sense of identity and security, an emotional fulfilment that is satisfied every time they contribute to the group welfare. Moreover, the group acceptance is, on its own, a motivational force for most Japanese.

In Western culture, success and failure are attributed to individuals. One mentions "my" work, "my" responsibility, "my" authority, "my" objectives, "my" goals and so on.

In Japan, they mention "our" work, "our" authority, "our" objectives, "our" goals and so on. It is the fear of not being accepted by the group as a productive member that stimulates the Japanese to work hard for the success of that group.

Pokémon reinforces in its players this "sense of belonging", of being part of a tribe which calls itself "pokemaniacs" and fights together to achieve certain goals. All the rules of the game, all the stories of the characters, all the relationship chains established by the Pokémon universe reinforce the traits of a family grouping, emphasising harmony, co-operation and conformity, putting pressure on the individual so that they do "not miss the boat" and become an outsider.

One can notice in the Pokémon logic all the characteristics approached by Enriquez (2) when he talks about what favours the group link and what allows for the differentiation between a group and a team.

According to the author *"a group can only be formed around an action that has to be taken, a project or a task to be performed... Every group works based on idealisation, illusion and belief."*

This can be clearly seen in the Pokémon "tribe": we have a group that has a value system sufficiently internalised by the whole of its members, which makes it possible to offer its dynamic characteristics to the project (to make it move from the stage of a simple plan to the stage of realisation).

Idealisation, illusion and belief are present at all times during the game which takes its participants to the city of fantasy (Pallet). It offers to the project an "exceptional aura", a symbolic device that works concealing every doubt and allowing for the certainty of harmony, progress, growth and magic.

### **3.2 Harmony and conformity in Japanese culture:**

Another classic characteristic of Japanese culture is related to the emphasis put on harmony and co-operation. The members of a group in the Japanese culture are *"isshindotai"*, i.e., *"a single mind, within a single body"*.

In Japanese culture, this "single mind" does not mean consensus with a Western meaning; it means the absence of dissonance or disagreement. That can be reached especially through the acceptance of the more junior individuals and the individuals at lower positions of the points of view of those who are more senior. Also, the wishes of the superior hierarchical levels are internalised and accommodated.

This constant quest for harmony in competitive environments is associated with negative factor, such as the inhibition of creativity and individual initiative, the slowness of the decision process and the lack of exclusiveness and of ways to express individuality.

On the other hand, although all these aspects have been criticised as the management of Japanese organisations is concerned, history has shown that these variables have been responsible for a cohesive and integrated collective system. This system has a strong identity which has served as a



shield in order to experience the ambiguities of a globalisation process and the emotional distress caused by situations of uncertainty. That means that this search for an exacerbated individualisation present in Western discourse has been more and more questioned in contemporary thinking.

As Castoriadis says (3) *"individualisation, the object of so many concerns, is more often a mere element of the massification process"*.

In Pokémon it is possible to experience this questioning, since the diversity of journeys always horizontalises the expressions of individuality. The rules of evolution favour the appearance of harmony originating from the contribution and the acknowledgement of the other players as regards the contribution given by a player to the team. This can be seen in the game despite the fact that one can identify the conformity to the rules imposed by the character who is hierarchically superior (Ash) and the one who is the oldest and wisest (Professor Oak, the greatest and oldest Pokémon collector in the world).

As stated by Kikaku (4), the Pokémon cartoon has a moralistic approach with a simple language that attracts children, particularly young children. The story is basically a tale about friendship – the main human character, Ash, fights against an "evil" gang in order to capture, nurture and educate monsters and thus become a responsible adult who is well accepted by society.

Within this atmosphere of conformity and harmony, Pokémon encourages the trainers to be partners; not figures of power, but sensitive and reliable learning advisors as recommended by Bell (5).

#### **4. POKÉMON AS A LEARNING TOOL**

In 1995, when Nintendo launched the blue and red versions for the game boy in Japan, at first it seemed that it was just another game. But there was something about it that was different, there was something in it that attracted the Japanese who started buying like crazy.

There were some reasons that were essential for this boom in sales. First of all, Pokémon's plot is totally different from all the other games. Children do not have to save the world or rescue a princess from the hands of a terrible monster. Neither do they have to escape from a dungeon... All

they have to do is become the best Pokémon trainer in the world. Secondly, there is the possibility of exchanging Pokémon with your friends through the game link, which generates this tribe spirit that is so important for a changing generation that is in the search of identity.

Pokémon's successful marketing campaign was accompanied by heavy criticism in the media. They claimed that there was a high degree of obsession and that there were harms and dangers for the players.

In his article on the subject, Orecklin (6) states:

*"For most parents Pokémon seems relatively benign, as long as it is only a fad. However, it is possible that it is a door for more dangerous obsessions."*

In order to justify this statement, the author interviews psychologists who say that behind every video game there is an operational conditioning principle, with an answer-reward stimulus that powerfully models and influences behaviour.

According to other authors (7), this risk of conditioning can be minimised with the balancing of the user's activities and not with the repression of their desire. That is to say, one should not exclude an important code in the process of being accepted by their reference group.

In this line of thought, Grossberger's article stands out (8). In it, he emphasises that this particular and private code, this hermetic language full of Pokémon jargon can be considered a strength, a differential that legitimates the advantages of learning.

According to the author, "Pokémon :

*"Affords children the chance to be in control of a complex universe and for once accumulate knowledge in a subject their parents do not understand, thus making them feel powerful and masterful, as well as educating them in the domain of commercial transaction as they trade for Pokémon cards. While some experts contend that the acquisitiveness factor emphasises cupidity and greed at the expense of altruistic values, others argue equal puissance".*

One might wonder if Pokémon induces learning only through the basic and classic conditioning derived from Pavlov's experiments (9) or only through an operational conditioning supported by Skinner's works(10).

There is no doubt that these learning models do exist, as well as there are models of social learning (11) that can be identified in a Pokémon game. It can be easily identified in the game the existence of learning through observation, the continuous positive and negative reinforcement.

Nevertheless, in the Pokémon universe one can notice more than just the application of **behaviourist** models. **Cognitive** models can also be recognised (12). In the latter, symbolic aspects, beliefs and values in the process of apprehension of reality are used.

You will only evolve in a Pokémon game if you know how to form alliances and symbolic exchanges. If, on the one hand, the video game has an individualist character in the act of playing (just as decisions have their instant of solitude at the precise moment of taking them), the "career plan" of the game can only be reached if the decision process is participatory.

In a Pokémon game, one learns again the meaning of "promotion", from a systemic point of view of a cognitive map that explains what is happening in this world.

Within the Pokémon culture, in order to "be promoted" from the lowest rank of the pyramid, Bug Catcher, to the second level, Trainer, or to the third, Gym Leader, or to the fourth, Pokémon Master and finally, to the top of the pyramid, Champion of the Pokémon League, one must know how to exchange their conquests.

The rules of power in the Pokémon culture are quite clear and transparent. In the battles against the Gym Leader, for instance, one knows exactly what the possible gains and losses are. That is to say, when you win this game, higher level Pokémon may obey you.

Reinforcement, or prizes, however present, represents just one more element of this symbolic universe and not occasional medals that evaluate performance or simplistic models of reward and punishment.

In this culture there are eight learning levels that increasingly vary from the badges of Rock, Cascade, Thunder, Rainbow, Soul, Gold, Volcano and Earth. Once you conquer the Earth badge, all Pokémon respect you and you are an unquestionable leader.

Likewise, in a learning culture (13) the individuals and the organisations evolve when they experience a systemic vision.

In a Pokémon game, power also occurs through a group game with constant exchanges, where the players' individual gains are not added to individual accounts, but to the accounts of the Pokémon community that took part in the dispute and, through it, gain experience and are able to evolve.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Pokémon is an opportunity to include one more element of cultural diversity into the universe of children. For many years we were colonised only by La Fontaine and Anderson's European fables, Walt Disney cartoons, Tex Avery and Hanna-Barbera cartoons, while eastern influences were restricted to poor quality series about post-war times, samurais and violence.

The Japanese spirit started to be introduced to the universe of Western children through the Tamagotchi fad, when children were responsible for their nutrition and had to care for them so that they would survive.

This sense of responsibility is resumed and added to by these little monsters who teach the players about Japanese values that regard team work and the performance of one's duties through co-operation with others.

Pokémon offers one more tool for the understanding and lateralising of cultural diversity. It proves, through a different logic, that Japanese culture and tradition are bigger than your imagination.

Pokémon is learnt by its players as another important element one must possess in order to live in a globalized world (14), where we do not always win and do not always lose, but that it is always important to play well, with responsibility and maturity.

As stated by Martens (15): “*The kids that read Pokémon will grow older, and they’ll know Japanese anime*”.

Pokémon brings to us the teachings of Japanese culture where not losing is infinitely more important than winning.

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