Gotta catch 'em all: structure, agency and pedagogy in children's media culture

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There can be very few people in the developed world who remain unaware of the existence of Pokémon. Yet despite the seemingly endless outpouring of adult concern and bewilderment, it is actually difficult to find a single term to describe it. In popular debates, Pokémon is most frequently referred to as a 'craze' – which of course implies that those who pursue it are in some sense mentally deranged, if only temporarily. Another, rather more neutral, term that comes readily to hand here is 'phenomenon'. According to the dictionary definition, a phenomenon is something 'remarkable' or 'unusual'; although, interestingly, it can also mean 'the appearance which anything makes to our consciousness, as distinguished from what it is in itself' (*Chambers*, 1978).

So what is Pokémon 'in itself'? It is clearly not just a 'text', or even a collection of texts – a TV serial, a card game, toys, magazines or a computer game. It is not merely a set of objects that can be isolated for critical analysis, in the characteristic mode of academic Media Studies. It might more appropriately be described, in anthropological terms, as a 'cultural practice'. Pokémon is something you *do*, not just something you read or watch or 'consume'. Yet while that 'doing' clearly requires active participation on the part of the 'doers', the terms on which it is performed are predominantly dictated by forces or structures beyond their control. The practice of collecting the cards, or playing the computer game, is to a large extent determined by the work of their designers – and indeed by the operations of the market, which makes these commodities available in

particular ways in the first place. The rules that govern these particular cultural practices are therefore not, by and large, open to negotiation or change.

   In classic sociological theory, this relationship between the activity of the consumer (here children) and of the producer (here Nintendo) is of course described in terms of structure and agency. This issue has been particularly prominent in debates in Media and Cultural Studies over the past ten or twenty years, not least in the seemingly interminable debates about the 'power' of media audiences. Our intention in this article is to use Pokémon as a case study of this relationship, particularly as it applies to a broader analysis of children's media culture. In common with others, we want to suggest that the frequent *opposition* between structure and agency is mistaken; and we want to propose a rather different formulation of the relationship, based around the notion of *pedagogy*. Drawing on theories of pedagogy, we suggest, might offer a more productive, and less abstract, way of understanding what is taking place in these interactions between producers, texts and audiences.

   In the process, we also want to consider what might be 'remarkable' or 'unusual' about Pokémon, as distinct from what is merely banal and familiar. In some respects, Pokémon has much in common with earlier textually based 'phenomena' in children's media culture – with Power Rangers or Ninja Turtles, or indeed with Disney; although in other respects, it can be seen as merely the latest in a historical sequence of children's 'crazes' or 'fads', along with Rubik's cubes, Tamagotchis, POGs and Beanie Babies. As we shall argue, the global success of Pokémon is partly a result of its ability to 'speak' to shared aspects of childhood experience, and of the ease with which it can be integrated within the routines of children's everyday lives. Yet there are also aspects of Pokémon that are decidedly new, and which might provide important indications about future directions in media culture – not just for children, but also for adults.

Cashing in

A Nintendo corporation press release, issued in September 1999, one year after the launch of the first Pokémon computer games in the United States, gives some indication of the scale of its success.[1] In its first year, the Pokémon franchise had generated $5 billion, almost as much as the whole US games industry in 1998. Pokémon was the top-selling Game Boy game and the top-selling trading card game; and the TV cartoon was the top-rating show on the WB network and in syndication. The soundtrack album *2.B.A. Master* and the *Official Pokémon Handbook* were both top-ten sellers in their respective charts; and Pokémon magazines and sticker

albums were also beginning to appear in stores. In the US, over 100 licensed companies were making Pokémon merchandise, while in Japan over 1000 different products were available.

Six months on, following the launch of the first Pokémon movie (which took $25 million in its first two days in the US) and of a range of new games (both for the Game Boy and the N64 console), Nintendo was claiming that global revenues would rise above $7 million in the year 2000.[2] In mid-2000, Pokémon websites – both official and unofficial – routinely topped the list of those receiving the most 'hits'; while more than 15 million Pokémon-related computer games had been sold in the US alone. In July 1999, Nintendo launched the 19-city 'training tour' of the Pokémon League at malls across America; while shops overflowed with Pokémon-branded soft toys, clothes, posters, food and drink, bed linen, wallpaper, bubble bath, mouse mats, key rings and myriad other merchandise.

The extraordinary success of Pokémon needs to be understood, first, in relation to Nintendo's overall profile and commercial strategy. While it is now Japan's second most profitable corporation, it is actually doubtful whether Nintendo would have survived without Pokémon. Nintendo has always been a comparatively insular company, at least in comparison with its competitors. Although it achieved some success in the late 1950s with the Japanese franchise for Walt Disney trading cards, it has generally been wary of cooperating with outsiders. Its approach to computer games has involved strong vertical integration of hardware and software. It favours exclusive contracts with games developers, and its cartridge-based platform is also exclusive and expensive to produce. In terms of content, the company has a generally 'family friendly' policy, with strict constraints on violence. In these respects, it is strikingly different from its major rival Sony, a relatively late entrant to the games market, whose Playstation is currently the leading domestic console. Sony has been much less intent on achieving vertical integration. It works with a wider range of games developers on non-exclusive contracts, and its CDs are both cheaper to produce (because they are easier to code) and to manufacture than Nintendo's cartridges.[3] Furthermore, Sony has aggressively targeted the young adult market: the Playstation is the 'must have' console for 16–25-year-old males, and this induces an aspirational factor in younger teenagers also.

In developing the Pokémon game, Nintendo played to its strengths and took advantage of its competitors' weaknesses. Pokémon was specifically targeted at younger children, who were largely excluded by Sony's marketing appeals – yet whose purchasing power has significantly grown over the past decade (Del Vecchio, 1997). Pokémon also enabled Nintendo to revive its hand-held Game Boy platform – which by 1998 was almost being written off by those within the industry. This was a sector of the

market in which Nintendo had been uncontested since the effective demise
of Sega's Game Gear. The Pokémon game was designed to exploit the
strengths of the platform in a way that goes against dominant trends within
the industry. Far from aspiring to ever-greater three-dimensional filmic
realism, in the manner of contemporary console games, Pokémon is a two-
dimensional puzzle game. Although it creates a complete fictional world in
the manner of role-playing games aimed at older players (such as the
Legend of Zelda and *Final Fantasy* series), it effectively leaves children to
imagine much of that world themselves.

Catching them all

More broadly, one can see how the Pokémon phenomenon seems designed
to maximize its appeal across different market sectors. The child market is
notoriously difficult to reach, partly because of its fragmentation in terms
of age and gender. As they get older, children repeatedly (and often
fiercely) reject their former enthusiasms: differences of as little as a couple
of years carry enormous significance. Meanwhile, the large majority of
boys are extremely resistant to anything 'girly'; and while girls may be
more likely to share in boys' pleasures, they have markedly less enthu-
siasm for traditionally 'boyish' occupations such as playing computer
games (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998). In economic terms, this makes the
market extremely volatile; and the more manufacturers seek to cater for
distinctions *within* that market, the less profitable it becomes.
    By contrast, in the case of Pokémon, different aspects of the phenom-
enon offer different kinds of appeal – and different levels of complexity –
for different age groups. Albeit at the risk of being reductive, it would be
possible to track the ways in which particular Pokémon products have been
created to fit in with the toys or media genres most characteristic of
particular (overlapping) age groups: soft toys for the under-fives, TV
cartoons for the four- to nine-year-olds, trading cards for the six- to ten-
year-olds, computer games for the seven- to twelve-year-olds, and so on.
Interestingly, these overlaps and the connections that cut across the range
of products available allow for 'aspirational' consumption, but also for a
kind of 'regression' – by which it becomes almost permissible, for
instance, for a seven-year-old to possess a Pokémon soft toy, or a twelve-
year-old to watch a TV cartoon. In principle, this also permits a kind of
progression *within* Pokémon, as children move on from one aspect to the
next as they get older; and, in this respect, it could be seen to make for a
longevity that is typically lacking from most such phenomena.[4]
    Similarly, Pokémon seems designed to appeal across gender differences
– or at least to offer pleasures for both genders that are more than
tokenistic. In the blue-and-pink world of young children's culture, this is

highly unusual. While the 'hero' of the game and the cartoon (Ash Ketchum) is male, he is distinctly pre-adolescent and asexual (by contrast, it must be said, with one of his fellow seekers, Brock). More to the point, the themes of the cartoon and the activities entailed in the game incorporate stereotypically masculine and feminine values. Thus, the game is about collecting and competing; but it is also about nurturing and cooperating. In order to succeed, the game player has to capture all 151 Pokémon species; but s/he also has to look after them and 'train' them in special skills in order that they can 'evolve' (or grow up), somewhat in the manner of the Tamagotchi (another toy whose appeal appeared to cross gender boundaries). The player must then use the Pokémon to compete with rival trainers, leading to a final showdown; but in order to capture all 151 in the first place, s/he has to link up (via a special cable) with a fellow-player's Game Boy. Again, without being unduly schematic, the Pokémon species themselves are quite diverse, including extremely 'cute' and baby-like characters as well as rather more monstrous and reptilian ones ('Pokémon' is a Japanese contraction of 'pocket monster'). Many of the more popular characters combine these qualities: Pikachu, Ash's pet and mascot, is cloyingly 'cute', but is also capable of unleashing vicious electric shocks. Significantly, hardly any of the Pokémon species are ever referred to in gendered terms.

Pokémon also seems designed to maximize its appeal across cultural differences. Again, there is a risk of essentialism here; but it is hard to deny that these key themes – the need for nurturing or the competitive search for mastery – reflect aspects of childhood that are effectively universal (see, for example, Bettelheim, 1975). In other respects, however, these appeals appear to combine themes that are at least culturally inflected in particular ways. The 'cuteness' (*kawai-sa*) that is so apparent with Pikachu is characteristic of Japanese popular culture more broadly, for example in the 'Hello Kitty' phenomenon; and it also relates to the miniaturization that has been seen both as a characteristically Japanese aesthetic and as a key feature in Japan's success in home electronics (the success of the Tamagotchi seems to combine both these elements). Meanwhile, the drive to collect (evident in the Pokémon slogan that gives our article its title) could be interpreted, not just as a form of anal compulsion but also perhaps as a symptom of the capitalist drive towards possessive accumulation. It may be no mere coincidence in this respect that the global trade in Pokémon cards is dominated by the sinisterly named US company Wizards of the Coast (operating under franchise from Nintendo) and by US-based trading card outlets.

In these respects, the success of Pokémon could be seen as a manifestation of globalization – or, more accurately, of what has been termed 'glocalization' (global localization). While drawing on Japanese mythology, Nintendo clearly set out to devise a product that could be exported

and adapted to local needs and traditions. Thus, for instance, some of the Pokémon characters were given English-sounding names even in the original Japanese version of the game. Meanwhile, the TV cartoon – which is re-edited by a US-based company for release in the US and other Western countries – seems to combine elements of the Japanese *manga* style with aspects of the 'limited animation' of US superhero cartoons of the 1980s. Significantly, the facial features of the characters are also ethnically quite ambiguous.

Success stories

Described in this way, Pokémon could appear to be distinctly 'calculated', both in terms of its relation to Nintendo's broader commercial strategy and in terms of its inclusive appeal to the child market. On this account, the corporation is seen to engage in a deliberate – even cynical – form of manipulation. The assumption here is that success is almost guaranteed; and that the children who are the consumers are easy targets for commercial exploitation. Advocates of this view might well go further, arguing that a phenomenon like Pokémon creates 'false needs', which it then promises to satisfy through consumption; and that, in the process, it prevents other forms of children's culture – forms that might be more 'dangerous' or 'oppositional' – from ever existing (see Kline, 1993). From this perspective, the success of Pokémon could be interpreted as evidence of the overpowering control of global, corporate capital – or, in more theoretical terms, of the victory of structure over agency.

   By contrast, many popular accounts of the phenomenon have tended to espouse a kind of '*auteur* theory'. In this account,[5] much is made of the personal vision of Pokémon's creator, Satoshi Tajiri. Thus we are told that Tajiri collected beetles as a child, just as Pokémon players now collect the pocket monsters in forests, caves and rivers. Tajiri is identified as an *otaku* – a member of the 'stay-at-home tribe', who cut themselves off from society and immerse themselves in the virtual worlds of computer games or comic books (Tobin, 1998). In this narrative, Pokémon is represented as a surprise success for Nintendo – something that just 'took off' unpredictably because of the enthusiasm of the child audience. Tajiri, we are told, even believed that the game he had spent six years developing would be rejected by the company that had commissioned him. This latter account thus emphasizes the agency, both of the individual heroic creator and of the children who recognize and identify with his personal vision – despite or even in opposition to the structuring influence of corporate capital.

   Clearly, there are several problems with both these accounts. While one appears to over-emphasize the power of the individual – both the creator and the 'consumer' – the other over-emphasizes the power of econ-

omic and textual structures. In the case of children's culture, these accounts take on a particular inflection – informed on the one hand by notions of children's innate spontaneity and on the other by assumptions about their vulnerability to manipulation (Buckingham, 2000). The obvious temptation is simply to put these accounts together – to recognize them as two sides of the same coin. Theoretically, the problem then becomes a matter of 'balancing out' structure and agency; allocating some of the power to the industry and the text, and reserving the rest of it for the audience. On this account, power is implicitly imagined to function rather like water in a vast hydraulic mechanism, which can be pumped round a system until it finds its own level. We will return to this issue below; but at this stage, it is worth noting one of the difficulties that neither account really addresses.

As we have suggested, there are several ways in which Pokémon seems to be designed to ensure a degree of longevity; and yet, sooner or later, it was bound to meet its demise. At the time of writing (mid-2001), children have already largely abandoned Pokémon, just as they abandoned Power Rangers and Ninja Turtles and countless other 'passing fads'. While a specialist collectors' market among adults will probably continue for many years, piles of discarded Pokémon merchandise are even now finding their way to landfill sites around the globe. Of course, this is partly a matter of children 'growing out of it', or just getting bored. Yet it is more than just an inevitable consequence of the passing of time. To some extent, it might even be argued that phenomena like Pokémon are bound to become the victims of their own success. Initially taken up by the 'cool' kids (the early adopters), they are quickly espoused by others (the aspirational consumers) who are keen to use them to acquire 'cool' status. Yet, once this happens, and the unique cachet of the product – that is, its ability to confer 'distinction' – is diluted, the cool kids inevitably move on. Likewise, new generations are bound to want to 'discover' cultural practices that they can claim as their own, and that will serve to distinguish them from the generations that have preceded them. There is certainly more to explain here; but academic studies of popular culture have generally failed to account for the life cycle of such phenomena – for how what was once popular becomes *un*popular, and why (Fleming, 1996).

To sum up, one can identify elements of the 'political economy' of Pokémon that are distinctly familiar – although others seem rather more unusual. Cross-media merchandising – or 'integrated marketing' – of this kind has been characteristic of children's media culture for many years (Kinder, 1991; Seiter, 1993). While it is typically dated back to the emergence of toy-related TV cartoons in the 1980s – the so-called 'thirty minute commercials' – it can in fact be traced back to the early days of Disney (Smoodin, 1994). In terms of the audience, this approach offers a kind of economy of scale: the more there is, the more unavoidable it becomes, and so the more one seems obliged or compelled to pursue it.

Like earlier phenomena of this kind, Pokémon also places a premium on
collecting – both of the different species within the texts (the game, the TV
cartoon) *and* of the physical commodities (the cards and the merchandise).
Here, again, the potential for generating profit is maximized: rather than
collecting just one superhero doll, or even a team of four, you need to lay
out much more money to complete the set. However, what is becoming
increasingly hard to identify here is the 'source text': we cannot make sense of
phenomena such as Pokémon in terms of an original text and a collection of
'spin-offs' that subsequently exploit its success. The computer game un-
doubtedly arrived first; but, according to Nintendo itself,[6] it seems that
Pokémon was planned as a cross-media enterprise from a very early stage.
Certainly, there are millions of children who might be counted as Pokémon
'fans' who have never played the computer games, and never will.

   The second area of novelty here centres on the notion of 'activity'. As
we shall indicate in the following sections, there are several key character-
istics and themes that cut across the range of Pokémon texts; but activity –
or agency – is an indispensable part of the process, rather than something
that is exercised *post hoc*. In a sense, it seems mistaken to describe the
children who engage with Pokémon as mere 'consumers', or simply as an
'audience'. Here, again, the difference between Pokémon and earlier
phenomena may be a matter of scale or degree, rather than of kind.
Nevertheless, we would argue that Pokémon positively *requires* and
depends upon 'activity' to an extent that many other forms of media
consumption do not; and, in this respect, it casts an interesting light on the
familiar debate about structure and agency.

Textual pleasures

The central narrative of the Pokémon game and of the cartoon is essentially
that of the hero's quest. Ten-year-old Ash, our hero, leaves home in search
of the Pokémon that will bring him adult mastery. Sent on his quest by
wise Professor Oak, he is assisted by various helpers and donors, and
travels through uncharted lands encountering a series of obstacles
and enemies. Needless to say, the resolution of his quest is endlessly
deferred in the TV cartoon; but in the game, Ash (or the player) eventually
arrives at a showdown with competing Pokémon trainers – success at this
stage being completion of the game.

   From a structuralist perspective, this is all extremely familiar. Like many
Westerns, for example, Pokémon can be made to fit very easily into
Vladimir Propp's template for the folktale (Propp, 1962). As we have
implied, there is also a developmental dimension here: when Ash tells his
mother that he is leaving home, she replies, 'Right. All boys leave home
some day.' While the masculine nature of his quest is not strongly

accentuated, successful completion of the quest is nevertheless implicitly the point at which Ash will become a man. In the cartoon and the movie, Ash repeatedly learns from his experiences, and from the advice of his elders and betters: in order to succeed, he must overcome his impulsive and emotional side, and learn self-control. In this respect, the narrative could be seen as a kind of *Bildungsroman*; and it also has much in common with the Samurai quest story popularized in a whole series of martial arts movies – and, as in these movies, Ash's quest carries a significant mystical or 'psychic' dimension (see Rushkoff, 1996). These narrative tropes and themes are also characteristic of the role-playing games and fantasy literature favoured by boys slightly older than the average Pokémon fan; and, in this sense, Pokémon itself could be seen as a form of 'training' in the cultural forms of male adolescence.

However, emphasizing narrative in this context may lead us to neglect the significant *spatial* dimension of the texts, particularly the computer game. As Henry Jenkins (1998) has argued, games can be seen as virtual 'play spaces' that compensate for the growing lack of such spaces in the real world, as children (and especially boys) have been increasingly confined to the home. According to Jenkins, the games (and the peer group culture that surrounds them) offer the same pleasures that used to be afforded to earlier generations of boys in outdoor play: the exploration and mastery of space, goal-driven activity, self-control rather than parental control, and male bonding. Pokémon provides a very extensive space of this kind – a self-contained universe with its own unique geography and cosmology, that can only be mastered through active exploration. Here again, there are clear similarities with the fictional worlds of adolescents' fantasy literature – with Terry Pratchett's Discworld, for example, or the world of the Dragonlance series; and indeed with the more participatory universe of *Dungeons and Dragons* and other role-playing games. Despite the challenges it holds, however, this is ultimately a safe world, as compared (for example) with the dystopian universes of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* or *Batman*. The 'baddies' in the TV cartoon, 'Team Rocket', are extraordinarily camp and ineffectual (not to mention their striking resemblance to the 1980s band Visage); although the evil mutant Mew Two, whose drive for domination of the universe creates the narrative of the first movie, is admittedly rather more threatening. Nevertheless, the world of the Pokémon game and the TV cartoon is one which children largely control, and in which threatening adults are effectively absent.

If the textual pleasures we have identified are perhaps stereotypically masculine, there are stereotypically feminine pleasures too. As we have noted, Ash and his friends (and by extension, the players of the game) have to nurture and 'train' the Pokémon they capture in order to succeed. In this sense, they occupy decidedly 'adult' – even 'maternal' – roles: they have autonomy and authority, as well as a burden of responsibility for

those who have less power than themselves. In these respects, Pokémon has much in common with young girls' 'collectable' toys such as Polly Pockets, Sylvanian Families and (particularly) Beanie Babies. Meanwhile, the central focus on Ash's quest should not lead us to ignore the secondary character of Misty, who is a significant figure for girl consumers. Unlike the other female trainers, she is neither brutally 'butch' nor dizzily feminine, and seems carefully constructed to appeal to pre-adolescent girls.

Creating activity

While these structural and thematic analyses must clearly account for some of the pleasures of Pokémon texts, they say very little about how those texts are designed to be *used*. How does Pokémon invite – and indeed require – 'activity' on the part of the user? There are several key aspects that can be identified here. On one level, Pokémon is centrally about acquiring *knowledge*. Like Tajiri collecting his insects, the successful Pokémon player will need to build up a detailed taxonomy of the various species and their unique characteristics and powers. The Pokémon belong to different categories (Water, Fire, Psychic, etc.), whose different strengths and weaknesses must be assessed when they come to compete. The knowledge that is at stake here is that of quasi-scientific classification – of Linnaean taxonomy. Indeed, the posters that display all the 151 Pokémon resemble nothing so much as a periodic table.

It is difficult to overestimate the amount and complexity of the knowledge that is required here. The guidebooks and websites that support Pokémon players are immensely detailed and quite incomprehensible to outsiders. In terms of audiences, this in itself has several functions. For the individual, it makes for a considerable degree of longevity: to 'commit' to Pokémon is to commit to a long-term engagement, which poses some significant challenges in terms of finding, processing, remembering and applying information. In interpersonal terms, this level of complexity also provides Pokémon enthusiasts with a great deal to talk *about*. Like many parents, we have been astonished by our children's ability to sustain extended conversations with their friends about Pokémon; and of course it is not coincidental that these conversations remain largely impenetrable to us.

A significant aspect of this knowledge – and indeed of Pokémon in general – is its *portability*: that is, the ways in which it can be transferred between media and between social contexts. Children may watch the television cartoon, for example, as a way of gathering knowledge that they can later utilize in playing the computer game or in trading cards, and vice versa. The fact that information can be transferred between media (or platforms) of course adds to the sense that Pokémon is 'unavoidable': in order to be a master, it is necessary to 'catch' all its various manifestations.

Another aspect of this portability is to do with the different social contexts in which Pokémon can be used. Children can experience Pokémon alone – for example, while watching the TV cartoon – or in the company of others – for example, while trading cards or swapping via the Game Boy cable; they can experience it at home, in 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. The diversity of media and activities enable it to fit in isomorphically with many of the spaces and routines of children's everyday lives. While some of these uses may re-flect the social isolation of the *otaku*, the large majority involve social interaction. As we shall argue in more detail below, Pokémon facilitates interaction in a wide range of children's social spaces, providing a ticket of entry to play, a pretext for negotiating friendships, as well as a vehicle for competition and conflict.

Our central point here, then, is that the texts of Pokémon are not designed merely to be 'consumed' in the passive sense of the word. On the contrary, they are designed to generate activity and social interaction. Indeed, they positively depend upon it. This is the case not only in children's immediate encounters with the text(s), but also in what happens beyond this. The computer games are obviously designed to be 'inter-active', in the sense that you have to make choices and predictions, remember key information, plan ahead, and so on, if you are to succeed. However, this kind of active engagement is also required by the phenom-enon as a whole: in order to be part of the Pokémon culture, and to learn what you need to know, you must actively seek out new information and new products – and, crucially, engage with others in doing so. There is a level of cognitive activity required here, but also a level of social or interpersonal activity without which the phenomenon would not exist.

In some respects, of course, this is an obvious point. The existence of 'active audiences' is scarcely a major new discovery. However, our emphasis here is rather different. We take it for granted that audiences are 'active' (although we would agree that there is room for a much more rigorous discussion about what that actually means). The key point for us is that the texts of Pokémon – or the Pokémon 'phenomenon' – positively *require* 'activity'. Activity of various kinds is not just essential for the production of meaning and pleasure; it is also the primary mechanism through which the phenomenon is sustained, *and* through which commer-cial profit is generated. It is in this sense that the notion of 'audience' seems quite inadequate.

This introduces a rather different perspective into the broader debate about structure and agency in Media and Cultural Studies. As we have implied, debates about media and their audiences are often implicitly perceived as a 'zero sum' equation. Despite all the talk of complexity and

contradiction, we often seem to be faced with either/or choices: either the media are powerful, or audiences are. More significantly, such debates often seem to presume that structure and agency are fundamentally opposed. Asserting the power of agency necessarily means denying the power of structures. Proclaiming that audiences are 'active' necessarily means assuming that the media are powerless to influence them; and asserting the power of the media necessarily seems to involve a view of audiences as 'passive dupes' of ideology. This is, we would argue, a fundamentally fallacious opposition.

   Within mainstream sociology, Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration (e.g. Giddens, 1984) is frequently cited. At least in principle, Giddens's theory provides a way of moving beyond this dichotomy between structure and agency. In essence, Giddens suggests that structure and agency are interrelated and mutually interdependent: agency necessarily works through structure, and structure necessarily works though agency. Where Giddens's work is somewhat lacking, however, is in its empirical specification of how these processes occur (see Parker, 2000). In the sections that follow, we want to suggest that the notion of *pedagogy* – and indeed, particular theorizations of pedagogy – might offer some potential in this respect, at least in relation to understanding children's culture.

But is it *good* for children?

In relation to children, these debates about structure and agency tend to take on a particular form. Indeed, it could be argued that they are simply a way of carrying on the old debate about media effects under a different rubric. The central question which researchers in this field are ceaselessly posed is whether the media are 'good' or 'bad' for children.[7] Here, again, the question invariably seems to be framed as an either/or choice, and in utterly totalizing terms, as though there were no problems at all in making meaningful generalizations about 'children' and 'media' (Buckingham, 2000). Furthermore, it is a question that is in itself ineradicably tainted with paternalism. It is up to us, as adults, to make this judgement; and when we have made it, we will be able to act accordingly – most likely by attempting to ban whatever it is we deem to be harmful. On both sides, these arguments tend to reflect assumptions about childhood that are rarely made explicit, let alone questioned. Let us identify some of the problems here by taking a few examples of the kinds of arguments that might reasonably be mounted.

   First, a couple of positive arguments. As we have implied, a positive case could be made for Pokémon on broadly *intellectual* grounds. At least for children at a certain age – and probably for many adults too! – the computer game in particular is quite challenging. In learning to play

the game, children have to develop a specialist vocabulary, remember key information and pay close attention to detail. They have to balance several variables at one time, predict likely outcomes and plan their future strategy. Winning the game requires an ability to assess the relative strengths of your own Pokémon against those of your opponent; and deploying these carefully through a sequence of 'moves' or different types of attack. In these respects, there are significant similarities between Pokémon and 'brain-teasing' games like chess – although of course the latter are much more readily acknowledged by the academic establishment.

Whether or not one sees this as 'good for children' depends on one's underlying assumptions. As with broader arguments about the cognitive or psychological benefits of computer games (e.g. Greenfield, 1984), there is a tendency here to view the brain as a kind of muscle that can be built up by means of a good work-out. In other words, there is an assumption that the mental skills developed in the context of playing the game – which are principally those of logical thinking – will somehow automatically *transfer* to other contexts. As in the case of chess, we would suggest that this is at least a problematic assumption. As we have implied, Pokémon effectively requires children to *play* at being learners; and it is therefore inevitable that they will learn *something* from engaging with it. Yet the fact that Pokémon is intellectually challenging (at least for some) does not necessarily make it educationally worthwhile: however we judge it, educational *value* is not the same thing as intellectual *difficulty*. On the other hand, there is a danger here of equating *education* with *learning* – as though the only learning that counts is learning that takes place (or at least can be legitimated or accredited) within a particular institutional setting.

A second positive argument focuses on the *social* benefits of playing Pokémon. As we have implied, the appeals of Pokémon cross significant boundaries of age, gender and culture; and, for those who have access to the Internet, they can also transcend the limitations of geography. To a greater extent than many similar phenomena, Pokémon could be said to create – or at least to facilitate – a 'common culture' among children. In the process, it could also be seen to develop their social and communicative competencies – skills in negotiation, self-confidence and even tolerance for others. In terms more familiar within Media and Cultural Studies, it could be argued that Pokémon fosters the development of new 'interpretative communities' (Fish, 1980) that in turn allow for more fluid or negotiable identities among their members.

Yet this argument also reflects a degree of optimism, and a somewhat normative view of children's social development. The notion of 'interpretative community' may be taken to imply a cosy friendliness that is characteristic of very few of the real-life communities we have ever encountered. In the case of Pokémon, much of the 'negotiation' that accompanies the trading of cards or game characters is – at least in our

experience – characterized by competition and conflict. Far from being overcome, differences of power may be simply writ large here, as older children may deceive or bully younger ones on the basis of their superior knowledge. Stories of children being attacked for their Pokémon cards may be hard to substantiate, but they are certainly plausible. Again, there is a sense in which adults may be imposing norms on children – about sharing and respecting others, for example – to which they do not necessarily adhere themselves.

Let us now consider a couple of negative arguments. The first concerns the commercial dimension of Pokémon, and in particular the trading of cards. Familiar arguments that children are being economically 'exploited' assume a particular force when one takes account of the large amounts of cash that change hands in the attempt to accumulate 'rare' cards. 'Rarity' in this case is of course a phenomenon that is artificially created by the trading card companies. 'Rare' cards (particularly those with 'shiny' holofoils) can only be found in expensive 'booster packs'; and the rarest cards are very infrequently included. According to some critics, what is taking place here is effectively a form of gambling, as children invest in more and more 'booster packs' in the (unrealistic) hope of finding their sought-after card.[8] More enterprising or wealthy children have resorted to buying such cards – in some cases for as much as $200 each – from specialist shops, mail order and online companies. This is, on one level, a very clear example of 'audience activity'; yet, on another level, terms like 'manipulation' and 'extortion' do not seem at all inappropriate. Furthermore, it is a form of 'activity' from which very many children are simply excluded.

For some parents, this too can be interpreted as a positive experience, from which children are learning fundamental lessons about economic life. While some might express horror at their children being transformed into budding stockbrokers, others argue that they are acquiring bargaining skills and an understanding of how our market-based society functions. Again, underlying these debates – as with broader concerns about the 'commercialization' of children's culture (see Buckingham, 2000) – are normative assumptions about the appropriate place of childhood. To what extent is it either possible or desirable to keep children segregated from the marketplace? And in doing so, are we not underestimating their critical abilities – or at least depriving them of the opportunity to develop a more critical perspective on consumer culture?

A second negative argument is to do with aesthetic value. The focus of criticism here tends to be on the Pokémon movies and the TV cartoon, which in the UK were frequently described as 'trashy' and worthless, particularly on the grounds of their lack of visual sophistication. For example, the liberal British newspaper *The Guardian* probably gives voice to many parents' responses when it describes *Pokémon: The First Movie* in

its listings as a 'contemptuously cheap animated cash-in on the monster kids' craze'. Again, this argument ties in with broader concerns about the dominance of commercial forces in children's culture – although in this case, they come partly from Japanese multinationals rather than from Hollywood.

The problems here have been well rehearsed in Media and Cultural Studies, yet they remain unresolved. As has been argued elsewhere (Davies et al., 2000; Katz, 1997), there are significant problems for adults in making judgements of taste about media aimed at children. Interestingly, *Pokémon: The First Movie* incorporates strongly moralistic messages, which may well be intended to reassure parents otherwise concerned about its poor quality and its level of 'violence' (or which may alternatively convince them of its fundamental absurdity). Whether or not children themselves perceive such messages – or take much notice of them if they do – is of course another matter (see Hodge and Tripp, 1986). Suffice it to say, however, that the difficulties entailed in making such judgements of aesthetic value cannot easily be sidestepped by appeals to relativism.

Two final points should be noted. First, in outlining and debating these arguments, we have inevitably had to make distinctions both between different aspects of the Pokémon phenomenon (the games, the cards, the cartoons) and between children themselves (for example, in terms of age). Generalizations about 'children' and 'media' are unwarranted – even generalizations of the kind that imply that 'activity' is necessarily in itself a 'good thing'. Second, we have also drawn attention to some of the problems entailed for adults in making judgements on behalf of children. We would not deny that such judgements must at some point be made. However, there are significant questions about how and by whom they should be made, which in turn raise significant questions about children's *rights* in relation to media (Buckingham, 2000).

Popular pedagogies?

All the above arguments are, to a greater or lesser extent, arguments about *pedagogy*. That is, they are concerned with what and how children might be learning from the texts of Pokémon, or from their participation in the broader 'phenomenon'. By 'learning' we obviously mean more than just a cognitive or mental process: learning from (and in) popular culture is also a matter of learning how to behave, what to want and to feel, and how to respond. In other words, the debate about pedagogy is essentially a debate about the production of subjectivities or 'forms of consciousness'. Clearly, different pedagogic theories offer different perspectives on the relationships between structure and agency in this respect. On one side of the argument are essentially psychological theories, of the kind that are often invoked in

discussions of computer games, which tend to regard knowledge and skills in a relatively decontextualized manner (e.g. Greenfield, 1984). On the other are social theorists such as Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) or Bernstein (1990) who argue that education only really takes place through induction into 'official educational knowledge'. Such theorists decisively reject the notion of knowledge or skills as having some transcendental value, in favour of an analysis that many have regarded as structurally determinist. Between these two 'extremes' are theories that variously purport (or are claimed) to offer a 'social' theory of learning. A Vygotskyan theory, for example, would have much to say about the context-dependent, implicitly social and even 'scaffolded' nature of learning within Pokémon (Vygotsky, 1962). Meanwhile, theories of situated learning (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991) would provide an analysis of the nature of the phenomenon in terms of 'apprenticeship' and induction into 'communities of practice', which might seem to offer a more dynamic theorization of the relationships between structure and agency (see particularly Wenger, 1998).

In respect of the debate about Pokémon, there is clearly an implicit concern about the relations between child 'students' and adult 'teachers'; and, indeed, there is an explicit power struggle here between two competing types of teachers – the producers of Pokémon, and the parents who seek to mediate their children's relationship with it (and who are ultimately paying for it). As we have suggested, there are normative assumptions running throughout these debates. Broadly speaking, we are happy with Pokémon if it teaches children to be competent social beings, and if it enables them to develop cognitive skills; and we are unhappy if it teaches them to be greedy and acquisitive, and if it cheapens their appreciation of art. On the one hand, we appear to espouse what might be termed a pedagogy of 'empowerment', which is concerned to develop children's competence and autonomy; while, on the other, we implicitly adopt a protectionist pedagogy, which seeks to segregate children from influences that are seen to have the power to harm them.

In relation to media, these arguments cut both ways. As we have implied, Pokémon could itself be regarded as a form of 'consumer training' – a means of inducting children into the habits and competencies that are required by our commercially based media culture (Kline, 1993). Of course, it is a partial training, which (for example) applies more effectively to boys than to girls. Our use of the word 'training' is also deliberate, in that it seems to suggest an unconscious, imitative and thoughtless process of induction. Yet, even within these limitations, it can be seen either positively or negatively – as a means of developing in children the 'multiliteracies' that are now essential for democratic participation (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000); or, alternatively, as a means of producing 'good' (that is, docile and obedient) consumers.

There are two fundamental problems with these pedagogic emphases with which we would like to conclude. First, there are some questionable assumptions here about the *status* of childhood. From the pedagogic perspective, childhood often seems to be perceived as merely a state of transition – a stage you pass through on your journey to somewhere else. This assumption is implicit, albeit in different ways, both in developmental psychology and in theories of socialization (James and Prout, 1990). Children are always to be judged in terms of what they will become; and the pedagogic interventions adults make must therefore be accounted for in terms of the adult subjects they will ultimately produce. Thus, we judge whether Pokémon is 'good' or 'bad' for children in terms of whether it will eventually turn them into 'good' or 'bad' people. This perspective implicitly assumes that children are relatively fragile or impressionable, and that any such interventions will have lasting effects; and it also entails the view that development will somehow stop at the point when children finally achieve adult status.

The second issue here concerns *education* – which, as we have argued, should be distinguished from *learning*. There is frequently an assumption in such debates that we can easily agree upon what *counts* as 'education'; and, more fundamentally, that if the activities children are engaged in are not sufficiently 'educational', then they are simply a waste of time. In many developed countries, there is now a growing view of education as the *work* of childhood (Ennew, 1994); and as something that should not be allowed to stop once children walk out of the classroom door. On one level, we would reject the puritanism that seems to inform such arguments: children have as much right to leisure as adults, and they should not always be required to remain 'on task'. Yet we would also challenge this view on the grounds that it seems to entail a particularly narrow conception of learning. As we have argued, many aspects of Pokémon could be described as 'educational', in that they involve teaching and learning. While some of this teaching is carried out by Pokémon texts, much of it is also carried out by children teaching each other; and, indeed, a great deal of the learning that takes place happens without any overt instruction at all. As with the fan cultures of adults (see Jenkins, 1992), Pokémon could also be said to create or to facilitate 'learning communities'.

Of course, for some critics, the learning that is at stake here is educationally worthless: children, it is argued, are simply developing an encyclopaedic knowledge of trivia. Yet, particularly in the light of contemporary social changes, learning must now be seen as more than simply a matter of the recall of information. In participating in the culture of Pokémon, children are *learning how to learn* – which may in itself be much more significant than *what* they actually learn. The same argument, after all, is frequently made about the relevance of the formal curriculum in

terms of its 'symbolic power' rather than the value of its pure content (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

These issues have particular implications for those who seek to intervene in children's relationships with media, whether as parents or as teachers. We recognize that such interventions are frequently perceived by children as merely patronizing – and hence are often ignored or rejected. Adults need to find ways of commenting upon children's media culture, both privately and in the public sphere, without resorting to the puritanical or paternalistic tone we have identified – a tone whose inadvertent effect is often to reinforce the appeals of the media industries that it seeks to condemn. In the UK, there is a striking contrast between the high levels of activity that have characterized the Pokémon phenomenon and the passivity that increasingly suffuses our children's schooling. There is a vast gulf between the energy of children's playground engagements with Pokémon and the often deadening influence of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies now compulsorily imposed upon primary schools. We understand why many schools have sought to exclude Pokémon, by banning children from bringing their cards to school. Ultimately, however, such strategies are bound to increase its 'forbidden' appeal; and they prevent schools from building upon the enthusiasms children possess. Teachers could learn a great deal from the ways in which children use and engage with such phenomena; and this, in turn, could give them some more relevant and stimulating things to teach.

We began this article by posing two questions. In what sense is the Pokémon phenomenon distinctively different or new, as compared with the forms of children's media culture that have preceded it? And to what extent does the ongoing theoretical debate about structure and agency – and the notion of pedagogy that we have sought to insert within it – help us to understand it? In some respects, the key issue that holds these questions together is that of *activity*. As we have argued, the novelty of Pokémon is partly a matter of degree rather than one of kind: it represents, perhaps, merely another stage in the positioning of children's culture in the forefront of developments in global capitalism. However, the centrality of activity in this case – the fact that Pokémon both invites and positively *requires* activity on the part of audiences – does seem to us to represent at least a new emphasis in children's culture. Nevertheless, we have also cautioned against the view that 'activity' can necessarily be equated with independence or autonomy or power – or indeed that it should automatically be invested with political significance.

A theory of pedagogy is ultimately a theory of activity – or at least of *process*. It requires an attention to the dynamic relationships between 'teaching' and 'learning' – or between texts and their reading and use – that does not simply invest power in one at the expense of the other. Pedagogy focuses attention, not just on the learning that arises as a result

of transmission, induction or training, but also on the learning learners might do by themselves and in their own right. Clearly, pedagogy does not represent a magic tool with which to bridge a theoretical gap; but it does at least offer a new way of conceiving of questions of media power that might enable us to move beyond some of the sterile dichotomies on which those debates have increasingly foundered.

Notes

1. 'Pokémon phenomenon reaches $5 billion and continues to grow', < http:// www.nintendo.com/corp/press/091599.html > .
2. 'Pokémon named "the big cheese"', < http://www.nintendo.com/corp/press/ 040300.html > .
3. See *Interactive Leisure Software: Market Assessment and Forecasts 1999–2000* London: Screen Digest and ELSPA 2000.
4. The interesting exception here is Disney, which of course is consciously designed to appeal to a 'family' audience. By contrast, Pokémon is significantly lacking in adult appeal – an issue we discuss below.
5. Evident, for example, in *Time*'s cover story 'Pokemania', 22 November 1999.
6. *Ibid.*
7. One of the present authors was recently called upon to address precisely this question by a British newspaper: see Julian Sefton-Green, 'Viewpoint: Don't Let Your Kids Miss Out on the Pokémon Craze', *Daily Express* 13 June 2000.
8. See Hilary Cooper, 'Fleecing Kids', *The Guardian* 10 June 2000.

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