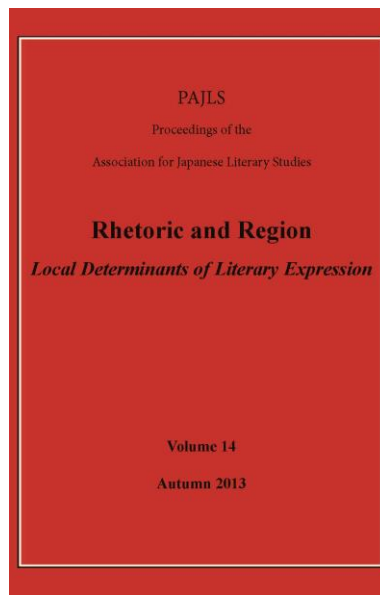


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Mythical Landscapes and Imaginary Creatures: Pokémon and Japanese Regionalism

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Each of the first four installments in Nintendo's Pokémon series of video games has been set in a different fictional region of an archipelago closely resembling Japan. Each of these regions (*chihō*) has its own native population of pokémon, as well as its own distinctive cultural character loosely based on Japanese regional cities and natural features. By exploring the region that serves as the setting for a particular game, the player learns the history and mythology of that region, which resemble the various regional myths of Japan. The player is thus encouraged to think of the Pokémon world as a fantasy version of Japan; and, by virtually touring the regions of Japan through the Pokémon games, the player actively engages in a narrative of regional differentiation and, through an awareness of the overarching connections between these regions and their proximity to real-world Japan, national identity. In the imagined version of Japan represented by the Pokémon series of video games, the ludic exploration of different Japanese regions not only reinforces a broader national identity but may also be applied to a flexible and accommodating understanding of internationalization in contemporary Japan.

The idea that a text generally understood as belonging to the category of "popular culture" can only be properly interpreted if those reading it are able to comprehend the physical and artistic processes of its manufacture and its production as a marketable commodity has recently been gathering momentum as a hermeneutic trend in Japanese Studies. Thomas Lamarre's *The Anime Machine* and Marc Steinburg's *Anime Media Mix* discuss the artistic and philosophical textual components engendered by the production and franchising of media. Likewise, Anne Allison's *Millennial Monsters* describes the technological development of video games and the commodification of the Pokémon franchise, and the essays in the collection *Pikachu's Global Adventure* handle the economic and cultural impact of the various media components of the Pokémon franchise on a global scale.

This essay will focus not on the development and marketing of the franchise, but rather on the content of the Pokémon video games released for Nintendo's portable consoles. Scholars such as Markku Eskelinen and Espen Aarseth have argued that video games, as a medium, should not be studied in the same way as films or literature. Aarseth in particular resists the trend toward "narrativizing" video games:

Underlying the drive to reform games as "interactive narratives" [...] lies a complex web of motives, from economic ("games need narratives to become better products"), elitist and eschatological ("games are a base, low cultural form; let's try to escape the humble origins and achieve 'literary' qualities"), to academic colonialism ("computer games *are* narratives,

we only need to redefine narratives in such a way that these new narrative forms are included").¹

Despite the theoretical justifications against "reading" video games as stories with narrative progress toward a goal, and the ways in which these stories unfold reflect larger cultural narratives of history and subjectivity, the Pokémon games achieve a balance between designer-scripted story and player performance, making them an excellent testing ground for Henry Jenkins's idea of narrative architecture, "a middle ground position between the ludologists and the narratologists, one that respects the particularity of this emerging medium – examining games less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility."² This essay employs the concept of narrative architecture by reading the Pokémon games as player-created narratives of traveling through a version of Japan that has been mapped out by the games' designers, who have constructed the virtual playspace of the games with easily recognizable geographic and cultural landmarks.

The concept for the Pokémon series of video games was developed by Tajiri Satoshi, who saw the potential in the unit-to-unit connectivity of Nintendo's handheld Game Boy console for a game that would allow players to trade insects and other small creatures between one game unit and another. Tajiri was influenced by the insect collecting craze of Japan in the 1990s,³ and his idea was made possible by Nintendo's release of the Game Link Cable hardware accessory, which allowed players to transfer game data between cartridges. Nintendo, which would oversee the transformation of Tajiri's concept into an actual game development project, eventually released a pair of games in 1996, *Pokémon Aka* and *Pokémon Midori*, which were localized as *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Blue* in North America in 1998. Each of these two games contained a slightly different set of approximately one hundred and fifty creatures, which meant that players needed to trade these creatures, called "pocket monsters" (*poketto monsutā*) or "pokémon," between the two games in order to acquire a full set.

The games are not simply collections of pokémon to be traded, however, but entire self-contained worlds for the player to explore. In each game in the series, the player begins as a boy or girl setting out from his or her home in a small town as a fledgling pokémon trainer. As such, it is the player's goal to travel through a self-contained geographic region, exploring both urban areas and wild spaces removed from human habitation. On the routes (*dōro*) between the various cities and towns in the region, the player climbs mountains, delves into caves, and rides his or her bike across bridges and highways, all the while interacting with computer controlled characters (referred to in both English and Japanese as NPCs, or "non-player characters") and searching for new species of pokémon to catalog and train for friendly competition. Although there is a specific order in which the urban areas of a particular region should be visited in order to advance the plot, the player is free to forge a unique, personalized path as his or her pokémon develop new skills, such as the ability to cross bodies of water. Although the goal of each game in the series is

¹ Aarseth 49.

² Jenkins 119.

³ This insect collecting boom was part of a broader growth in Japan's pet industry, which "expanded into a trillion-yen business" in the 1990s (Ambrose 5).

ostensibly to defeat the region's eight gym trainers and thus earn the right to compete in the region's elite Pokémon League (*Pokemon Riigu*), the focus of the games is less on battle and more on traveling through the region in order to gain familiarity with its cities, natural features, local cultures, and local pokémon, among which are creatures so powerful that they are regarded as regional deities.

The main branch of the Pokémon series currently has five pairs of games, which are commonly referred to as "generations." In chronological order, these games are *Pokémon Red/Green* (1996), *Pokémon Gold/Silver* (1999), *Pokémon Ruby/Sapphire* (2002), *Pokémon Diamond/Pearl* (2006), and *Pokémon Black/White* (2010). The first four generations are set in different regions of an island chain closely resembling the Japanese archipelago. These regions, whose names are all written in the *katakana* script, are Kantō (based on the Kantō region of eastern Honshū), Jōto (based on the Kansai region of western Honshū), Hōen (based on the island of Kyūshū and several of the smaller islands surrounding it, including Yakushima and Tanegashima), and Shinō (based on Hokkaidō, the southern tip of Sakhalin, and the southernmost of the Kuril Islands). The most recent pair of games, *Black/White*, is set in the Isshu region, which is modeled on New York City and its suburbs.⁴ This essay will discuss the Isshu region later, but for now I would like to focus on the four "Japanese" regions.

Each of these regions retains certain traits of the Japanese region on which it is modeled. For example, the Kantō region is dominated by an enormous metropolis, which is divided into various districts. Contiguous to this large city is a seaport with a notable population of foreigners, and removed from both urban areas is a large park and wildlife preserve. Although the names of these fictional localities are derived from colors, the similarities to Tokyo, Yokohama, and the Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park are clear. Two of the major cities in the Jōto region, Kikyō City (localized as Violet City) and Enju City (localized as Ecruteak City), prominently feature pagodas, wooden architecture, and tiled roofs of the type common in Nara and Kyoto. A certain burned temple in the foothills of Enju City is surrounded by fall foliage and an ornamental pond in a nod to the various temple complexes of Kyoto. (*Figure 1*) The largest city in the Jōto region, Kogane City (or Goldenrod City), is a bustling commercial center on a port. Like Osaka, Kogane City also serves as a major station for a certain high-speed train linking the Jōto and the Kantō regions. Although most denizens of the Pokémon world speak in standard Japanese, certain residents of Enju city speak in Kyoto dialect, while certain NPC residents of Kogane City speak in Osaka dialect. The periphery Hōen region is less densely populated and has few cities, but it boasts a flourishing maritime trade, and the player is given opportunities to visit in-game museums displaying exhibits on nautical engineering and marine biology. The mountainous Shinō region, which is partially covered in snow, is home to large mining cities, small settlements of the

⁴ The two online wiki articles "Pokémon Regions" and "Pokémon World in Relation to the Real World" contain fan speculation on the similarities between the locations in the fictional Pokémon universe and similar locations in the real world, which include but are not limited to cities and geographical landmarks in Japanese political territories.

descendants of pioneers, and vast fields of wildflowers. Each region therefore has its own distinct climate, geography, and cultural character.⁵

Each region also contains its own distinctive set of pokémon. Since pokémon are fantastic creatures with semi-magical powers, it is difficult to draw parallels between them and the fauna and flora of the real world. Nevertheless, the fact that certain pokémon can only be found in certain regions emphasizes the uniqueness of each region in the Pokémon world. Furthermore, it is only by traveling to and exploring each region that a player hoping to compile a "national pokémon index" (*zenkoku pokemon zukan*, or Pokédex) can assemble a more complete collection of pokémon. The pokémon of each region are not entirely exclusive, however, and certain common species, such as the Koikingu (localized as Magikarp), inhabit multiple regions. Each region's pokémon also respond in identical ways to certain nationally available standardized products, such as the pokéballs (*monsutā bōru*) used to capture them and the various topical sprays used to heal their injuries. Therefore, although the singularity of each region is demonstrated by its unique population of pokémon, the rules governing the treatment and care of pokémon are standardized across regions, and a player who has previously played a Pokémon game will not find him or herself lost or bewildered in the region of another game.

Certain pokémon called *densetsu pokemon* ("legendary pokémon") are absolutely unique to each region, however. Only one *densetsu pokemon* exists in each game, and encountering and possibly capturing this creature is one of the player's primary goals. Unlike the more common varieties of pokémon, a game's particular *densetsu pokemon* will be directly connected to that game's story, which will involve the natural history of that game's region. For example, the two *densetsu pokemon* of the Ruby/Sapphire games, Gurādon and Kaiōga (localized as Groudon and Kyogre), act as symbolic embodiments of the land and water of the Hōen region. In the games, these two pokémon are referred to as "archaic pokémon" (*chōkodai pokemon*), and they are believed to regulate the balance of the natural world through their power over such geological phenomena as ocean currents and lava flow. Although neither of these pokémon is worshipped in any traditional sense, the residents of the Hōen region know the legends surrounding them, and they are associated with special jewels that may be used to physically summon them.

Likewise, the northern Shinō region is home to two pokémon that exercise considerable power over the natural world: Diaruga (Dialga) is believed to have control over time, while Parukia (Palkia) is believed to have control over physical space. Although such incredible powers would conceivably affect the entire universe, Dialga and Palkia are characterized as pokémon who specifically inhabit the Shinō region. A village in the central area of the region, Kannagi Town (localized as Celestial Town), contains both ruins with ancient wall carvings detailing the creation myth of the region and a Shinto-esque shrine devoted to the worship of these legendary pokémon. Mio City (localized as Canalave City), another town in Shinō, is home to a three-story library that houses a collection of books of the myths of the region. Upon entering this library, the player can read various stories about the region's origins, learn about the special pokémon that supposedly

⁵ The Japanese *Pokémon Wiki* contains articles on each region that describe the history, demographic patterns, and natural features of each region, with sub-articles on individual towns, cities, and natural landmarks.

inhabit the region's many lakes, and enjoy legends about the early interactions between humans and pokémon. The Shinō region thus displays a confluence of the natural wilderness of the "far north" of Hokkaidō and the imagined role of the "far north" of Tōhoku as a repository of myths and folklore.

As these examples demonstrate, each region not only has its own ecology and cultural character but also its own system of regional myths and regional pokémon worship. At the same time, each region belongs to a larger national entity, across which everything from the rules governing pokémon battles to the products sold in stores is standardized. Moreover, by transferring data from one game in the series to another via a Game Link Cable or a wireless connection, the player is free to travel across multiple games and multiple regions. As so many elements of the Pokémon world are based on real-world Japan, touring the regions of the Pokémon world thus serves as a way of touring a fantasy version of Japan rich in nature, culture, and local deities.

The idea that peripheral regions throw the centralized state into sharper focus by collectively acting as an ontological other has been advocated by historians following the frontier model of Frederick Jackson Turner; and, in the case of Japan, this idea has been convincingly argued by proponents of Tōhoku Studies, such as Takahashi Tomio and Umehara Takashi. In her seminal study *Discourses of the Vanishing*, Marilyn Ivy builds on this concept by demonstrating that notions of Japan's cultural character can be constructed through touring the cultural margins of Japan. As Alisa Freedman has argued in *Tokyo in Transit*, an awareness of national character can be constructed even while touring within a single region of Japan. The Pokémon game franchise reflects ideas concerning the construction of national identity through the movement across culturally inscribed space by using different regions to create a world that, through the unique character of its regions, is even more strongly identified with Japan. The narrative architecture of landscape is reinforced by the player's goal of completing his or her *pokemon zukan* (Figure 2), an experiential knowledge-building activity that may be linked to the compilation of *yōkai* encyclopedias discussed by Michael Foster in *Pandemonium and Parade*. Kagawa Masanobu makes this connection as well in his discussion of how contemporary children carefully construct notions of the world they live in through illustrated *zukan* of both the realistic and fantastic varieties.

Furthermore, the mythology surrounding *densetsu pokemon* also confirms the present by establishing a natural and a national past. In fact, a recent collaboration between Nintendo and the third party developer Capcom has produced a crossover between Pokémon and a role-playing strategy gaming franchise called *Nobunaga's Ambition* (*Nobunaga no yabō*). In this crossover, aptly titled *Pokémon Plus Nobunaga's Ambition* (localized as *Pokémon Conquest*), the history of Japan is the history of powerful men and women relying on their pokémon partners to settle disputes over territorial sovereignty and competing cultural values. Oda Nobunaga, for instance, has risen to immense power not only through the strength of his eponymous ambition but also through the grace of his *densetsu pokemon*. In effect, Pokémon is Japan in microcosm, and it is possible for anyone with a Nintendo handheld console to feel connected to the concept of "Japan" by exploring its fantastic incarnation in the Pokémon games. Through his or her experience with

the games in the Pokémon franchise, the player learns that "Japan" is an exciting, important place, full of godlike entities and adventure and life-changing experiences.

Despite the series' construction of a national and natural culture, history, and mythological background, no one region is characterized as central; each is as important as the others. The most recent generation of games in the Pokémon series, *Pokémon Black/White*, adds a new twist to the Pokémon world by being set in the Isshu (localized as Unova) region, which is loosely modeled on New York City, specifically Brooklyn and lower Manhattan. This "American" region, which is characterized as American through various visual and cultural references such as the Brooklyn Bridge, is incorporated into the same system of rules and mythology common to the Pokémon games set in "Japanese" regions. It is significant that Isshu is referred to by official Pokémon literature as a "region" (*chihō*) in the same way as the areas based on Japan, which implies an underlying unity between the Isshu region and the regions of previous generations of games. In fact, as directly stated by the game's head developers, the etymology of the name of the region is from the expression *isshurui*, meaning "all of one type."⁶ Just like the Japanese regions, Isshu has its own legendary pokémon, and the player can encounter species of pokémon and human characters from earlier generations in the region as well, which suggests that both people and pokémon are able to move as freely between Kantō and Isshu as they are between Kantō and Jōto.

By incorporating an area based on New York City into the previously "Japanese" world of the Pokémon universe, Nintendo is not attempting to construct an elaborate allegory of the "colonization" of America through the Pokémon franchise that the company partially owns, as certain critics might suggest.⁷ Rather, the development of the Isshu region, in conjunction with the non-centralized autonomy of the four previous regions, points to an understanding of globalization that doesn't rely on the economic power and cultural capital of major urban areas. Instead, in the Pokémon world, globalization is an entirely local phenomenon in the sense that any one location is just as global as any other. According to the prevailing historical model, the cultural creation of peripheral and marginal regions serves to enforce the idea of a political center, while the promotion of tourism to these regions serves to solidify a feeling of national unity and cultural identity. The Pokémon games may indeed be interpreted as contemporary examples of how these cultural processes function; but, when viewed as a whole, the equality of central and peripheral regions of the games actively resist this interpretation.⁸

The geographic environments of the first four generations of Pokémon video games are based on specific regions of real-world Japan, and the ways in which the concept of regionality is constructed in the Pokémon world resemble the ways in which regionality is constructed in the

⁶ Masuda Junichi, a member of the Game Freak studio board of directors, discusses of the location and theme of *Pokémon Black/White* along with other members of the game's production team in a roundtable interview titled "Shachō ga kiku Poketto Monsutā Buraku Howaito," which is available on Nintendo's official website.

⁷ Tobin artfully summarizes such views in his introduction to *Pikachu's Global Adventure*.

⁸ Other cultural industries, such as the Discover Japan tourism campaign discussed by Marilyn Ivy and highbrow home magazines like *Kateigahō*, also encourage travel to "peripheral" regions, which are characterized as just as Japanese (if not more so) than central regions. The efficacy of the Pokémon games in the same cultural project lies in their ability to grant children and teenagers the autonomy to travel through a virtual version of Japan.

real world. The world of the Pokémon games does not revolve around any sort of political center, and even countries other than Japan are understood as belonging to a borderless international whole. This reflects a construction of globalization in which nations are more properly "regions" of a larger system of connectivity that has no center. From a metatextual perspective, such a construction makes sense in terms of Nintendo's position as an international corporation that does indeed release Pokémon games in "regions" rather than in specific countries.⁹ It would also make sense to the ever-growing number of fans of the games, who use the internet as a global Game Link Cable to trade and battle pokémon with an entirely postmodern lack of respect for national boundaries. In his essay "*Pokémon to Monhan no yasei no shikō*," Shida Hidekuni sees this disregard of both national boundaries and narrative boundaries as representing "a true wildness" in which the narrative architecture of the Pokémon games is better able to reflect a more ecologically informed examination of the position human culture occupies in the natural world.¹⁰ Therefore, while the concept of regionalism in the Pokémon games serves to reinforce the idea of "Japan" as a cultural construct, it might also serve to break down the idea of Japan as a modern nation with clearly defined political and economic boundaries.

⁹ Like DVD and Blu-ray discs, video games are released in separate economic regions (the largest of which are Japan, North America, the United Kingdom, and Europe), and a game released in one region is often incompatible with the consoles sold in other regions. To date, all of the Pokémon games released for Nintendo handheld consoles have been region-free, and the wireless access of the company's recent handheld consoles has allowed free game-based communication between players across political and economic borders.

¹⁰ Shida 196.

Figure 1



Figure 2



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