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Quentin Gervasoni

► **To cite this version:**

Quentin Gervasoni. Is Pokémon for children? How fan participation and transmedia practices transform age boundaries of audiences. Cultural and Creative Industries of Childhood and Youth. An interdisciplinary exploration of new frontiers, 2021. hal-03905727

**HAL Id: hal-03905727**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03905727v1>**

Submitted on 19 Dec 2022

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**Is *Pokémon* for children?**

**How fan participation and transmedia practices transform age boundaries of audiences**

Quentin Gervasoni

Experice

Université Sorbonne Paris Nord

Although video games initially appeared as an adult hobby (Triclot, 2011), they then became associated with children and teenagers. Later on, video game audiences grew older again, with some young adults even playing the same games as children and adolescents to some extent (Cross, 2010). This porosity of the boundaries of age is part of a wider trend observable mainly in the leisure world that has been associated with transformations related to media, although Cross argues that “the cult of cool” is a core factor. *Pokémon* is usually known as a children’s game, and even though its audience has grown older as old-time fans keep buying their products and actively engaging with the franchise, the video games are still mainly designed for children. Yet, the internet of *Pokémon* seems to be mainly populated by adolescents past the age of 15 and young adults, even up to 30 years old, according to my observations as well as my casual experience as a fan. Younger children are there, but are less visible. I argue in this chapter that this is a consequence of the fact that the online spaces I study, which are mainly the ones with the highest visibility,<sup>1</sup> are built by adults and older adolescents, for adults and older adolescents. While the younger part of the *Pokémon* audience is likely to have less access to the internet, this does not suffice to explain the relative invisibility of younger adolescents.<sup>2</sup> As such, fans’ online practices of circulation and enrichment of the *Pokémon* franchise are part of what makes it broaden its audience.

According to Jenkins, “a participatory culture is one which embraces the values of diversity and democracy through every aspect of our interactions with each other – one which assumes that we are capable of making decisions, collectively and individually, and that we should have the capacity to express ourselves through a broad range of different

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<sup>1</sup> I study some “niche” communities such as one based on a role-playing forum, however, the one I chose is the most populated and most visible one among the French role-playing forums, with several dozen to a hundred active members.

<sup>2</sup> It is impossible for me to make a rigorous quantitative claim about the age stratifications of the French *Pokémon* audience, in general or online, since such data is unavailable and would require a complex and expensive methodology. France also lacks rigorous data on the use of internet by children and younger adolescents. The surveys conducted by the Ministry of Culture on the matter only concern people aged 15 or more (Donnat, 2009).

forms and practices” (Jenkins, Ito, Boyd, 2015, p. 2). This idea of participatory culture as a movement toward a democratization of participation tends to minimize the fact that participation is primarily about power (Kelty, 2013). Indeed, adult-children relationships are grounded in power, as age constitutes a “principle of justification of action between adults and children” (Garnier, 2014, p. 453) which contributes towards the legitimizing of adult domination. This means that the study of the online participation of children, adolescent and adults of the same fandom must take adult domination into consideration. Thus, although it is undeniable that the internet has raised some opportunities for participation, it is important to keep in mind that the skills and resources required for such participation are not evenly distributed across social categories such as social class (Helsper & Eynon, 2013; North et al., 2008) and age (Meneses & Mominó, 2010), as, unsurprisingly, children need to develop their digital literacy, contrary to what the criticized concept of “digital natives” would suggest (Bennett et al., 2008, Lardellier in this book).

Gary Alan Fine argues that the success of leisure organizations mainly depends on their ability to provide resources to participants (Fine, 1989). Resources can be material, such as infrastructures or physical tools, but also immaterial, such as knowledge. Explaining the success of *Pokémon* is beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, Fine’s Provisioning Theory incites people to consider the role played by resources produced online by The Pokémon Company (TPC) and by the *Pokémon* fans with respect to fans’ participation and the age dynamics among the online fandom. How do the resources provided by TPC and the online fan communities influence fan trajectories in the *Pokémon* world? How do those resources participate in framing the intergenerational online fan participation with *Pokémon*?

First, I present the *Pokémon* franchise and the data and methodology which this chapter draws on. In the second part, I argue that the *Pokémon* experience can be understood as a “designed exploration” produced by the intersection of game design, marketing strategies, fan engagement and collective fandom production, which leads fans to navigate in the *Pokémon* universe, especially on the internet. The third part emphasizes the role of fans in the construction of the internet of *Pokémon*, and the fourth part investigates what various barriers this induces for children’s participation. The fifth part furthers this point by highlighting adult-targeted online communication by TPC.

### **Investigating the internet of *Pokémon*.**

*Pokémon* was launched in Japan in 1996<sup>3</sup> as a video game before it quickly became a media mix (Steinberg, 2012) with the production of an *anime* as well as a trading cards game. Satoshi Tajiri, the man behind the original games, was a fan of beetle collection and hoped to foster a taste for the exploration of nature in children of the new generation (Tobin, 2004, p. 57). After a period of “Pokémania” around the 2000s, the franchise was prophesied to fall out of trend (Tobin, 2004). Despite the apparent end of “Pokémania”, the video games of the main *Pokémon* series<sup>4</sup> still usually hit 10 million sales each year<sup>5</sup>. *Pokémon* came back into the spotlight with the 2016 augmented reality smartphone video game *Pokémon GO*, which was the object of much academic focus, as it raised issues related to public health (Althoff et al., 2016; Ayers et al., 2016; Oidtman et al., 2016; Zach & Tussyadiah, 2017) and economic impact (Frith, 2017), and academics investigated the potential reasons for its success (Keogh, 2017; Vella et al., 2019; Yang & Liu, 2017). Thus, while it is unlikely that *Pokémon* has managed to revive Japanese kids’ taste for nature and beetle collection, it succeeded in encouraging many people to explore cities. However, the world that *Pokémon* fans usually wander through is rather the virtual, intertextual world of the franchise itself, and one of its widest spaces may be found online.

This chapter draws on a study of the francophone online fandom of *Pokémon*, focused mostly around the video games, which are at the center of the *Pokémon* media mix (Gervasoni, 2018; Ito, 2010), though the broader context of the franchise is taken into account.<sup>6</sup> Rather than mapping *a priori* the space of our fieldwork and its boundaries, I started with participant observation of a few online *Pokémon* fan spaces, and drew on the “orientations” (Boutet, 2008) of the users themselves who participate in constructing the internet of *Pokémon*.<sup>7</sup> This means our fieldwork is dynamic and the limits are drawn based on practical criteria but not taken for granted. In this chapter, I mostly focus on observational data gathered on four kinds of online spaces: Facebook fan groups, YouTube videos and comment sections, Twitter, and fan websites. This leaves out several major online spaces,

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<sup>3</sup> *Pokémon* official website: <https://www.pokemon.com/us/about-pokemon/>

<sup>4</sup> Fans refer to the series of *Pokémon* video games which are iterations of the first ones as the “main” series. They consist of a young adolescent (around eleven years old) setting out on a quest to become a *Pokémon* master by challenging trainers in *Pokémon* battles, while beating an evil team in the process.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance the ranking for the best Nintendo 3DS sales (official website). <https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/en/finance/software/3ds.html>

<sup>6</sup> This chapter draws on an ongoing PhD thesis about the role of the internet in the attachment to the *Pokémon* franchise, under the supervision of Pascale Garnier and Vincent Berry of EXPERICE research center, Université Sorbonne Paris Nord 13. This PhD thesis benefits from a grant from LabEx ICCA.

<sup>7</sup> I use the term “internet of *Pokémon*” to refer to the complex set of online spaces dedicated to *Pokémon*.

such as Discord<sup>8</sup>, and forums. According to my observations, which have been confirmed by several testimonies, forums have been largely emptied of their active users, who left to Discord. Discord is a very scattered space, with a very complex and messy organization. At this point of my research, my understanding of the Discord *Pokémon* fan ecosystem is too shallow for me to exploit the data rigorously.

This chapter also draws on 19 semi-directive interviews, most of which were conducted online. The latter were mostly contacted in Facebook fan groups and on my workplace at the time, as interviewees were mostly contacted in several online fan communities and other online spaces. Online, written interviews were done through Discord for most part, although a few of them were carried out on Messenger. The choice to use mostly online, written interviews is driven by several factors. It is easier to get fans to agree to an online interview than a face-to-face one, and it allows me to do away with geographical barriers. Although interviewees are less likely to be focused on the interview due to the multitasking habits of internet users (Béliard & Brossard, 2012), online interviews also allow them to opt for spontaneity rather than well-considered responses, and make it possible for the researcher to come back to the interviewee in later days in order to ask for clarifications, precisions, or finish aborted interviews. In this chapter, all quotes from interviews are translated from French. I try to respect the tone and style of the interviewee to a certain extent. Interviewees are also given a pseudonym.

### **The “designed exploration” of the *Pokémon* world.**

“I love the culture they created in the games, with a mythology, a history, events, as well as self-references between games. But most of all the exploration/discovery of new regions with each new game”<sup>9</sup>

Kurt Squire argues that video games are to be considered as “*designed experiences*, in which participants learn through a grammar *doing* and *being*”<sup>10</sup> (Squire, 2006, p. 19), by which he means that any ideology or intent is injected during the development of a game, and gamers are active producers of a gaming experience that is framed by the design. *Pokémon*'s

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<sup>8</sup> Discord is an application which allow users to easily create servers with direct message channels for written conversation, and vocal channels. Discord also allows private direct messages and calls.

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas, 20, M.

<sup>10</sup> Italics in the original text.

experience appears to be mainly focused around exploration and adventure. I use the term *designed exploration* here to examine the ways in which the *Pokémon* game design, and even *Pokémon* as a whole, incite and frames diverse exploration practices.

Indeed, one of the main pleasures of *Pokémon* stems from the possibility to explore a complex living world. As was noted earlier in the chapter, Satoshi Tajiri's goal when developing *Pokémon* was to give kids the will and the pleasure to explore nature. In this respect, *Pokémon GO* may look like the achievement of that original goal, although the game design favors the most urban areas over "nature" (Colley et al., 2017). Still, *Pokémon* video games from the main series are about setting on a quest to help a scientist learn everything about *pokémons*<sup>11</sup> by exploring the region. The *Pokémon anime*, another core part of the *Pokémon* media mix, also tells the story of a young adolescent who explores the world of *Pokémon*. The French and English versions of the emblematic opening of the first season both mention this fact.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, *Pokémon* was designed "not as something you consume, but as something you do" (Sefton-Green, 2004). *Pokémon* fans are incited to navigate through the fictional world of *Pokémon*, engaging with products of the *Pokémon* media mix (Steinberg, 2012). Becoming a fan of *Pokémon* involves learning about hundreds of creatures, gaining and sharing information within the community of fans. Such a quest for information may lead fans online (Vasquez, 2003). When she was younger, Marjorie<sup>13</sup> "loved to visit Pokébip to read articles about the *anime*". All the fans I interviewed converged in their discourses of how they started searching for online *Pokémon* content. At some point, they needed information about how to get past an obstacle, or about where to find a pokémon. They figured that the internet might be the place to find a solution.

For instance, Morgane<sup>14</sup> started checking *Pokémon*-related materials "at the end of primary school, to find walkthroughs on forums". The *designed exploration* of *Pokémon* is not only a product of media mix strategies which foster active engagement with cultural products, but also of game design itself. *Pokémon* contains several hidden and semi-hidden in-game features. For instance, pokémons have Individual Values (IVs), hidden values which influence the pokémon's combat characteristics. Such hidden values can be evaluated thanks

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<sup>11</sup> Although TPC prescribes the use of *Pokémon* both for referring to the brand and to the creatures, we consider it less ambiguous to write "*Pokémon*" when referring to the brand, and "pokémons" when referring to the creatures which inhabit the world of *Pokémon*.

<sup>12</sup> The English and French lyrics of the *Pokémon* first season *anime* opening on the largest *Pokémon* fan-made wiki. [https://bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net/wiki/Pok%C3%A9mon\\_Theme](https://bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net/wiki/Pok%C3%A9mon_Theme);  
[https://www.pokepedia.fr/Th%C3%A8me\\_Pok%C3%A9mon](https://www.pokepedia.fr/Th%C3%A8me_Pok%C3%A9mon)

<sup>13</sup> 20, F.

<sup>14</sup> 19, F.

to online calculators<sup>15</sup>. In the recent games, some Non-Playable Characters (NPC) give hints about IVs, although one needs to know such values exist in order to understand what the NPC is talking about. Some other features are not completely hidden but not explicit either, such as “nature”. Pokémons can be of one of 24 natures, 4 of which are “neutral”. The 20 other natures give a 10% boost to one battle characteristic<sup>16</sup> and reduces another one by the same amount (Hit Points are not affected by nature). This feature is not explicitly explained in the video games and players usually learn this in the fan websites and communities. The recent games give hints about the effects of natures in the User Interface. The boosted stat is written in red and the lowered one in blue (Figure 1). However, the interviews revealed, not surprisingly, that only those who already know about the mechanics behind the “nature”, realize what the colored stats mean, and some do not even realize they are differently colored. *Pokémon* is already too vast for a player to know everything about it by simply playing and passively consuming products. Such game design features make it even more important for players to engage more intensively, and online participation is the most common way to further one’s knowledge about the games thanks to the resources provided by fans.



Figure 1. Picture of a stats screen of a pokémon, Pelipper, in *Pokémon Ultra Sun*. His nature is “Jolly”, which lowers his Special Attack (Sp. Atk) by 10% and boosts its Speed by 10%, as suggested by the colors in which they are written.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, using Serebii (a famous fan website) IV calculator. <https://www.serebii.net/games/iv-calcs.html>

<sup>16</sup> Pokémons have 6 battle characteristics: Hit Points, Attack, Defence, Special Attack, Special Defence, and Speed.

Through the media mix strategies embraced by TPC and a variety of game design features, *Pokémon* incites a form of involvement which guides people toward “curious exploration” (Auray, 2017) of online spaces, which can be seen as a potential gateway to participation, or even a form of participation in itself (Jenkins *et al.*, 2015), although it does not leave obvious traces. The fact that the content fans engage in once online are, in part, produced by other fans, suggests that the “designed exploration” is framed not only by TPC, but also by the collective action of fans. Although the exploration of online content appears to be of a different nature than that of the virtual spaces in-game, we argue that there is a continuity between both.

### **Fan digital labor**

While *Pokémon* is a *copyrighted subculture* (Fine, 1989), and Nintendo is known for its conservative approach to copyright and authorship (Newman, 2018), much of the internet of *Pokémon* is the result of fans’ *digital labor* (Scholz, 2013) through which they provide walkthroughs, encyclopedias, news about the franchise, as well as online communities to participate in, constituting resources for exploration and participation. Although TPC has now seriously entered the internet, putting effort into an official YouTube channel, advertising on Twitter with a Community Manager, fans have been pioneers in building the internet of *Pokémon*. Since 2013, *Pokémon* now has official channels in several languages including English and French, which boast millions of subscribers each. Yet, some *Pokémon* fan channels sometimes attract even more viewers than the official channel. The official French language *Pokémon* channel has 205,000 subscribers, and most of its videos about the video games get between 50,000 and 200,000 views. One of the most popular recent videos, the first *Pokémon Sword/Shield* trailer, got 203,915 views on November the 6<sup>th</sup> in 2019. At the same time, the Pokémon Trash YouTube channel has 800,000 subscribers, and most of its videos about the video games get over 100,000 views. A telling example is that of the video “Que cache le trailer de POKÉMON ÉPÉE BOUCLIER ?” [What’s behind the *Pokémon Sword/Shield* trailer?], published on July 8, 2019, 3 days after the trailer it refers to, which got more than 270,000 views. In comparison, the official trailer got slightly over 104,000 views<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Every trailer on the official French-speaking channel is published in two versions, with one presented as the Belgian version, although I have not found any difference between those versions. Links to the Pokémon Trash video and the official trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVhggIVg7TQ>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHLJXe8PUYs>



Fan participation also results in a large body of fan production, such as artwork or even fan-made video games. In other words, fans are the active builders of the internet of *Pokémon*, and as such, they are the core providers of transmedia resources which enable and foster participation. In his study of 80s role-playing games, Fine (1989) already observed this process: the players participated in providing resources in *copyrighted cultures*, however, he still insisted that it was highly framed by the game creators. While TPC plays a central role in shaping fans' activity and the way resources are organized, nonetheless the way the resources circulate, especially on the internet, is now determined in a more complex way by both the company and the fans. I avoid talking about a "coproduction" of the franchise and its online spaces, because such a term tends to hide the fact that the relations between fans and companies are ones of uneven power. For instance, when fans produce video games which gain too much attention, TPC does not hesitate to make legal threats and force the amateur to shut his game down<sup>18</sup>.

Nonetheless, the internet has given the opportunity for fan communities to be active producers and to play an important role in the production and circulation of *Pokémon* content online. Fan websites are run by fans who recruit other fans to gather information about the franchise as fast as possible in order to share news, and as such become important sources of information for fans. Two of the main *Pokémon* French fan websites, Pokébip and Pokémon Trash, boast around 1-2 million visits a day, while the official website can be estimated to usually get about 1.5 million French visits a day<sup>19</sup>. Much like mainstream news outlets, fan websites draw on each other's work, as well as a network of information sources. For instance, in February 2019, a Twitter account which had leaked a conference a few weeks earlier tweeted the message "Pokémon soon". Pokékalos, a French fan website, shared that news through their own Twitter account, and other websites such as Pokémon Trash wrote articles in anticipation<sup>20</sup> of a supposed "Pokémon Direct"<sup>21</sup> coming soon. As a result, although TPC own *Pokémon* and are the first-hand producer of the franchise, the circulation of the information is largely done for free by fan websites which act as mediators. They are essential

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<sup>18</sup> Pokémon Uranium, which boasted over a million downloads, may be the most famous recent example. <https://www.polygon.com/2016/9/21/13007798/pokemon-uranium-shutdown-downloads-development-canceled>

<sup>19</sup> According to SimilarWeb (<https://www.similarweb.com>). The 1.5 million number for the official website was obtained by applying the percentage of visits from France to the total.

<sup>20</sup> The article about the rumours on the Pokémon Trash website names and thanks Pokékalos for finding and sharing the information. <https://www.pokemontrash.com/news/rumeurs-annonce-plus-coquiperl-go>

<sup>21</sup> Nintendo broadcasts live streams called "Nintendo Direct" on streaming platforms such as YouTube and Twitch to reveal and discuss trailers, expose their marketing strategies, or simply communicate with their fanbase. *Pokémon* now has its own live streams called "Pokémon Direct".

actors of the affective economics (Jenkins, 2006) of *Pokémon* in that they provide information about the franchise not only as fans, but also as fan communities. For instance, Pokémon Trash is known for its humorous editorial line which heavily draws on subcultural elements of internet and gaming communities, such as internet memes<sup>22</sup>, which act as important shared references for online groups (Miltner, 2014) and constitute repertoires of practices (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003), in that they become important aspects of participation in fan communities.

Indeed, not only are memes used in Pokémon Trash articles, but sharing memes is also one of the main activities in some Facebook fan groups and Discord servers. Pokémon Trash runs a Facebook Fan Page which advertises some of the website's content and shares some funny posts. A private group called Pokémon Trash Talk is associated to this Fan Page. While Discord servers are scattered online spaces, which are subject to very complex patterns of use, maybe in part because Discord written communication is done only through instant messages, Facebook group patterns of use are a little easier to characterize. Usually, people post and comment on "*Pokémon* memes". For a meme to qualify as a *Pokémon* meme and thus be relevant in a *Pokémon* fan group, it must at least feature a *Pokémon* in the image or be about *Pokémon*. Some memes use images from *Pokémon*, such as the "surprised Pikachu" meme which got famous online even outside of the *Pokémon* fandom<sup>23</sup>. "Surprised Pikachu" was originally a zoomed image of Pikachu from the *anime*, in which he had his mouth wide open and looked shocked. A lot of "surprised Pikachu" memes posted in *Pokémon* fan groups were not really about *Pokémon*, such as one which was painted on a car hood, with the caption "\*Engine blows up\*", surprised Pikachu thus representing the reaction of the car owner. Relevant *Pokémon* memes can also be more standard memes which do not draw on *Pokémon* content if the meaning of the meme has something to do with *Pokémon*. In such a context, fan groups largely function under an emotional regime (Reddy, 2001) of *fun*, that is, the activity of the group is largely driven by the production and the circulation of content with the purpose of producing a playful atmosphere.

As such, fans do not just circulate *Pokémon* content with some minor added value; they are, at a collective level, very active producers of *Pokémon* content. This fact is most obvious during periods in which new *Pokémon* content is revealed or commercialized, which

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<sup>22</sup> Internet memes can be defined as "groups of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users" (Shifman, 2014, p. 41). The most common examples of memes rely on images called "templates", usually viral pictures, often took from popular culture media products, which are either posted in a fitting context or captioned in a slightly different way from the original.

<sup>23</sup> Knowyourmeme page of "surprised Pikachu": <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/surprised-pikachu>

triggers an emotional regime of *collective effervescence*, marked by an expression of *hype*<sup>24</sup>, but also disappointment and even anger<sup>25</sup>. This emotional regime, alongside the regime of *fun*, is dominant in the live chats of live stream announcements on platforms such as YouTube and Twitch.tv, as well as in the comment section of YouTube trailers, for instance. Fan Discord servers and Facebook groups are also affected. In Facebook groups, the daily activity rises in the days subsequent to announcements and leaks<sup>26</sup>. Fan artists are also very active right after trailers and announcements. For instance, as soon as a new pokémon is revealed, many works of fan art are produced and circulated, and such fan art even seems to participate in feeding the *hype*. Wooloo, a basic and cute sheep-like pokémon, which is the equivalent of usually bland, early-game pokémons, received an enthusiastic response and inspired fan artists a lot. The female playable character, with its Scottish look, also inspired fan artists, who drew on clichés about the Scottish such as their accent and their alleged love of alcohol, which guides much of the production of fan art of this character.

While *Pokémon* is a copyrighted culture and The Pokémon Company sometimes has a conservative stance concerning copyrights, nonetheless fans and fan communities participate actively in the production and circulation of *Pokémon* content online. Not only they do engage with resources provided by The Pokémon Company, but the fan communities have also built social infrastructures which in turn provide relevant resources for participation, such as repertoires of practices and online spaces for learning and mobilizing those repertoires, among other resources. In that sense, fans play an important part in the construction of an online ecosystem which favors the development of a participatory culture.

### **Barriers to children's participation.**

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<sup>24</sup> I use the term *hype* in the way fans do, to refer to the strong, collective feeling of anticipation and impatience. French fans also use the English word *hype*.

<sup>25</sup> See the #Dexit and #BringBackNationalDex on Twitter for examples of strong, collective fan “voice” mobilization. These hashtags followed the announcement that not all former pokémons would be included in the next games.

<sup>26</sup> Sometimes, information which TPC does not want to give away is leaked. The most recent, massive leak, happened in November 2019. The entirety of the pokémons to be available in *Pokémon Sun & Moon*, including the new ones which had not yet been revealed in official trailers, were leaked.

“So, everyone’s 30 years old, you follow *Pokémon* like kids, the group’s called trash talk, but we can’t trash talk? It seems like we’ve got the elite over here”<sup>27</sup>

“A game for crybabies who are going to have great fun grooming their pokémons, giving them hugs, and throwing a plastic pokéball at the TV screen, because It’S So CoOl”<sup>28</sup>.

And on the other hand, we cut off battles with wild pokémons from the game and to make things worse we add some of this *Pokémon GO* shit.

Can’t wait for the next RPGs, hoping they’ll think about their very first players”.<sup>29</sup>

These two instances of online posts by fans capture the tensions that pervade the *Pokémon* audience and fandom in relation to age. As the first one suggests, albeit exaggeratedly, the majority of the active members of the group are adult. On November 15, 2019, a member of the fan group Pokémon Trash Talk posted a survey asking for the age of other members. People voted in categories including 10-14, 14-18, 18-20, 20-25, 20-30 and 30+, alongside many less serious choices added by other members such as “age is just a number”. While this is obviously not a rigorous survey, it can be used to determine broad tendencies. The highest age category was 20-25, with 232 answers, followed by 18-20 with 124 answers, 25-30 with 87 answers and 14-18 with 45 answers, while 10-14 only had one, although an earlier survey in September 2017 had 10 self-declared members aged 13 or less, all of whom did not seem to be lying according to their Facebook profile. These surveys suggest that the majority of the active members of the Facebook group are over 18 years old. Although this may not be the case of the *Pokémon* online audience in its entirety, Pokémon Trash Talk is arguably the biggest French *Pokémon* fan community, and the most visible. The second quote is a YouTube comment which aggressively exposes a stance which is held and expressed in hundreds of other comments on the official French-speaking YouTube channel. Online debates and discussing in *Pokémon* spaces can be perceived as so toxic that some

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<sup>27</sup> Facebook publication done by a member of the Pokémon Trash Talk group. He was banned or left the game thereafter.

<sup>28</sup> I write in such a way to highlight the fact that the original French comment writes this phrase with a very bad spelling in order to make it look stupid and signify sarcasm. Another way people do so in the internet, which is much easier to translate, is by alternating upper and lower cases, usually in reference to the Mocking SpongeBob meme: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1267323-mocking-spongebob>

<sup>29</sup> Comment on the first trailer for Pokémon Let’s GO Pikachu/Eevee on the official French-speaking Pokémon YouTube channel. Link to the video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8b-FZT9O6C4&list=PLVXmcWvDTic9Rq6I1oSu3PX2lLwiE4sb\\_](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8b-FZT9O6C4&list=PLVXmcWvDTic9Rq6I1oSu3PX2lLwiE4sb_)

interviewees have reported that they avoid participating openly due to this. Hamza<sup>30</sup> reports that “sometimes [he] refused to ask questions or share stuff on the website because [he] was afraid too many people would be mean to [him] or make fun of [him]”. He later sent me a screenshot of a segment of the comment section of a post on the Pokémon Trash Talk group, in which someone asked what the use of a particular *Pokémon* move was. The first person who answered assumed he was asking about the effect of the move, and answered, in what was interpreted as an aggressive way, that one can use Google to find answers to such questions, before explaining the effect<sup>31</sup>. Hamza highlighted that “he’s the kind of person because of whom [he doesn’t] want to post stuff”. If adults are deterred from participating due to a “toxic atmosphere”, it is likely that some children would be too, especially when many fans claim that children are responsible for what they consider a decline in quality of *Pokémon* video games, which feeds mechanisms of exclusion analogous to some of the mechanisms which exclude women from online gaming spaces (Fox & Tang, 2017; Gray, 2012; Gray et al., 2017). Still, one must be wary of immediately drawing a parallel between these two forms of domination, as these claims require further inquiry.

The potential exclusion of children from online fan spaces and communities does not only arise from explicit exclusionary mechanisms such as an open hostility toward childhood. After all, the publication present in the first quote in this section was followed by several opposing comments. Members of Pokémon Trash Talk reminded the person who posted it that this was not a group for “trash talking”, a discussion group of the Pokémon Trash community, hence the name. At the time, a member also noted that “there are also children in this group (some comments are made by 12 years old)”. All the more, participation requires the acquisition of *repertoires of practices* (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) which are associated with specific subcultures. It is unlikely that younger adolescents and children understand most of the pop culture references which internet memes draw on or more subtle forms of humor which memes can convey, which require specific, new literacies (Procházka, 2014) to be fully grasped. Indeed, a lot of memes are references to typically adult worlds, such as workplace culture, drug, sex, and politics.

Not only do children and younger adolescents lack specific kinds of literacy, they also do not necessarily share the same interests and the same culture as older adolescents and

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<sup>30</sup> 26, M.

<sup>31</sup> In the main series of *Pokémon* video games, pokémons learn moves (4 at a time at most) which they can use in turn-based battles. Some of these moves are not very useful during usual solo play but can be strategically useful in player-versus-player, and their usefulness isn’t always obvious.

adults. Even though the “cult of cool” has weakened age barriers in the domain of leisure (Cross, 2010), differences still subsist between the leisure worlds of children and adults, starting with some shared popular culture references which may be largely restricted to a generation or the other. Alban<sup>32</sup> had “acquired a writing ‘style’ (nothing exceptional but, as a result, nobody knew about my exact age until the first IRL gathering)”. He had therefore developed skills which allowed him to be a news writer for the Pokémon Trash website when he was in junior high school, which means he had a status, and was recognized by the community. Yet, even though he did not always get talked down due to his age, “[he] felt little connection with their humor, their interests”. Being an important member of the community was important for him as he was in a “violent school” and a difficult overall social context, he wrote during the interview. His status in the community allowed him to feel cool and important. In another context, the lack of connection with his older peers’ culture would likely have been a barrier to his participation.

### ***Pokémon is adult business***

In the recent years, The Pokémon Company has put more efforts into their online presence. While their games still seem to be targeted at children, their online activity, paradoxically, seems to be turned towards their older fans. This results in tensions with regards to the reception of the online communication surrounding *Pokémon* video games.

One of the core reasons for lasting attachment of fans to the franchise is believed to be nostalgia (Carter, 2014; Keogh, 2017; Yang & Liu, 2017), as suggested by the success of *Pokémon GO* among adults. Nostalgia acts as a sort of disposition ready to be re-ignited on certain conditions. It is an emotion that has long been strongly commodified (Cross, 2017), and *Pokémon* plays heavily on it. A year after the creation of the official *Pokémon* YouTube channel, before announcing the *Pokémon Sun & Moon* games, the official channel posted a series of short videos called *Pokémon Generations* which acted as a tribute to the history of *Pokémon* generations. Among the trailers for *Pokémon Let’s GO Pikachu & Eevee*, several videos were clearly made to appeal to nostalgia. One of the trailers shows Lavender Town, an iconic town of the first games famous for its creepy atmosphere, which inspired a famous creepypasta (creepy urban legend) about Japanese kids who allegedly committed suicide

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<sup>32</sup> 26, M.

because of the music<sup>33</sup>. Pikachu is present in most games, and every generation has its “Pikachu-like” (Figure 2) new pokémon, except for the second generation which brought Pikachu’s baby counterpart, Pichu, which evolves into Pikachu. This can be understood not only as a tribute to the franchise mascot, but also as a tribute to the first generation. To a lesser extent, Charizard, another first-generation pokémon and one of the most iconic of the franchise, also had special treatment. It had several special forms, such as two Mega-Evolutions, when not every pokémon had one and none other than it had two, and it also got a Gigamax form (Figure 3). In the trailer which revealed its Gigamax form, four others are revealed, and they are also from first generation, iconic pokémons. Not surprisingly, Pikachu is one of them, and its Gigamax form is made fat, which is understood by fans as a reference to the fat design of Pikachu in the first-generation games. Eevee, which was featured as one of the two main pokémons of the *Pokémon Let’s GO* games, Meowth, which is famous for being a main antagonist of the animated series, and Butterfree, an important pokémon of the main protagonist in the first season of the *anime*, were also revealed to have a Gigamax form. Butterfree is famous for the emotional scene where he was released by Ash, the main protagonist, so that he could live with his romantic partner. This scene has become a meme which made fans cry, and still does.



<sup>33</sup> “Lavender Town”, Know Your Meme. 2011. <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/lavender-town-syndrome-creepypasta>

Figure 2. Pikachu and the “Pikachu-likes”, as well as his two evolution forms and his baby form.

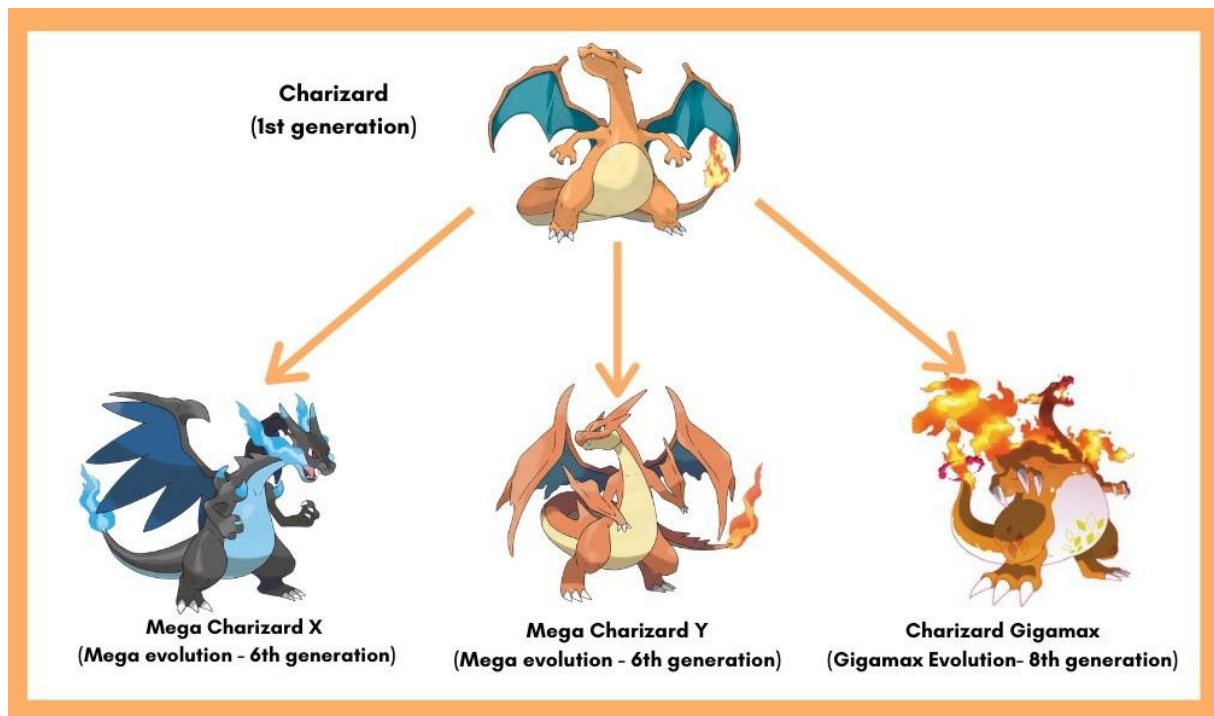


Figure 3. Charizard and his Mega-Evolutions and Gigamax form.

More subtly, fans also noted that the fifth generation of games, *Pokémon Black/White* was largely inspired by the first generation<sup>34</sup>.

TPC communication also strongly draws on aspects of online culture which are unlikely to appeal to younger fans. Junichi Masuda, composer, director and producer of *Pokémon*, has the habit of sharing subtle clues about upcoming content. While exploration and riddles are not specifically adult leisure activities, he shares those on Twitter, which is mainly a network for adults and, to a lesser extent, older adolescents.<sup>35</sup> For instance, in February 2019, Masuda shared a screenshot from *Pokémon GO* which showed a pokémon which had 226 candies<sup>36</sup>, without any context. Fans deduced that an announcement would happen on February 26, 2019 (2/26)<sup>37</sup>, and were right. Another most telling case of online

<sup>34</sup> An article from Smogon, a fan website which mainly focuses on competitive play. The article argues based on the many similarities between 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> generation games. <https://www.smogon.com/smog/issue14/firstvsfifth>

<sup>35</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, only 32% of U.S. teens say they use Twitter, while the numbers are 85% for YouTube and 51% for Facebook, for instance. All the more, only 3% say they use Twitter most often. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>

<sup>36</sup> In *Pokémon GO*, the player amasses candies as he captures pokémons. Candies are used to evolve and boost pokémons.

<sup>37</sup> An article from Pokémon Trash which relays the information: <https://www.pokemontrash.com/news/rumeurs-et-tumeurs>



communication directed towards adult fans may be the 24-hour live stream which took place on the October 4, 2019. For most part, it was just a still view of a mysterious forest where nothing happened on screen. In 24 hours, only a handful of previous-generation pokémons and one from the current one, which had already been revealed in a previous trailer, appeared. The only novelty was the revealing of Galar Ponyta, the Galar form of a first-generation pokémon<sup>38</sup>. Hence only one new pokémon was revealed in a 24-hour stream. Fans, and especially fan websites which had to gather and share the information, followed the entire stream. This sort of commitment is unlikely to happen with children and younger adolescents, due to them not being able to do this, but it is also highly unlikely that they find enjoyment in doing so, not that adults seemed to enjoy it all that much.

Many adult fans believe that TPC does not really care about them when designing its video games, and still targets children. An employee of Asmodée, the French company in charge of the distribution of *Pokémon* cards, informally confirmed that TPC does not focus all that much on satisfying its adult fanbase. This may however be partly untrue, in that, although they do not seem to design their video games mainly for that part of their fanbase, they still provide resources which seem to be specifically targeted at them. In-game “Easter eggs” are common. For instance, in *Pokémon Sun* and *Pokémon Moon*, which were released in 2016, a feature allows players to take in-game pictures of wild pokémons and receive comments from fictional social network commenters. Sometimes one can get the comment “7.8/10 Too much water ͇͇('-- ')͇͇”, which is a reference to a popular IGN Entertainment Inc. review which became a famous internet meme<sup>39</sup>. More generally, the media mix strategy has long allowed *Pokémon* to broaden its audience’s age range. For instance, the *Pokémon Adventure* manga is considered to target an audience older than that of the *anime*, for instance. It tackles more serious and political subjects, has humans targeted and hurt near death in pokémon battles, and some pokémons die gruesome deaths, such as an Arbok, a snake pokémon, which gets cut in pieces and lies in its blood. Another one, the last one before the release of the games, revealed that the game featured famous human characters from the first generation of games and manga.

### **Conclusion : Children participation in the adult fandom of *Pokémon*.**

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<sup>38</sup> An article from Pokémon Trash was written live by members of the writing team:  
<https://www.pokemontrash.com/news/les-24h-du-pokmans>

<sup>39</sup> An IGN article which lists *Pokémon Sun & Moon* Easter eggs, including the one about the IGN review:  
[https://www.ign.com/wikis/pokemon-sun-pokemon-moon/Easter\\_Eggs\\_and\\_References#Other\\_References](https://www.ign.com/wikis/pokemon-sun-pokemon-moon/Easter_Eggs_and_References#Other_References)

Throughout this chapter, I have made the case that, by circulating and transforming resources provided by TPC, *Pokémon* fans and fan communities are essential actors of the enrichment of the “Poke-world” (Sefton-Green, 2004), by taking part in cooperation networks similar to those observed in “art worlds” (Becker, 1982). In this “Poke-world”, fans engage in a “designed exploration”, induced by *Pokémon* game design and its media mix nature, and framed by the online ecosystem of resources for participation which results from the combination of industrial production and fans’ “digital labor” (Scholz, 2013). Among such resources are the vast and varied information fans have collectively gathered and shared in online databases and websites, as well as the many fan productions such as fan art and fan-made video games. These resources act as a support both for the initial gaming experience, with walkthroughs and guides, and for the enrichment of gaming possibilities.

Alongside informational resources are social resources, such as fan communities, which allow fans to build their identity as a fan by participating in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in varying degrees, by writing news, sharing information, or simply publishing internet memes and participating in debates. This makes *Pokémon*, an initially single-player game for the most part, into a collective experience. Active, public participation, however, is limited by dynamics of exclusion. The perceived toxicity of some internet spaces can be a deterrent for some fans, and the hostile discourse toward children makes the internet of *Pokémon* a space which paradoxically may not be completely fit for children’s participation.

Since this chapter draws mostly on qualitative data, and quantitative data in online participation is very difficult to grasp, especially regarding children, as well as being scarce and of limited quality, I cannot say with certainty that children are deterred from participating online due to all of this. Indeed, they are likely to be in lower numbers in the first place in the online spaces I observe. They may also participate in online *Pokémon* spaces which I have not explored yet. Still, since I investigated the spaces with highest visibility, their absence there is important to note. Furthermore, however great or small the effect is which the exclusionary dimension of the resources has on children’s participation, the internet of *Pokémon* still appears to be an age-segregated space built largely by adults, for adults.

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