

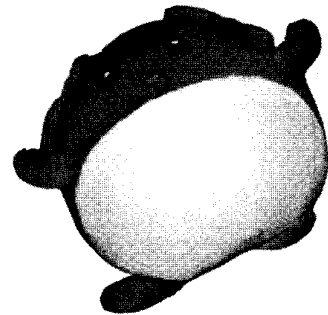
日本經濟經營研究所

CENTER
ON JAPANESE
ECONOMY
& BUSINESS



COLUMBIA
BUSINESS
SCHOOL

POKÉMANIA: SECRETS BEHIND THE INTERNATIONAL PHENOMENON



FEBRUARY 7, 2000

Pikachu, Bulbasaur, Meowth... Puzzled by Pokémon and the international buzz it has created?

On February 7, 2000, the Center on Japanese Economy and Business, the Donald Keene Center of Japanese

Culture, and the East Asian Institute of Columbia University, together with the support of the

Consulate General of Japan in New York, hosted a panel discussion featuring the

creators and packagers of Pokémon. The program included a multimedia

demonstration on the development and international marketing of the elec-

tronic games, trading cards, films, toys, videos, and myriad tie-ins that have

attracted children all over the world. ■ Featured speakers included Tsunekazu

Ishihara, President, Creatures, Inc., Masakazu Kubo, Executive Producer, Shogakkan

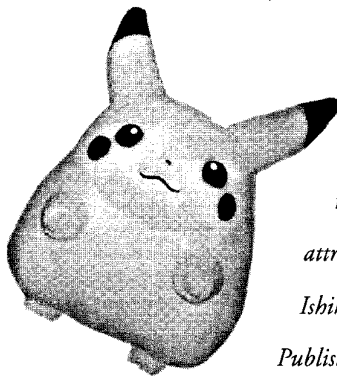
Publishing, and Takashi Kawaguchi, General Manager, Nintendo Co. Ltd. David

Weinstein, Shoup Professor of the Japanese Economy, Columbia University, served as

the moderator. ■ The speakers provided an insider's look at the challenges and strategies they encountered

while building Pokémon into a symbol of international pop culture and global commercial success. A sum-

mary of their presentations is presented below.



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✦ **THE DONALD KEENE CENTER OF JAPANESE CULTURE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY** **THE EAST ASIAN INSTITUTE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY** **THE CONSULATE GENERAL OF JAPAN IN NEW YORK**

Pokémon was first released in Japan on February 27, 1996, on Nintendo's handheld machine, Game Boy. Since then, 8.2 million copies have been sold in Japan, and another 8.6 million copies have been sold in the United States. This record does not include profits from special versions that were released experimentally.

The success of Pokémon is due in large part to its innovative and unique game system. Owing to recent technological development, many games are now equipped with superb audiovisual effects, but lack of inspiring contents. In contrast, although Game Boy's limited hardware environment has constrained Pokémon's visual and sound capacities, its game system is evidently superior to much of the available software. Therefore, Pokémon's success indicates that the purchase decisions of Japanese and American customers — children in particular — are contingent upon the game system, which is ultimately the essence of entertainment, rather than the supplementary audiovisual effects. In fact, the lack of hardware-generated artificial effects is considered to have stimulated the user's imagination and creativity. Currently, there are 151 species of Pokémon dispersed among three existing versions of the game: Pokémon Red, Pokémon Blue and Pokémon Yellow. One must trade between

versions to complete the collection of species. Thus, the quest for all Pokémon grows as the product line expands with new species. Pokémon Gold and Pokémon Silver will become available in the U.S. in 2001 with the release of an additional 109 species.

The distinctiveness of Pokémon's game system stems from its 'communication' factor. Pokémon utilizes a format called RPG, which allows for peer communication among children who wish to play or trade Pokémon characters on the communication cables. Therefore, Pokémon can provide infinite entertainment, unlike the traditional venues, such as movies or cartoon readings in which the pleasure ultimately ends at the closing of the shows. For example, Pokémon players can extend the game spheres from the original Game Boy program into new games by searching for unknown or advanced versions of Pokémon characters through communication cables and/or trading cards.

With regard to card trading, a buyer of multiple cards can edit the contents and create his/her original decks. Therefore, unlike the traditional card-trading game in which the ultimate goal is to complete the collection, Pokémon encourages its users to trade cards in order to change the values of their possessions and renew the games. In sum, the Pokémon card game is a communication

tool, not an end. Pokémon is a medium that facilitates communication among the users, and this increases its entertainment values.

In addition, Pokémon allows cross-sectional marketing by fully exploring different venues of entertainment. For example, Pokémon cards are included in some cartoon comic books to enhance Pokémon's visibility and reach out to comic book readers. Further, the Game Boy version of the program can be converted to Nintendo 64 in which the user can play the game in a high-level 3D environment.

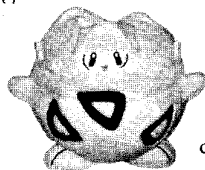
In Japan, Pokémon's release was staged incrementally. Given the generally short life span of most game software (70–80 percent of the profit is generated during the initial few months), this continued success, currently in its fourth year, is unprecedented.

Two reasons account for the success; first, the existence of the 151st Pokémon, *Mew*, and, second, the role of Japan's largest cartoon journal "Korokoro Comic." In spring 1996, the creator of Pokémon, Satoshi Tajiri, used this comic book series as a vehicle to conduct an experimental exhibit of Pokémon *Mew* and to distribute the first trading cards as giveaways. Subsequently, this marketing device received an enormous response. Tajiri fanned the growing excitement by designing a secret twist to the programming. Officially, there



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were only 150 Pokémon species. Unknown to Nintendo, Tajiri added the 151st in the software: *Mew*, a major character of the film. Rumors of a secret monster that only a few people had the key to unlock circulated and more games were sold.

The launching of Pokémon's TV program in April 1997 expanded the market opportunities drastically. The sales of Pokémon games increased from 200,000 in March 1997 to 500,000 in April, to 1.3 million in the second quarter, and to 4.7 million by the end of 1997. There are no other software games which exhibited such an extraordinary increase in sales. Further, the ratings for the first broadcast of the TV program broke a new record at 10.2 percent, and continued to climb to over 18 percent.

In 1998, the animation

movie *Pokémon the First Movie* was released. The box office sales generated placed the movie seventh in Japanese movie history. In November 1999, two additional versions of the video game were released from Nintendo in Japan, and sold 200,000 by the end of the year. By March 2000, it is projected 400,000 will be sold. The two versions will become available in the United States in fall 2000.

Based on its experience of incremental development, the promoters of Pokémon were able to develop an effective, integrated strategy for the structure and sequencing of Pokémon products in the American market.

In the United States, Pokémon was first released in fall 1997 as a TV program, followed by the launching of the TV game, trading cards, and the movie, all of which are mutually

interactive. In order to adapt to the American market, approximately 150 Pokémon characters were renamed to reflect the cultural preferences. For example, Satoshi became Ash and Shigeru became Gary.

Currently, there are more than 500 names worldwide for the 150 characters, thereby localizing Pokémon characters in accordance to diverse linguistic and cultural traditions. As a result, *Pokémon the First Movie* was ranked top in Brazil and Bolivia in 1999, and was recently launched in Europe, which is doing very well.

Pokémon has offered a comprehensive entertainment package, which includes the elements of illustration, game program, sound effects, digital visual effects, and card trading. The harmony between all of these elements is the key to Pokémon's success. ☞



Masakazu Kubo, Tsunekazu Ishihara, and Takashi Kawaguchi

「ポケモン参上! : ポケモンはいかに成功したのか」

コンロンドリア大学とニューヨーク・日本総領事館の共催で、2000年2月7日にポケモンの開発及びマーケティングに携わった、石原恒和氏 (Creatures Inc. 社長)、川口孝司氏 (任天堂宣伝部長)、久保雅一氏 (小学館出版エグゼクティブ・プロデューサー) の3氏による特別講演が実施された。以下は、講演内容を簡単にまとめたものである。

ポケモンは1996年2月27日に任天堂ゲームボーイ用ソフトとして日本で発売されて以来、日本で820万本、アメリカで860万本という記録的な売上を達成してきました。ゲームボーイ上での限られた音声画像の提供であるにもかかわらず、ポケモンが成功した理由は、ユニークで画期的なゲーム・システムにあります。日米の子供たちは、画像や音声などの特殊効果よりむしろ、より本質的なそのゲーム・システムの魅力に惹かれ、ポケモンを選びます。

ポケモンの独特なシステムとして、その「コミュニケーション効果」を指摘する必要があります。つまり、子供たちは通信ケーブルを介してポケモンで遊ぶことができます。言い換えれば、ポケモンは、映画や漫画のように、その購入したものの自体を遊び尽くしてしまえば終わる「閉じた商品」ではありません。ポケモンでは、ゲームボーイで遊び終わった後でも、通信ケーブルやカード交換を通じて新しいポケモンを探し続けることができます。収集が目的の一般のカードとは違い、ポケモンではカードを交換し、カードを集め編集すること等により、さらにゲームを続けることができます。その意味で、ポケモンによる遊びは無限に続けることが可能です。また、ポケモンは、漫画本にカードを付録として足したり、ゲームボーイから任天堂64への切り替えを可能にしたり、と様々なメディアとの連携が可能です。

日本ではポケモンの発売はまず漫画誌ではじまり、そして1997年4月にTV放映がはじまってから爆発的に人気が出ました。1997年3月の売上が20万部だったのに対して、1997年末には450万部の売上を記録しました。1998年には映画が公開され、日本の映画史上7番目の売上を達成しました。

アメリカでは1997年秋にまずTV、その後、TVゲーム、カード、映画、という順番で人気を博してきました。アメリカの文化に合わせキャラクターの名前を変える等、マーケティング上の戦略も成功の要因となっています。ポケモン映画はブラジル、ポリビアでも1998年には第1位の興行成績を残しています。ポケモンとは、一言でいうと、イラスト、ゲーム、音声、画像、カードなどのあらゆる要素がひとつに溶け込んだエンターテインメント・パッケージと言えるでしょう。これが成功のカギだったと考えられます。

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