

Pokemania

When Pokemon came to the USA 25 years ago, it was an instant success, thanks in part to the immense popularity of the anime tv series. So with the adaptation of the Pokemon anime, what did America do right and what did they do wrong?

Now, I don't need to explain Pokemon to you, you already know what Pokemon are, you wouldn't have clicked this video if you didn't know Pokemon. But the reason you know Pokemon is probably down to how America changed it. The franchise started in Japan by Satoshi Tajiri and Game Freak with the Game Boy games in 1996 and then the anime made by OLM launching the following year. And to be clear, this video is focusing on the anime, not so much the games, but obviously you couldn't have the show without the games so: Nintendo Of America saw the obvious potential for Pocket Monsters to come to the West and as they began their work on the games, the rights of the anime were scooped up by licensing company 4Kids

This was definitely a gamble, the games had not tested well with American kids [1] and, well the Pokemon were cute but they weren't, you know, cool. American kids liked action heroes like the Ninja Turtles, X-Men, Batman, Street Sharks, Biker Mice From Mars - big muscles, lots of attitude. Cool. There were attempts by Nintendo Of America to redesign the Pokemon to be cooler, including Pikachu:

"As expected, when I first showed Pokemon over there, people said, "Too cute." At that time, there was a character idea that the American staff came up with, and it was an illustration that I would never be able to show to anyone for the rest of my life, but if it was Pikachu, it would be something like "Cats" by Shiki Theater Company. She's shaped like a tabby cat, but she's changed into a character with big breasts. When I said, "What? What's Pikachu about this!?", they were like, "No, this is where the tail is sticking up!"

[2] Let me take a Peek-At-Chu! But because by that point the anime was already being made, the designs had to stay as is, which is why I think this advert exists. [3] Yeah, Pokemon isn't edgy, like at all, but you gotta make this cute thing look cool to the kids of the 90s so into the car crusher with you. Nothing captures the spirit of Pokemon more than killer bus drivers. The American way of coolness was also reflected in the pop-culture inspired names like Hitmonlee and Hitmonchan being named after Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. This was to alter the Japanese names into something easier for English speakers to say, but this also had its oddities.

[1 [Pokémon Patriarch \(Business Week Online - 2000\)](#)

Extract: "Research showed that American kids hated it".]

[2 [Ishihara Interview \(Nintendo JP\)](#)]

[3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GF-Bc3XBC3c>]

For example take Mr Mime. which according to Bulbapedia, "*the name may be derived from the abbreviation of Mister and mime*". [1] We're learning today. So these weird little guys use mime to make invisible barriers, so Mr Mime makes sense, but since in subsequent versions of the games, you could get female Mr Mime's, Japanese developers weren't always happy with these changes. Nintendo Of America was given total freedom to change whatever names they needed to to make this work, apart from the franchise mascot, Pikachu, to maintain that international branding. And 4Kids were also allowed and actively encouraged to Americanise the anime.

[1 [Mr. Mime \(Bulbapedia\)](#)]

Before Pokemon, there were successful shows imported from Japan like Astro Boy and Speed Racer in the 60s, and they definitely had their audience, but Dragon Ball and in particular Sailor Moon, which was expected to be way more popular, landed with a thud. Japanese animation never really blew up in the mainstream and networks had no confidence that Pokemon was going to be any different. There was also a well known urban legend that surrounded the anime, giving it and the franchise a degree of infamy.

You see, in 1997, the episode *Dennō Senshi Porygon* (Computer Warrior Porygon / Electric Soldier Porygon) aired for the first and only time. In the episode, Ash and the gang enter a computer system and are attacked by antivirus missiles. Pikachu uses a thunder shock to stop it - and this is where everything goes wrong. What happens next is a strobe effect that goes white, red, white, red, black and then alternates red and blue on every frame in a sequence that lasts about 4 seconds. Reports at the time suggested that this caused dizziness, blurred vision, and nausea in hundreds of children. Even as someone without epilepsy, this sequence is still really hard to watch. News of this quickly spread across Japan and the world. The numbers kept climbing. 10,000, 12,000. Several news broadcasts in Japan included a clip from the episode, which caused even more seizures. No one died, but this was a major incident and was nicknamed "The Pokemon Shock".

Pokemon was close to being cancelled before it had even gotten started, so it went on a brief hiatus for several months, which messed with the order of events in the show such as a Christmas episode bumped to the following October, while investigations took place. But after its original Japanese airing, this episode has never been repeated ever again, it was never released commercially and it was never sent to America for dubbing hence why Porygon only appears as a still image in the Pokérap. Porygon's appearances in the anime have been reduced to rare cameos at most, never having a major role in any episode or movie ever again, including its evolutions who have never appeared in animated form other than this brief appearance. [1] The Porygon has taken to fall, mostly like to avoid reminding anyone of this controversy. Which is unfair since it was Pikachu that caused the explosion, not Porygon. The official Pokemon Twitter account even joked "Porygon did nothing wrong." Before they deleted it.

[1 Pokémon the Movie Kyurem VS. The Sword of Justice]

But was the episode really that impactful? Sure, the episode was watched by about 5 million people but did it really affect 12,000 of them? Animation producers were pretty stumped by all this because this wasn't the first time an anime has used this kind of strobe. The strobe effect is called Paka-Paka, an anime technique to create tension, and has been used hundreds of times. It happens in Astro Boy, Sailor Moon and Dragon Ball Z.

YAT Anshin! had a scene with strobing in the same year as the Porygon episode, and also led to children being hospitalised, albeit four of them, far fewer than Pokemon caused. So what happened here?

Benjamin Radford, a sceptic investigator, thought that 12,000 sounded impossibly high. Were Japanese children more unusually susceptible to photosensitivity? Surely not. About 1 in 100 people have epilepsy and only 3 percent of those individuals have photosensitive epilepsy. Where did all these other kids come from? In 2001, Radford shared the results of his own investigation. While he confirmed around 600 cases that genuinely did have

headaches, convulsions and breathing problems caused by the show, he theorises that the rest were caused by mass hysteria. Now, mass hysteria sounds like people panicking in the streets, but what it actually means is people started getting symptoms after being told what the symptoms were. It's like if I were to tell you I have a headache, you might go "huh, I'm starting to get a headache too..." It's like that, but on a much larger scale. The more the cases were discussed in school playgrounds and on the news, the more cases emerged, well after the show had aired. This doesn't mean people were making it up or it was all imaginary, the symptoms were real. But it wasn't caused by the show, it was caused by other people's symptoms.

But despite all this, including Japanese broadcasters agreeing to new guidelines regarding flashing images,[1] the damage was done. 4Kids did a lot of work to remove any kind of flashing images but even during the build-up to the show's American premiere, it was being called "The Convulsion Cartoon". It led to parodies in The Simpsons and South Park. But as far as president of 4Kids Productions, Norman Grossfeld was concerned, any publicity is good publicity:

"But we thought ok, you know what, this could be disastrous, or, it could just- the story is "look how popular this is that this had this event" but any any kind of publicity like that was good news"

<https://www.4kidsflashback.com/episodes/4kids-normans-land>

So it already had a notorious reputation upon its arrival.

American networks weren't interested so 4Kids offered the show for free in exchange for advertising revenue. With the swaying power of Nintendo Of America, Pokemon was finally on US TV on September 7th 1998, but parked into really bad time slots, outside of the prime time block, [2] something that a lot of anime was relegated to at the time. But then, something strange happened. Kids were waking up early to watch this show. Soon Pokemon, outside of a prime time slot, was beating shows IN the prime time slot.

Pokemia had arrived, thanks to the three-prong assault of the games, the cards and the tv show. As this headline says, "Pokemon penetration imminent". [1] Don't, don't call it that. It was the 5th most searched term in April 1999. Just don't ask me what was number 1. Or number 6. Or number 8. Or number 10. But anyway, Pokemon!

Kids loved it, adults were mostly confused and the media did not know how to react to this.

[1 <https://kidscreen.com/1999/01/01/24089-19990101/>]

Pokemon was regularly described as an invasion, part of a seemingly everlasting trend of Japanese fads being brought to America in the 90s, like the Tamagotchi and the Power Rangers. So I think this framing of a foreign invader, especially one that targeted children, led to some hostility.

The emphasis on Pokemon battles in its marketing, again to make it look cool, had some worried about teaching kids violence, although most parents were completely fine with it. In fairness, the US was still reeling from the Columbine School Shooting that had happened that same year, which had sparked a lot of debate about the effects of violence in mass media, which at the time pointed the finger at things like goth culture and Marilyn Manson. So it's not surprising that the "fighting animal show who what fight each other" was met with scrutiny.

It ruffled the feathers of some religious groups. In some cases because Pokemon evolve. If Mankeys evolves into Primeapes, then why do we still have Mankeys! But there were also fears that particularly the ghost and psychic type Pokemon were teaching kids about the occult. You know that meme of that guy that says:

"Why? Why? Why? Whyyy?"

Yeah, he's talking about Pokemon.

"So Pokemon is a game that teaches children how to enter the world of witchcraft"

A children's pastor burnt Pokemon cards with a blowtorch, used a sword to cut up a Pokemon toy and got his own 9-year old son to rip the head off his own Pokemon doll, all while the children chanted "Burn it! Burn it! Chop it up! Chop it up!".

This didn't actually go down very well, some parents even removing their kids from the church. These are just some of the very few noisy examples, most religious groups didn't really care, some were a little cautious in the same way any trend could be a distraction, some even saw some Christian values in it, like Ash's self sacrifice, that's a bit like Jesus, right? But mostly people either found this harsh anti-Pokemon rhetoric either very boring or very silly.

So there wasn't actually all that much protest to Pokemon, at least with the show and the games. The things that were a lot more contentious were the trading cards. I want to keep this video on topic about the tv show specifically, but let's cover this quickly.

The Trading Cards, published in the US by Wizards of the Coast, were a cornerstone of the craze that had kids hungry to get them all. Doubly so because the appeal of Pokemon wasn't pigeonholed being a boy or girl thing. Stocks struggled to match demand, increasing their rarity and value. Many schools had to ban them altogether. Many parents took issue with the randomness of the card packets, and the seemingly artificial value placed on one particular card over another, made it a form of gambling for kids. Honestly, if I made this video about just the Pokemon cards, it would be twice as long. For example, there's this story of a 9 year old boy who hid inside a store after closing so he could steal Pokemon cards, but forgot that when stores close they, you know, close. So he got trapped inside until the police showed up. Amazing.

Another young boy found this card that came with this symbol of a swastika, and which naturally caused upset with Jewish families in America. But this isn't a Nazi swastika because for one it's backwards, in fact this symbol predates Nazi's but has nevertheless been appropriated by them and remains a stark reminder in the West. In Asian countries, it is a symbol of spirituality and good fortune and seen as distinct from the Nazi swastika. In Japan, this symbol is called the manji and is the symbol for Buddhist temples. Even though this Japanese language card was never meant to be in America, the card in question came from an imported stock, and plans were for the English version to alter this image, the Japanese version also had this symbol removed in all future versions.

A moment of Western culture clash and it wouldn't be the only one. Case in point: Jynx. So in December 1999, the US aired the episode Holiday Hi-Jynx. Here the Jynx are like Santa's helpers and she gets Ash and the gang help her rescue Santa from Team Rocket. This caught the eye of US critic, Carole Boston Weatherford, who published an article, describing Jynx as a racist stereotype:

“Jet-black skin, huge pink lips, gaping eyes, a straight blonde mane and a full figure, complete with cleavage and wiggly hips.”

“Jynx clearly denigrates African Americans, particularly black women.”

So what are we looking at here?

Blackface and Minstrel shows, where white actors would wear black face paint and perform as comical racial stereotypes of African Americans, were massively popular in America in the 1800s, and while that declined in the early 1900s, it influenced a lot of early Disney, like Mickey's white gloves. Following World War 2, Japan took a lot of influence from places to inform the modern anime style like early Disney, and in turn, a lot of the blackface elements too.

According to a Bulbagarden column by Xan Hutcheon:

“Post-war Japan took many cues from American media, and blackface was among them. As often happens when cultural concepts cross oceans, the original context has been lost. Japanese blackface, one could argue, doesn't carry the connotations that made the Western version so vile. And yet, at the same time, it does, at least to us. It's likely to make the average Western onlooker rather uncomfortable because of the genre's history... a history that would be largely unknown to a Japanese onlooker.”

As is the case with Mr Popo from Dragon Ball. While Western adaptations have made alterations, in the case of Jynx, following this backlash, the episode was pulled and has never been syndicated again. In other countries, the episode was re-released much later but now with Jynx's skin recoloured purple. Eventually the games would follow suit, so because of the repercussions of this episode, Jynx is officially purple.

It is possible Jynx was actually meant to be based on something else. Her outfit and hair resemble an opera singer, such as Brunnhilde. Some speculate she's based off a ganguro girl, a fashion trend in Japan involving bright hair and tanned skin, but the timings of when this became popular don't really line up with when Jynx was designed. She may be more appropriately based on Japanese folklore like Yama-uba or Yuki-onna, a witch-like snow or mountain spirit, and in fairness, there are other spirit Pokemon given a black colour. On the other hand, it could be based on Black Pete, a folklore character from The Netherlands, Luxembourg and Belgium, who works as a servant for St Nicholas, hence the episode's Christmas connection, and has its own fair share of blackface backlash.

Whatever the true reason behind her design is, really the finger of blame should point to Nintendo of America who should have spotted the potential problem with Jynx way way sooner. And it's not like 4Kids didn't make judgement calls of other episodes. Like an episode with a gun held up to Ash and the gang was sent over to the US but the network refused it, so outside of Japan it only exists in the Pokerep.

And 4Kids made plenty of changes, not just for censorship, but to make Pokemon as palatable to American kids as a jelly-filled donut. Yeah so the donut thing, this was all part of 4Kids undisguised attempt to minimise anything Japanese about Pokemon. As previously mentioned, there wasn't an anime that had really broken into the mainstream in the 90s and there were many hard lessons learnt by how Sailor Moon failed.

Sailor Moon, about a girl who discovers a magical broach that transforms her to hero to fight evil, came to the US in 1995 and was widely expected to be a smash hit. Like Pokemon, a lot was altered to be Americanised. Usagi became Serena, Satoshi became Ash. They'd flip

the shots of some vehicles so they would drive on the same side of the road as US cars. They added flashy CGI transitions and even the “moral message” at the end of every episode. But it performed so poorly the dubbed series was almost cancelled midway through season 2. So what did Pokemon learn from Sailor Moon?

For one, it invented a killer hook of a tagline.

“GOTTA CATCH ‘EM ALL! GOTTA CATCH ‘EM ALL!”

This was created by Norman Grossfeld from 4Kids but due to rules involving advertising to children, the phrase “Gotta Catch ‘Em All” could be construed to have the double meaning of “Gotta Buy ‘Em All”, like an explicit instruction, which is prohibited. But given that catching is a core mechanic of Pokemon, the tagline was permitted. And this catchy phrase proved to be a powerful rallying cry:

“It was always my intention to come up with a tagline for marketing purposes that would also be included in the theme song”

https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/pokemon-theme-catch-em-if-you-can_n_592f3495e4b0540ffc84324a

Ash’s surname was made to be Ketchum, to allude to “Catch ‘em all.” and the song became so synonymous to the Pokemon franchise, it became the official slogan.

But specifically with the adaptation of the source material there was the problem with Japanese text. Sailor Moon does mask over Japanese text with English in some cases, but Japanese text is still visible everywhere. And this constant reminder of its Japanese origins ostracised American audiences. One Pokemon executive producer said:

Japanese writing showing up on signboards in the background and uniquely Japanese family settings distract American kids, preventing them from really becoming absorbed in the movie’s fictional world. With these examples in mind, from the start we had our hearts set on thoroughly localizing Pokémon (in the English speaking market).

[The Many Faces of Internationalization in Japanese Anime by Amy Shirong Lu \(Northeastern Edu - 2008\)](#)

So the US adaptation stripped all Japanese text, in many ways it looks super janky, but Sailor Moon had shown it was better to look janky than leave the Japanese text in.

In fairness, Sailor Moon was at a disadvantage compared to Pokemon. Sailor Moon was not just being translated but also forced to be more kid friendly than its source material since it was going into a kids block. There was a lot of violence and suggested nudity that had to be cut down. It had also erased canonical queer couples, presumably to avoid outraged parents. In one instance changing the gender of one of the male characters to a female so they’d be a straight couple now, and in the other from girlfriends to cousins. While Pokemon had also faced censorship, it was at least always aimed for a younger demographic from the outset.

But the reason Pokemon succeeded at all in the West was due to the active and intentional erasure of its Japanese elements. And once you’ve done that, when you have removed and replaced all the original parts, is it even the same show anymore? A real ship-of-theseus type situation. A kid who grew up watching Pokemon in Japan would have had a different experience to a kid who grew up watching Pokemon in America. And it’s still mostly called “Pocket Monsters” in Japan. The Pokemon name is often integrated as well but ironically this name is a Western invention. Al Kahn, a licensing executive who saw the immediate potential for Pokemon to come to the West said:

"I didn't like the name 'Pocket Monsters. I wanted the name to be more Japanese-y."
[Meet the man who made Pokémon an international phenomenon \(Washington Post - 2016\)](#)

In their 1988 paper about the dominance of US television internationally, Colin Hoskins and Rolf Mirus spoke about a "Cultural Discount". When a product, such as a show, is exported to a foreign environment, the cultural appeal of the product is discounted for the benefit of foreign viewers. In the case of anime, this internationalisation has to remove those cultural barriers for mass consumption, like the removal of Japanese names and text, so that the wider Western audience would view anime as going alongside it's Western contemporaries and not alternative to. Obviously I'm talking about mainstream commercial success, there's plenty of anime adaptations that try to stay true to the source material, like a later redistribution of Sailor Moon that redid the previously dubbed seasons to stay faithful to the Japanese originals. But these have a more niche appeal, and Pokemon wanted to appeal to as many people as possible so they weren't protective about cultural elements they'd have to lose to do so.

This hits hard for me, because I too find myself having to accommodate my own content to reach wider audiences, I think a lot of YouTubers do. I am British (I'm sorry), and obviously I grew up watching a lot of British shows but there's little of this I could make videos about without it ostracising parts of my audience who never saw it because they're in different countries. Unless it's stuff that has already broken America, like Dr Who, Sherlock or Aardman, which I actually did. So I tend to lean my videos towards topics of broader international appeal, but given it dominates the industry with the big movies, the prestige tv shows, the legendary animated shows, when I say "international appeal" I really mean American. So in a way, I am culturally discounting myself.

YouGov found that a lot of countries feel that their own national culture is getting more and more influenced by America, especially with films, tv and music. For example. While it has roots in Scottish and Irish traditions, "Trick or Treating", as we know it, has been very much an American thing since the 1910's. It wasn't something the UK did at Halloween until the 1980s, because of British kids seeing American media, such as ET. Many British kids don't know the difference between the emergency phone numbers 999 and 911, to the point where dialling 911 will now just redirect to 999. While British schools had the school leavers party, like a school disco or summer ball, this is now largely replaced by the American style school prom, because of the importance it's given in American movies and TV shows.

To be clear, this isn't "old British man yells at American cloud", I love taking my son out every Halloween, and if anything, this is on British media who need to make greater efforts for more brilliant and original ideas like Ghosts and Taskmaster. But for a long time, America gets to call the culture shots, while international shows have to accommodate themselves for an American audience. This can be for logical reasons, such as pop culture references that wouldn't make sense to anyone outside the country, but it's not such a requirement for American media with an international audience, unless it's cutting any scenes of queer people. To be clear, I love American media too, this stuff is part of my childhood and my adulthood. Of course, there's been a greater push for more diversity, just look at the huge success of Squid Game and its clear message about predatory capitalism. And also look at how that message got lost in translation.

Pokemon was a sensation until around 2000. Obviously the franchise is alive and well but it had died down in the mainstream until the massively popular Pokemon Go in 2016. The phenomenal success of Pokemon anime led to an increased curiosity and acceptance of anime in the West. Cartoon Network used their Toonami block to air anime shows including Dragon Ball Z and Sailor Moon where they finally found their audience and remain popular to this day. After 25 years, Ash finally became a world champion Pokemon trainer and the anime now follows brand new trainers who have only just begun their journey.

But did Pokemon completely lose its Japanese voice in order to come to the West? Perhaps not entirely.

For one, there's debate if it really had a Japanese voice at all. Associate Professor Amy Shirong Lu suggests it was intentionally designed to be a more ambivalent fantasy world for internationalisation:

Although some dragon-like pokémons might remind the audiences of certain Western folklore creatures, they are portrayed as pokémons that do not belong to any specific culture. From the very beginning, Pokémon was intended in part for export.

[The Many Faces of Internationalization in Japanese Anime by Amy Shirong Lu \(Northeastern Edu - 2008\)](#)

After all, behind the cute faces, it's still a business.

However, in November 1999, New York Times journalist, Stephanie Strom, said:

The cartoon is steeped in traditional Japanese values -- responsibility, empathy, cooperation, obedience, respect for elders, humility -- that go far beyond its obvious references to things Japanese. It may sound like the makers of Pokemon cribbed those themes from Sesame Street, but there is something notably Japanese in the emphasis on team-building and lending a helping hand, values that are admired but not always handsomely rewarded in American society and culture.

[IDEAS & TRENDS: Japanese Family Values: I Choose You. Pikachu! \(NY Times - 1999\)](#)

So maybe there's more we can learn from each other. You teach me, and I'll teach you.