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## Consumption, Collection, Creativity: Micro-Local Practices within Children's Bedroom Play in Urban Vancouver

### Résumé

À la suite de l'importance grandissante (dans l'étude de l'enfance) des enfants en tant que consommateurs actifs et agents, cet article examine le jeu créatif avec des produits Pokémon dans une micro-ethnographie d'enfants dans leurs chambres. Je soutiens que les processus des enfants, celui de collectionner, celui de manipuler à travers le dessin et celui de jouer et de démontrer indiquent comment un produit global de grande consommation peut être utilisé en tant que forme de découverte de soi (privé) et comme partie intégrante de la création et du renforcement de la connaissance sociale du public.

### Abstract

Following the growing emphasis in childhood studies on children as active consumers and agents, this paper examines creative play with Pokémon products in a micro-ethnography of children in their bedrooms. I argue that children's processes of collection, manipulation through drawing, play, and display evidence how a mass-consumed, global product can be used both as a form of (private) self-discovery and as part of the creation and reinforcement of public social knowledge.

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The departure point for this paper is the concept that all objects encompass a biography (Kopytoff 1986) or a chain (Gereffi 1995; Leslie and Reimer 2003) of motion, in many cases from the global to the local (and, in fewer cases, back again). This movement suggests that contemporary life is awash in impersonal commodities, fetishized, and alienable (Leonard 2007). However, recent studies in material anthropology (Miller 1995; Herrmann 1997; Hetherington 2004; Gregson and Crewe 2003) have tried to investigate the less personal, less fetishized, and less alienable existence of these objects when they enter and are socialized into our home lives. Contemporary (often middle-class) discourses about child-rearing in contemporary North America express a sense of a loss of an authentic local(e) that stems from these global patterns of circulation. Deep suspicion accompanies the so-called "plastic

stuff from China," as one middle-class parent in my study group put it, and much work is done by these parents to try to interest their children in that hand-made toy that, as Seiter puts it, is "better to like" (1993: 8).

Despite limited access to economic capital of their own, children themselves are able to participate on the stage of global consumption, whether through trading toys and candy or through hearing about the latest television shows from their friends. Adults, in their consideration of children's popular culture from Japan, have argued that there must be something inherently "cool" about Japan (McGray 2002), that allows products from there to capture children's imaginations in a way that other toys do not. However, as I argue in this article, children's uninterest in the "authentic" qualities of a hand-made train set actually implies a far greater social interest in

consumption than an interest in the “cool” toys from distant lands. That is to say, children are more interested in what they can do with and get out of a toy socially speaking, than in where it came from.

For adults, this hearty interest in consumption is often met with a fear on two counts. First, that children’s innocence, their role as the Rousseauian naturals of society, is somehow corrupted by contact with the manufactured world of global capitalism. Second, that their youth implies a lack of discrimination, both in terms of the “tastes” (Bourdieu 1979) of what is good for them and a serious vulnerability to the “false needs” (Marcuse 2006 [1964]: 8; Nava 1991) of the world of advertising trying to “hook ‘em young” into a cycle of seemingly meaningless consumption.

The media debate surrounding the consumption of children’s toys related to television and their manipulation into creative play has much in common with the debate concerned with the influence of television on what children call “pretend” or imaginative, fantasy play. This similarity occurs because, some have argued, pre-set commercial products as setting-off points for play lead to impoverished creativity and less imagination in play (Kline 1993). This impoverishment can be demonstrated through the many examples of negative media cries about Pokémon cards and Beanie Baby collections; Cook illustrates his paper with phrases such as “cardboard crack (cocaine)” (2001: 84) and “unhealthy and addictive” (82). As they are of any addiction, adults are fearful of the consequences surrounding the repetitive nature of play. Mimesis is often seen as the only type of children’s play and is associated with primitivism and underdevelopment, as evidenced in the phrase “children are little monkeys.” However, Caillois (2001 [1961]) has identified a number of different forms of play that weave in and out of these types of games. Furthermore, I would argue that while children often appropriate backstories from the world around them, often the media world, these never remain unmodified.

Nevertheless, it is clear that mass media is of increasing importance as an agent of socialization and learning in children’s lives (Buckingham 1993, 2000, 2007; Seiter 1993). This importance is represented not only by the growing emphasis

in children’s play on television-based narratives but also by media knowledge’s presence as a fundamental part of the social world of the child. Nava and Nava (1990) have demonstrated that the process by which children develop and absorb this social knowledge is not passive; however, it is also clear that the influence of the media is far more widely felt in children’s lives than simply through pretend play. The role of children as active participants in how and what they choose to consume, collect, and reproduce gives the act of consumption a positive dynamic.

Furthermore, this process is key to how children begin to constitute social relations in a way that positions them as members of a group with coherent values and narratives. Miller (1987, 1995) argues that when “consumption studies” comes to mean production, rather than studies of individual consumers’ negotiations regarding the positive and negative aspects of consumption, anti-materialist ideologies are produced. Many examples of these ideologies permeate discourses on child-rearing and subsequent media debates, particularly culturally pessimistic points of view such as the following advice from Sue Palmer, a childhood educator and advocate:

Over the last twenty-five years, huge technological and cultural changes have transformed the lifestyle of people in the developed world largely for the better. But it’s all happened so fast we haven’t noticed that changes which benefit adults aren’t always so good for children. A toxic cocktail of the side-effects of cultural change is now damaging the social, emotional and cognitive development of a growing number of children, with knock-on effects on their behaviour. (2009)

Palmer’s work (2006) tends to cast all consumerism in a negative light, arguing, as in her 2009 YouTube video, that children should be protected from the “aggressive” marketing of commercial children’s television, the “excesses of celebrity culture,” and be severely limited on the Internet in order to “save” their childhood from the dangers of modern, urban life. These sorts of discourses highlight the overarching dichotomy between the benefits of mass consumption, in ensuring global access to resources, and the loss of authenticity that accompanies greater access to commercial goods. This tension weighs even heavier on children, cast in their roles as society’s lifeline to

our Biblical, unfallen selves, whose enthusiasm for mass consumption seems to declare innocence as beyond salvage for modernity (Kline 1993; Goodenough 2007; Louv 2005). However, as Miller (1995) argues, the mass-produced good and its socialization into the individual's life is part of re-investing the commercial with the personal. This paper aims to focus this discussion on children's consumption and production surrounding play. Furthermore, it illustrates how this sort of play works toward preparation for wider social relations. I shall argue that children's play, even within the context of media that is often accused of impoverishing its creativity, remains fundamentally inventive and adaptable.

Lavie, Narayan, and Rosaldo (1993) argue that, in the context of anthropology, creativity is a "human activity that transforms existing cultural practices" into new social forms (1993: 5). It is precisely through this sort of creative practice that children incorporate media into their play. Other anthropologists, such as Parkin (1987), have argued that creativity represents the role of the individual in challenging society's boundaries. By comparison, Cook (2001) argues that contemporary children's play, even when transformative and creative, remains indivisible from the material culture of capitalism, implying that children's play is essentially about acts of production and consumption that transform existing frameworks into creative explorations, as I have argued in the case of pre-set narratives.

Taken in combination, these definitions suggest that the way that children challenge and constitute their position as individuals in networks of social relations is through manipulations of the media. This paper will demonstrate two ways that children "mess around" (Ito et al. 2009), using Pokémon products: first, through the collection and manipulation of the cards within the home; second, by the study of films, books, and DVDs, and through drawing and copying Pokémon characters. This approach to studying children's play, like Attfield's (2000), assumes that as objects of mass consumption are brought into the home, they can take on new meanings and social lives. It also shows how the home can be a site of production that allows children to create social linkages with their wider peer communities, despite the physical restrictions of the environments, as pointed out in studies of privatization

and solitarization that mark contemporary urban childhoods (Sutton-Smith 1986; Lareau 2003). In this way, children's active processes of play demonstrate that there is parity between commercial toys bought for them and those types of creative plays that they make themselves, as both contribute to positive creation of the self.

## Method

Acting as a volunteer child-carer or babysitter, I conducted a year-long ethnography with participant children aged six to eleven in urban Vancouver across multiple field sites. My primary mode of conducting research was through participant observation, using what the sociologist Corsaro calls a "reactive" entry methodology (2005: 52). This entails responding to the children but not directing, judging, or interfering in their play. This allowed for an adjustment period; the children adjusted their expectations of my role as a teacher to that of friend, even if they had not had adult friends before. These relationships were made possible by the long-term unbroken period of fieldwork that I undertook. My aim in collecting my data was not to judge or interfere with the children's natural play, in order to do research with rather than on the children (Christensen and James 2008).

## Participants

Using the website *Craigslist*, a popular community classified in Vancouver, and adopting the style of other research listings, I advertised my research project as looking to observe and talk to children who like to play imaginatively at home in exchange for free babysitting. I set an age limit of between seven and twelve years with no gender requirement. I also specified that siblings would be welcome even if they fell outside of the age limits and that the children must have access to television, or that there should be one in the home. Once I had received a response from the parents, I emailed them a far more detailed explanation of the research and answered their questions, which resulted in my meeting the parent(s) and the child(ren) in their homes. I was clear that it was the parents' choice whether they would be present or not while I

was with the children and while sometimes they remained in the home, perhaps taking a nap or doing chores, mostly they took the opportunity to go out. Invariably the children preferred this, often chivvying their mothers out of the door. My three main participants were Brianna (age 7) and Zach (age 8), a working-class Caucasian sister and brother living in the east side of Vancouver, and Zuleika (age 8), a middle-class Iranian Canadian living in the wealthy western suburbs of Vancouver. In related research not detailed in this paper, these children led me to a snowball sample of thirty-eight further participants out of a raw sample of about five hundred children.<sup>1</sup> In total I collected more than three hundred hours of observation data (2008-2009) with the majority involving these three children.

I do not position these three children (Brianna, Zach, and Zuleika) as representative; rather, like many anthropologists and sociologists, these children and their families have been key participants in and gatekeepers to the community. The use of key informants in ethnography, as Casagrande (1964) demonstrates in his research about well-known anthropologists and their relationships with key participants, has been a core technique for pioneers in socio-cultural anthropology, and their data provides a depth and intimacy that is paralleled in sociological ethnography—for example, Whyte's relationship with Doc in *Street Corner Society*, wherein Doc became such a key part of the research that he moved from the role of participant to collaborator (Whyte 1955). This willingness to collaborate, in my perception, is very much what Zuleika, Brianna and Zach felt about helping me with my "school project" and is of ethical importance in terms of empowering the children as participants to collaborate in the research. Miller has argued that the individual is the "minimal exemplification of society" (2009: 1). Consequently, he advocates that urban ethnographies focus both on the individual and the societal institutions and forces that they live within, in order to demonstrate how these mutually frame and shape social experience.

## From Consumption to Creativity: Children's Use of Pokémon in the Home

Goldstein, Buckingham, and Brougère in their book *Toys, Games and Media* point out that much of children's play that draws upon the commercial media interconnects in various forms. They argue:

Children's culture is now highly intertextual: Every "text" (including commodities such as toys) effectively draws upon and feeds into every other text. When children play with Pokémon cards or toys, for example, they draw on knowledge and expertise they have derived from watching the TV shows and movies, or from playing the computer games: Each play event is part of a broader flow of events that crosses from one medium or "platform" to another. (2004: 2-3)

I would argue that to simply consider children's material culture as "text" capable of being read is an overly simplistic view for anthropology, as it de-emphasizes the child's creative role as a social actor, where producers' intended meanings may not be recognized, much less respected. Pokémon, particularly, is a very good example of this type of interconnected commercial product, and while I was conducting my fieldwork in Vancouver, it was certainly the most popular children's media property. Pokémon often stood out over my range of field sites, as it seemed so easily connected to different types of play and games. However, the main ways that the children engaged with Pokémon was through watching the television shows, studying and learning to draw the characters, and through collecting and exchanging the collectible cards. While the exchange of the cards, forming part of a larger world of social exchange, is also a highly relevant part of these media, particularly for directly reinforcing and influencing social hierarchies (Loebenberg 2011), these processes of television-drawing and card-collecting are primary examples of children engaging with the media as consumer-producers. In sum, they consume the media images or cards and then productively transform them, through play, into drawings and collections.

### Cards

The history of trading cards in North America stems from small promotional cards included

in packs of tobacco. Initially, popular inserts were coquettish drawings of women, but their collectability became cemented when they started including drawings of well-known baseball players. Later, the Topps-Bowman and Goudey Gum Company began to popularize baseball cards among children and modified the format to include key statistics about the player's history and performance (Fitts 1997). These statistics enabled children to study and compare the attributes and skills of the various players, a process that has much in common with how contemporary children study their Pokémon cards. However, although baseball cards have remained enduringly popular, they have now been carried into the adult world, with clear market and exchange values attached to the cards. Bloom's (1997) ethnography of adult baseball card collectors shows that this is a world dominated by adult men. While children's interest in cards was tolerated at large card trading shows, their participation in the adults' dealings was considered by the men to be a "symbolic loss of innocence" (85). This loss is due to the cut-throat nature of the trading world, where, although adults were prepared to buy and sell with children, they were equally willing to give them an unfair deal if they could. Consequently, pure trading cards have taken a back seat for children in favour of trading card games, where one's odds of winning are based both on skill and on having better, and therefore more valuable, cards.

In order to understand the basic rules of how my participant children play the Pokémon trading-card game I asked Brianna and Zach for a lesson on how to play. Brianna first explained that some of the cards work in pairs, where if you have an "evolved" form of the Pokémon card as well as the "basic" form you can use them together in the game and play a more powerful turn by "playing it [the evolved form] over the other one" (she placed one card on top of the other slightly drawn back to demonstrate). The players also require "energy" cards to power the Pokémon's turn taking attacks against the opponent.<sup>2</sup> All of these cards come from the deck of cards that the player has collected and then selected to play with, in combinations that they feel will make their deck more likely to win than that of their opponent. The Pokémon cards each detail, like a baseball card, the statistics of each of the creatures, which

encompass a huge range of personalities, sizes, and shapes. Notionally, the Pokémon live in different habitats: forest, mountain, or lake, and their habitat influences their characteristics and power, and assigns an "energy" element of fire, water, earth, and so on to the creature that allows its owner to understand and "tap" its abilities. The amassing of knowledge of Pokémon's elements, habitats, and how the Pokémon evolve is a key part of successfully playing the game.

Despite the popular history of collecting trading cards in North America, adults often claim that card-trading games such as Chaotic, CardCaptors or Pokémon,<sup>3</sup> are an insatiable and, moreover, an incomprehensible habit for children. While trading the cards is an important social component of Pokémon, collection and study of the collection is the primary focus within the home. Benjamin (1999 [1969]) has argued that the importance of collection for children lies in the ability to touch, arrange, and manipulate it, as a way of controlling part of the environment. The power to control their environment is particularly acute for many children who often feel disempowered in their normal lives or who may feel that the shared spaces in the home, such as the living room, where they may not be allowed to make a mess, are limited and carefully managed by their parents. In Zuleika's home the only evidence of the eight-year-old resident of this house in the shared spaces is a small bright pink bag and some basic piano tuition books in one corner of the living room. Because Amira, Zuleika's mother, runs a daycare in the basement section of the house, she is careful to separate her work from her private home and does not allow any toys upstairs. Even in Zuleika's room, the only toys she is allowed are neatly underneath her raised-up bed or on top of her bed where she has a Powerpuff Girls quilt (but plain linen) and a few stuffed toys.

Burikova (2006), in her study of young au-pairs' rooms within family homes, expresses a variety of ways that the women react to an awkward living experience. In their cases, no space is their own, not even their bedrooms, nor are they allowed or encouraged to make it so. This completely differs from the way that other temporary accommodation, such as college dorm-rooms, are perceived in studies such as Gosling et al. on Personal Living Space (2005).

Fig. 1  
Zuleika's drawer  
showing Pokémon cards  
and other contents.



For the young au-pairs, making their room deliberately dirty or messy in reaction to the requirement that they clean the family house was one strategy to assert their ownership, but another was to hide small collections of personal objects on windowsills, behind the curtains, or in drawers away from where a cursory glance of the room could perceive them. The adult spaces outside of the children's bedrooms are subjected to a reluctant truce similar to that between the parents and the au-pairs. The children will often hide their possessions in groups, under couches or on shelves behind the adult's ornaments, aware of the spatial difficulties of their co-presence. Zuleika and Zach and Brianna all have raised-up beds in their bedrooms, underneath which they are allowed free reign to personalize and play. However, this is the only space, even within the "private" bedroom, in which they are not subjected to frequent injunctions to clean up. Thus, the grouping of possessions into collections and their spatial locations, either hidden in bedroom drawers as Zuleika does (see Fig. 1); under the living-room couch, as Zach does; or behind a wall of stuffed toys, as Brianna does, is an assertion of socio-spatial ownership.

The approach that the cultural theorist Baudrillard takes in *The System of Objects* is to argue that, "for children, collecting is a rudi-

mentary way of mastering the outside world, of arranging, classifying and manipulating" (2005: 93), which echoes much about the functions of play. However, Baudrillard, like many other key consumption theorists, has nothing further to say on why this "mastering the outside world" is particularly significant, yet that children play with their collections indicates a fundamental difference from adult attitudes to collecting. Twentieth-century archaeologist Moshenska (2008) demonstrates in his study of children's shrapnel collections in London during the Second World War that while the contents of a collection, like rocks or pencils, might seem nonsensical, it is through the physical process of collection, assimilation, and haptic connection that the children recast their collection as a control of trauma. Clearly, however, the collection of Pokémon cards, characters, manuals, and so on cannot be cast as control of trauma, and it would be a stretch to argue it as such, even in light of the so-called difficulties of assimilating modernity, which Cullingford (1992) argues is the purpose of play. Nevertheless, collections, for children, do give a sense of control of the possession, which, particularly in the home, may be something children are not routinely awarded.

Belk sees collecting, and especially the presentation and spatial ordering of collected objects, as a process of "self-extension" (1988: 150) and "legitimization" (154). In my participants' cases, for example, winning territory covertly within the home seemed to challenge their feelings of disempowerment over control of space. Baker and Gentry suggest the process of "legitimization" is more important in the understanding of children's motivation to build collections: "Children learn (from adults) that behaviour which is done for 'rational' purposes (e.g., creating, investing, building history) is not considered to be self-indulgent if one labels it as 'collecting'" (1996: 132). The authors discover a variety of motivations among the children in their study: some report to collect "to look at" (135) their collection, some because the collection is unusual; some so that they can play with their friend's similar collections, such as Barbie dolls, together; or some simply because no one else collects that item (Baker and Gentry 1996). In the case of the collection of Pokémon cards, for example, their ubiquity means that they are used both in play and for manipulation and

presentation. The marketing of Pokémon albums with clear plastic pockets designed to protect and display the cards and the assignation of monetary value to the trading of rarer cards means that the children use them for trade, collection, and play. These actions imply that the consumption of trading cards is socially significant as it contributes to producing the child's sense of self, through processes of acquisition and presentation of the collection.

### Drawing from Television

A second way in which children's consumption leads to production of the self is through drawing while watching television. This activity might link to other parts of their play lives too—for example, drawing “proxy” cards of particularly powerful or rare cards to simulate cards that are gaps in the collection. The children who were the most interested in Pokémon (and a similar series of products, Digimon) among the three main participants were brother and sister, Zach and Brianna. Much of the time I spent with them was spent watching Pokémon videos and films on

the small TV in their bedroom. Debra, their aunt, would hunt down episodes of Pokémon on VCR for them at second-hand shops like the Salvation Army, and they had an impressive collection of videos and DVDs related to the series.

On one evening the children were virtually pushing Debra out of the door and beckoning me into their room when I arrived, where they had preloaded a film called *Pokémon 4Ever* (the fourth Pokémon feature film) for us to watch together. The day before they had shown me their impressive collections of Pokémon stuffed animals, books (manuals of the types and information about the Pokémon), cards, and videos. The main character of Pokémon is a boy of about ten years old called Ash Ketchum, whose name fits the slogan, “Catch ‘em, gettit, ‘cause you gotta catch ‘em all,” as Brianna likes to quote. Ash has a number of friends who travel with him to collect Pokémon and train them to fight.

Ash's first and favourite Pokémon is Pikachu, a small squat yellow and black rabbit-like creature with a lightning-bolt tail, whose image is the symbol of the franchise. A rare Pokémon, Pikachu can zap its opponent with its electric power just



*Fig. 2*  
*Author sketch of Zach and Brianna's bedroom.*

Fig. 3  
Zach's drawing of his  
own monster listing its  
attributes. Photographed  
in field.



by squeezing its cheeks. The evil “Team Rocket” is their enemy, who, according to Zach, in this particular film have a senior trainer who comes to steal Pokémon and put them into “evil balls” which instantly “evolves” them to the highest level that they can be but in an evil form which he can control against Ash and his friends. Even though Ash also captures and controls Pokémon, they are framed as his friends who are free to help him in battle or not. Much discussion has taken place about the symbolism of the cute aesthetic found in the basic level Pokémon, and then the obvious change to the not-cute, powerful, evolved Pokémon (McVeigh 1996). Landzelius, for instance, argues that the cute aesthetic associates nurture (for adults) with children’s media because of the similarities of neotenic features between babies and cute cartoon characters (2001). These, in general, are traits such as large eyes and heads and other senses of disproportion in the characters. Yet, for the children, this transition from juvenile to adult-like traits, an evolutionary metaphor, or a growing-up metaphor, was obvious and a part of the appeal of the Pokémon concept. “It’s cute but it’s powerful,” Brianna would say, signifying the latent potential in the Pokémon to “evolve,” physically transform and rescue their “friends” (owners/collectors). In some senses, for the children, this ability seems to signify a

parallel with their ideas surrounding an ideal state of their own lives. That is to say, they seem to wish that they could be both cute children, with commensurate levels of protection, but also have the latent potential for power, which they see primarily adults as possessing.

For Zach and Brianna watching films at home, the film (or television show) and its content form only a part of what may be going on in the playscape of their bedroom (Fig. 2). Not only do they play or draw in different areas of the room, at the same time as watching the film, but both children also have their own side of the bedroom next to their beds. They always sit or lie on the floor toward their side when watching the television, which is on a low bookcase filled with Pokémon manuals, videos, DVDs, and books, in the centre of the room, below the window. Zach was particularly keen that I watch *Pokémon 4Ever* because it revolves around the legendary Pokémon Celebi, who is his favourite character. Celebi is a reclusive and highly powerful Pokémon who is portrayed in the film as a benevolent nature spirit, living deep within a forest, similar to Miyazaki’s portrayal of Totoro in his 1989 film, *My Neighbour Totoro*.

As the film started, Zach and Brianna had a small argument over who would be Celebi, adding a little “pretending” into the movie, because they clearly could not both be Celebi at the same time, since there is only one Celebi, as with all the “legendary” Pokémon. I asked Zach why he likes Celebi, and he replied, “because I think Celebi can time-travel.” It is interesting that the children will always chose to “be” a Pokémon rather than one of the more obviously human characters. This tendency runs counter to the industry perspective, where according to Jones, “Pokémon also included a human heroine who appealed to most girls as much as, or even more so than, the male protagonist” (2003: 65). The range of powerful and fluid characters that do not have direct gender associations is a useful way for children to explore fantasies not limited by gender, a freedom that can only add to the widespread popularity of these media.

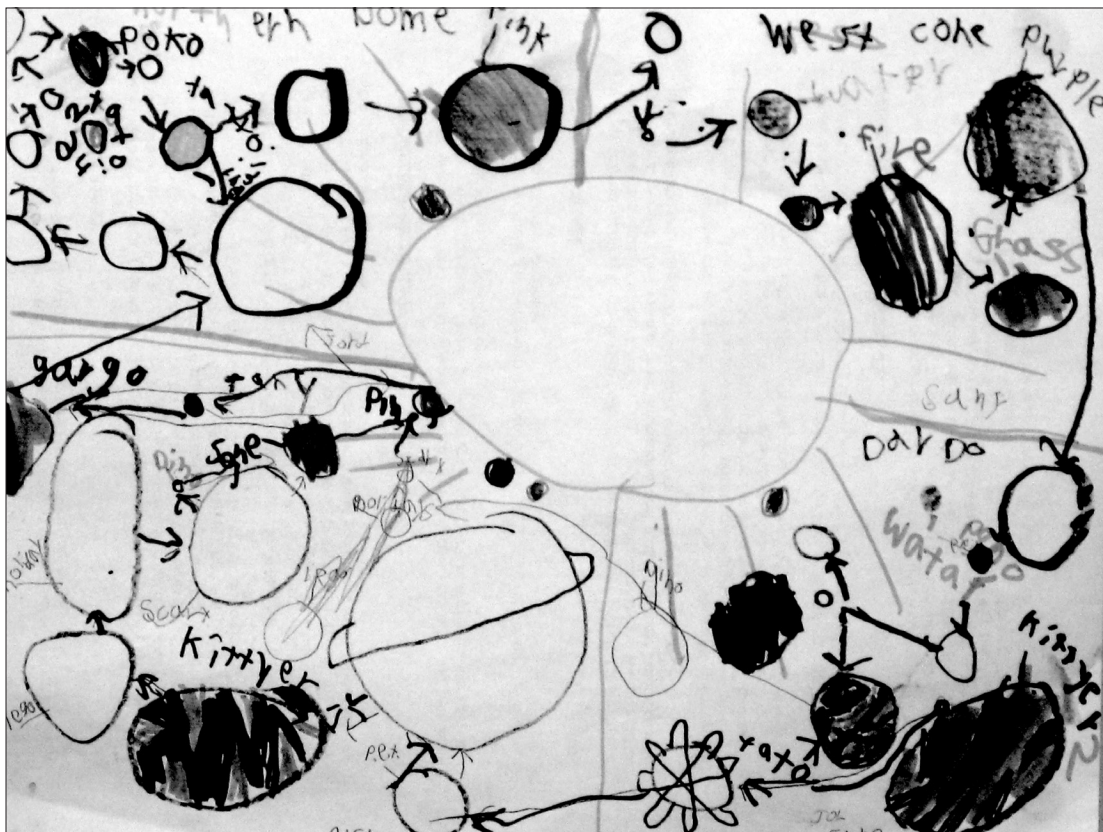
In the film, Ash and his friends use teamwork to allow their weaker Pokémon to defeat the stronger, fully evolved Pokémon of the “evil” Team Rocket leader, who has enslaved Celebi and turned it into an evil slave. In the process of



the battle Celebi is hurt, and Sam, one of Ash's friends, brings him back to life by taking him to a lake that has been polluted and corrupted. Zach explains, "Celebi can come back to life, but only in the Lake of Life." The children place Celebi under the water, which acts as an elixir of life connected to him as the spirit of the forest and the well-being of the forest as a whole. When Celebi enters the waters, the film's voiceover tells us, "the spirits of the past and future surround him and bring him to life" (Yuyama and Malone 2001). The waters of the lake clear, turn blue and healthy, and Celebi is revived. Seeing the spirits around him, I asked Brianna what they were, as they all looked like Celebi. I asked if there was more than one Celebi. "No," she said, "Those are just angels or something." Brianna's attitude is not unusual; in general in children's media there is widespread appropriation of the Japanese anime aesthetic and essentialized themes surrounding Japanese cultural and spiritual practice. The very successful Dreamworks film *Kung Fu Panda*, for example, contains certain dream sequences that point to a movement from an American cartoon

aesthetic to one of anime, the commonalities in narrative content aside.<sup>4</sup>

At points during the film Zach would say things like: "Now they're all dead! Just kidding!" He was aware that I had not seen the film, and did not want to "ruin it" for me, whereas Brianna would unconcernedly reveal the plot, only to be told off by Zach for spoiling. In the second half of the film the themes grow quite bleak. Celebi, captured by the evil trainer, weaves an enormous monster out of twigs and bark from the forest, which then starts to attack Ash and the other children. Zach started to intensify his drawing at this point, perhaps because the movie was quite scary for him, drawing monsters of his own on sheets of paper, assigning them attributes as on the Pokémon cards. Zach described one drawing as having "invisible eyes," the other as having "his eyes on his teeth"; all the drawings had a top speed listed and a Canadian province indicating their origin (Fig. 3). While it may seem tempting to therapize this type of drawing activity and argue that it is a way of safely controlling fear, or some such, drawing analysis



**Fig. 4**  
Zach's drawing of  
his and his sister  
Brianna's "toy galaxy."  
Photographed in field.

has been severely criticized as a methodology for understanding children. Mitchell's criticism on drawings as a visual research method, for example, strongly argues, "drawings are not a substitute for children's voices" (2006: 69). She asserts this in reaction to assumptions that have been made that children's drawings can be alternative sources of information on their perspectives as expressed through visual and representational analysis. Rather, I would argue that children's drawing is part of their play within a dynamic between consumption and production. It allows the children to explore their sense of how they see themselves and the world around them. After Zach had drawn these monsters he told me that he "is from Saskatoon too!" Thus, the intensification of Zach's "messing around" activities indicate that he is creating relational links between his consumptive and productive activities and his self and environment.

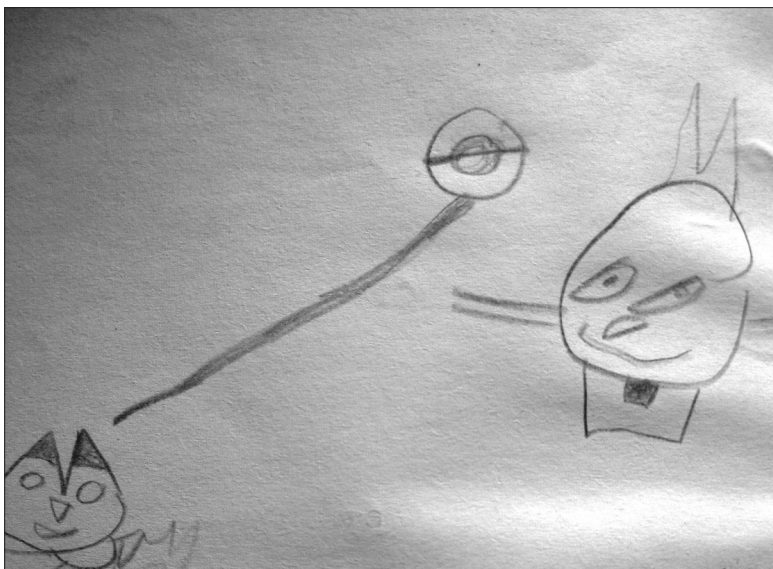
Zach's drawing of monsters in this way has partly been absorbed through the television show and film series *Digimon*. While the show pre-dates *Pokémon*, the children tell me that it is a spin-off series, possibly because of its lesser popularity. The series has a similar premise to *Pokémon*, the collection and training of Digimon (digital monsters, as opposed to pocket monsters). The protagonist of the film's drawing of his ideal Digimon, much like Zach's monster, magically transforms into a real Digimon, which he then trains in and around his school and suburb. Zach and Brianna's room is scattered with pieces of

paper, all having been divided into odd sized rectangles with recognizable drawings of the various Digimon and their names, Togemon, Motimon, and so on written next to them. From one week to the next the content of their continual parade of drawings changed, from Digimon to Pokémon, to general monsters, to Littlest Pet Shop. On one visit, Zach proudly gave me a drawing called "Zach and Brianna's Toy Galaxy" (Fig. 4), an impenetrable web of connections and stories, drawn as a series of planets, starting from the elemental "fire, water, grass," and moving around a central empty sun naming toys and proto-words before reaching planet Poko, where Zach thinks Pokémon are from. Malchiodi, taking a multi-disciplinary approach to how children's drawings have been understood, argues:

Although children may use drawing to explore, to problem solve or simply to give visual form to ideas and observations, the overall consensus is that art expressions are uniquely personal statements that have elements of both conscious and unconscious meaning in them and can be representative of many different aspects of the children who create them. (1998: 1)

Like the "Toy Galaxy" example, many of the drawings the children produce seem to be characteristic of Malchiodi's "uniquely personal statements." However, drawing specific Pokémon or Digimon characters is a more instrumental form of drawing than forms such as free or life drawing, in the sense that it directly reinforces the social currency that the children gain from learning the names and attributes of Pokémon through social kudos in being able to precisely list Pokémon and their attributes in conversation with their friends. Zach can draw many of the Pokémon freehand, although not entirely accurately, and he is happy to fill up a page with them. Brianna still draws from the manuals and tries to make her drawings more accurate, copying the circles and basic shapes the manuals show, but struggles to complete the character and erase the construction lines. Scholastic has a reading book licence for Pokémon but also makes other sorts of books like their *Pokémon Pop Quiz Brain Busters* series (West 2002b). One of the most popular parts of the books (judging by the markings on my second-hand copies of them) are the quizzes asking the child to identify various Pokémon

**Fig. 5**  
*Pokémon drawing by Samuel Moore, who carefully printed his name in the front of my second-hand copy of Pokémon 4Ever (West 2002a).*



either through looking only at their eyes or only at their tails, etc. Zach and Brianna spend their free time preparing for and testing each other on this type of “study,” arguing over the correct names for the various evolutionary stages, reciting for example, “Pikachu comes from Pichu and goes to Raichu. Charmander goes to Charmeleon who goes to Charizard” and looking through manuals to check their facts. Yet, one can see from the drawings that Zach makes, or this scribble by Samuel Moore (Fig. 5), that the Pokémon do not stay static in their minds; they change attributes and aesthetic with the creativity of the child, who might make them fly, spit fire or electricity in their minds, or use them as inspiration for their own series of monster drawings. As the children become more confident to move away from pre-set aesthetic-narratives, such as those offered by how-to manuals, their focus of activity shifts from consuming to producing.

One of the ways children use drawings for these purposes is encoded in their choice of anime aesthetic, which signifies that the drawings are for fun, and challenges adult-imposed styles of drawing and art that happen in school.<sup>5</sup> Tarryn (age 11), who was an excellent artist, often showed me her drawings in the manga/anime style (Fig. 6). Tarryn said she got her ideas from *Gaia Online*, an American children’s social networking website where all of the avatars (characters substituted for the user’s image) are drawn in this style. The anime style of drawing has become so ubiquitous as to disassociate itself from its east Asian aesthetic origins, and, like drawings “for fun” that stand apart from drawings for school, represent a willingness to communicate with a global network of like-minded tweens. This type of drawing for online consumption bears much in common with the popularity of toys such as Webkinz and Littlest Pet Shop, that “live in the computer” (Bazon 2008). That is to say, while the toys themselves are much like any stuffed animal, children are invited to construct socially networked profiles for their animals on the manufacturer’s website, earn credits toward costumes for their virtual animals to wear, and present the animals in a house furnished with proxies of real-world objects. Thus, unlike the teenagers in Horst’s (2009) study, who presented carefully constructed images of their own bedrooms and selves on MySpace, on the internet, younger

children are more likely to present a version of their media-based social capital than a version of their person, open to inspection and critique.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that while the act of consumption is often conflated with negative consumerism in the case of children, it can operate as part of a positive dynamic where mass consumer objects are socialized into the child’s life-world in an emotional and interactive way. My participant children’s play with these objects and technologies demonstrates that acts of consumption and production can be creative and can evolve beyond being simply derivative of their commercial media starting points.

I have discussed how consumer products such as Pokémon cards and television, when creatively modified into collections and drawings are, as Belk states, acts of “self-legitimization” (1988: 154). Moreover, I have argued that these acts of creativity show how the children construct how they see themselves. While card-collecting extends the self and challenges spatial restrictions in the home that can constrain the children’s social position in the family, drawings in many ways are a type of imaginative play that has much in common with pretend play. In particular, the movement of the children from a reliance on pre-set guides of how-to-draw, to freehand and modified drawings demonstrates this commonality. These activities demonstrate how the children



*Fig. 6*  
Example of a *Gaia*  
Online avatar drawing.

integrate their own play surrounding their sense of self into the common social knowledge shared by their peers.

James (1995) argues that developing a relative sense of self is how children create themselves as individuals and as part of the category of child. She argues that through the processes of developing self-consciousness—awareness of conformity and of lack thereof—particularly with regard to social status, children’s self-consciousness emerges from “the gap between sameness and difference, conformity and individuality” (74). Acts of self-legitimization such as collection and drawing help develop the self-consciousness James discusses. In the first instance, drawing and collecting produce conformity initially, and self-reflection later, such as with the spatial manipulation of the collection and drawing that reflects what Malchiodi (1998) sees as individual expressions of creativity. Furthermore, the flexible and often amorphous presentations of self that are offered by the new media allow space to experiment with how the self is seen by others. The children’s creative output, particularly within the small-scale social networking offered through toys like Webkinz and Littlest Pet Shop, can focus more consciously on how they wish others to see them without committing firmly to an image that represents their physical selves.

This research demonstrates that children’s play within their homes is not necessarily “bourgeois” and “solitarized” by modernity, as Sutton-Smith (1986) has argued. Rather, private

play can increasingly be a preparation for social interaction with peers. Cohen (1994) argues that this preparation derives from awareness that the public persona is only a part of the self, not the whole “me” of the person. Moreover, this authorial, active self means that individuals are more than simply their relation to social groups. In essence, Cohen argues that self-conscious identity production only incorporates, rather than shapes, how others see the individual. However, the ways individuals construct their self in order to relate to their groups include the creative dynamics of play, the acquisition and rehearsal of social knowledge surrounding Pokémon, that the participants demonstrated in their homes. The more overtly conscious constructions of the self, through new media particularly, are far less important for these young children than they are for teenagers and adults. The participant children’s use of their collections and knowledge of media-based toys demonstrates how mass-consumer products can be manipulated and re-purposed toward social practices within the home. Such re-purposing not only evidences children’s active participation in global flows surrounding toy products, but also the ways in which local peer cultures can cement a particular form of cultural practice within the individual’s home. These objects do not remain static as they enter the children’s bedrooms; rather, they are continually manipulated, re-organized, and reproduced as part of an internal motion that is indivisible from their technological and social multivalence.

## Notes

1. The research design was approved by the University of Oxford’s Ethical Review Board (CUREC) and the Vancouver School Board’s research ethics committee.
2. The Pokémon can also evolve, essentially gaining more access to the element that makes it powerful, which also physically changes the Pokémon into a different character, as Brianna explained in the layering system. When the Pokémon, as cards, computer games, or in the television show, battle each other, this elemental nature comes to the fore, where the Pokémon trainer will pit one contrasting element against another to try to beat the opponent, sometimes for fun and sometimes for a pre-negotiated wager of certain good cards.
3. Nintendo, as the main licence-holder for Pokémon, has created an exceptional number of marketing tie-ins with other global companies, such as Wizards of the Coast, who created the original trading cards along similar lines to an already popular card game. Their licence was revoked by Nintendo in 2003 to allow a direct Nintendo subsidiary to take over the incredibly lucrative line.
4. While early Japanese forays into the international toy market in the 1950s with tin toys often worked with themes familiar to the Western mindset such as “Cowboys and Indians,” contemporary Japanese popular toys are very much constructed with the domestic market in mind. However, in the export scenario, it has been argued that the influence of so-called “cool Japan” (McGray 2002) on global popularity and consumption—what Anne Allison calls Japan’s “desire to achieve not only real but symbolic capital in infiltrating the realm of kids’ mass/popular culture” (2006: 236)—has created a market for an overt display of “Japaneseness” in children’s television.
5. See Thompson (2006).

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