

# What in the World Is Pokémon?

(Continued From Front)

playing with each other instead of with an electronic box. But these card games weren't their parents' games. Hearts, clubs, spades, and diamonds weren't part of the formula.

Pokémon's co-creator, Tsunekazu Ishihara, saw the potential of these collectable card games and released Pokémon: TCG. Approximately 1 billion cards have already been sold in Japan. In 1998, Nintendo signed an agreement with Wizards of the Coast (creators of Magic: The Gathering) and commenced distribution of an English translation of TCG. The game's popularity exploded. Soon after shipping began, Wizards of the Coast was forced to ration the cards due to the incredible demand. A trading card league sprung up in which players earn points and collect trainer badges. And the Pokémon Trading Card Game Tour travels from mall to mall across the country, drawing 4,000 at a stop. This past summer over 44,000 swarmed to the Mall of America for the Tour with lines stacked up 3,000 deep.

The frenzy for Pokémon: TCG has grown so great that many schools have banned it entirely from campus. In Milwaukee, Wis., Burleigh Elementary Principal Bill Zahn issued a principal's proclamation entitled *The Pokémon Dilemma* which stated that "Pokémon cards have become a huge problem here at Burleigh." Zahn also said, "Students are admiring their Pokémon cards instead of paying attention to their teacher." Janna Russell, principal of Bill Elliott Elementary School in Fort Worth, Texas, confiscates the cards on sight, keeping them until the end of the school year. The reasons cited by schools for banning the cards are a lack of attention in class, harsh conflicts resulting from trades gone bad, and theft.

## Pokémon: TCG, A Discussion of Value

Controversy has swirled around Pokémon: TCG since its birth. Some claim it is overtly evil and occultic, and should be avoided at all costs. Others view it as harmless fun, even beneficial.

First, let's look at what's being said in the phenomenon's defense. "There is nothing sinister [about Pokémon]," says John Hooten, father of two avid fans. "It is a good activity. It makes them use their memories, it makes them put things in order, it makes them interact socially with other kids." Tammy, a mother and elementary school teacher, has no reservations about TCG: "I think it's great. There's a lot involved in it. First of all, the reading and the language is good for [kids]."

A consistent gripe of parents is, "My child just watches TV and plays video games all of the time. He won't go outside and he won't read any books." With the advent of Pokémon: TCG, fans have disconnected themselves from electronic entertainment and run outside with cards and sourcebooks in hand. Strategic thinking is encouraged. Winning a game requires knowing the strengths and weaknesses of other Pokémon and playing the correct cards against them. To know the strengths and weaknesses, one must read various books and study the Pokémon. And to get the cards to win the games, one must either buy a lot of booster packs (which are randomly seeded with powerful cards) or learn to trade with others. Since most children will not have the money to buy scads of cards, they tend to trade, learning negotiation skills in the process. The downside to this is that there will be some who will get taken advantage of.

Even though Pokémon are pitted against each other in combat, none of them actually die; once they've been "beaten about a bit," they faint and are out of play. The card is simply removed. There are no dramatic or stomach-turning scenes of graphic violence. The player simply pulls another card from his deck and continues playing. These cute little animals are a far cry from the rotting zombies, mangled motorists or butchered cowboys of video games *Resident Evil 2*, *Carmageddon* and *Rising Zan*.

All is not perfect in the Pokémon world, however. As just noted, the animals don't die, but the idea of a dog fight is at the core of the game. It's difficult to get around the concept that you are teaching your Pokémon to "smack the stuffing" out of someone else's Pokémon. But once again, the violence is not explicit, nor is it displayed. When someone plays *Battleship*, for example, he generally doesn't stop to think, "I'm firing at an enemy vessel, blowing it up, and killing thousands of men in the process." He just puts a red peg in a hole. With Pokémon: TCG, a player puts a card on a table.

TCG includes ghost and "psychic" characters. (Think *The Wizard of Oz*, *Mary Poppins* and *J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings*, not *Charmed*, *The Craft* or *Vampire: The Masquerade*.) Still, children who play Pokémon are introduced to bizarre supernatural forces that have absolutely nothing to do with God. (More on this in the section titled "Pokémon and the Occult.")

It also proffers the idea that Pokémon can "evolve" to higher forms. But it is not the same theory which is being taught in high school classrooms; this evolving is not a matter of random chance, but of conscious choice. Players can

decide whether or not they want their Pokémon to evolve and they can actually devolve with the use of certain cards. Pokémon evolution bears as much resemblance to Darwinian evolution as a sunflower does to the sun--same general color, similar names, but very different things.

## Addition and TCG

Pokémon's oft repeated motto states it plainly: Gotta catch 'em all! The continually emphasized goal is to become a Pokémon master (which really means collecting each and every species of Pokémon, ASAP). The Pokémon Trading Card Game Player's Guide states:

"You are a Pokémon Trainer. You have collected Pokémon for your use and must compete with rival Pokémon trainers in battle. You pursue that lofty goal of becoming the number one Pokémon master in the world. You will face many challenges in your quest. You may even falter on occasion, but your call to Pokémon Mastery beckons and you must not relent!"

Soon the collecting frenzy is due to expand even more; 100 new creatures are to be added with the introduction of Pokémon: Gold and Pokémon Silver for Game Boy, and these Pokémon will certainly be shifted over into TCG. *Electronic Gaming Monthly* put it well when it said, "The game programs you to collect things. . . . The average player's probably pretty keen to get his hands on as much Pokémon-related gear as he or she can afford." It's not hard to realize that the golden rule of Pokémon ("Gotta catch 'em all!") is in tension with that which God wants us to "collect." "Provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Luke 12:33b-34)

Pokémon enthusiasts themselves readily agree about the compulsive nature of the game. Eric, age 13, told *Plugged In*, "It's highly addictive and I think it's fun that there's a world out there with imaginary creatures that you can control and are highly powerful." Justin, an employee at the Colorado Springs-based Complete Games and Hobbies, commented, "[The kids] are fans. They're fanatics. There's really no other word for it. . . . It's like the Beatles." When questioned about why his friends liked Pokémon, Travis Price, one such fanatic, replied, "Most kids get brainwashed into it. They really like [the TV show] so they start collecting the toys first usually, like I did, then, when they found out cards had come out, they start collecting those. . . . You get really obsessed with it." His mother was quick to interject, "But you mean obsessed in a good way, wouldn't you say?"

## Pokémon and the Occult

Some people have connected Pokémon directly with witchcraft and the occult, saying it is "entry level evil" and the names of certain Pokémon are actually the names of demons. For example, the Pokémon Bellsprout, Weepinbell and Victreebel are said to be connected to the spirit world because the "bell" and "bel" sections of their names are similar to the name of the ancient Caananite god Baal. Of course, it may be that these creatures are named thusly because they are actually shaped like bells. Name puns are very common in the game. Two jellyfish Pokémon are named Tentacool and Tentacruel.

Two turtle types are called Squirtle and Wartortle. The names of three psychic characters form an obvious, if not groan-worthy, joke: Abra, Kadabra and Alakazam.

Author Berit Kjos writes that Pokémon presents children with "a tempting promise: supernatural power." Parents must decide for themselves if that overstates the case. However, this spiritual discussion does raise an important point. Even if one concludes that Pokémon: TCG itself isn't inherently occultic, many other card games are full of dark spirituality. And although claims that TCG is a ready stepping stone to these kind of games may be a bit overdone (Pokémon: TCG's rules are quite different from Magic: The Gathering), there is some truth to them. Parents whose children are already fans of Pokémon: TCG should not allow games such as Magic: The Gathering, *Legends of the Five Rings (L5R)*, *Legend of the Burning Sands*, *Rage*, or *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle* into their homes. These games directly embrace wizardry, channeling, demonic possession, sorcery, black magic and vampirism. "Let Us Hear the Conclusion of the Whole Matter . . ."

So, should children play Pokémon: TCG or not? It encourages reading, critical thinking and social interaction. But it also contains mild violence, can lead to other disturbing games, is very addictive and can easily cause strife between parents and children.

Additionally, the mere presence of ghosts and "psychic" characters may effectively nix Pokémon for some families. In all cases, caution and moderation are key. If your children are already involved, look for warning signs of addiction (obsessive behavior, a consistent unwillingness to do schoolwork, disobedience when asked to leave the game to come to dinner, etc.). If they aren't into the fad yet, weigh it carefully before buying them a starter set for Christmas. Consider your child's personality, peer group, self-discipline and maturity. Prayerfully pondering your knowledge of Pokémon and your knowledge of your child should lead you to a wise conclusion.

