

# Ecomon Go: Cultivating an Ecocritique of the *Pokémon* Franchise

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## INTRODUCTION

*Pokémon* is a globally resonating media franchise, considered by some sources to now be the most profitable media franchise of all time (Koepp 2025). Just as *Pokémon* connects players around the world, its transmedial outputs further sedimented gaming culture's stakes in mainstream media cultures, if not surpassing its boundaries entirely (Heckman 2019). Emerging in the 1990s, a decade which likewise witnessed the first substantial climate change conventions (including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992 and its implementation in the Kyoto Protocol of 1997), and its proliferation in the public imaginary since, *Pokémon* must be considered as intricately connected with the sensibilities of the climate crisis. This paper progresses an ecocritical understanding of *Pokémon* that is in touch with the extensive contradictions of both aesthetic and material realities in media industries (Maxwell and Miller 2012; Cubitt 2017), and especially the games industry (Abraham 2022; Chang 2024). As such, this paper conducts a literature review of existing ecocritical scholarship on *Pokémon* to foster the franchise's designation as an emblematic research topic to further unearth the contradictions of ecomedia as the climate crisis proliferates. Furthermore, it suggests that the *Pokémon* franchise should be at the vanguard of ecocritical game studies, not in spite of, but because of its global success and potential to resonate with a variety of audiences.

*Pokémon* has a longstanding yet fragmentary ecocritical application in scholarship. Andrew Balmford and co-authors (2002) concluded that *Pokémon* was more successful in making children cognisant of virtual wildlife than conservationists are successful in promoting physical wildlife, prompting the question: "Is Ecomon the way ahead?" In the context of the climate crisis' development toward the current predicament of its everyday palpability (Bould 2021; Ripple et al. 2024), the progressive potential of *Pokémon* for ecopolitical negotiation is underscored by the franchise's increasing engagement with questions associated with the climate crisis, such as biodiversity, resource management and animal welfare (Alcott and Maavara 2025). Moreover, the franchise's habit of basing its fictional regions on physical locations facilitates ecological analyses of how they relate to and represent situated realities (Kennedy 2025) as well as geophysical realities (McGowan and Alcott 2022).

Complicating its ecopolitical significance, multiple scholars note the contradictions prevalent in *Pokémon*. These include the contradictions of the franchise's titular creatures as both companions and monsters (Ford 2025), and the mechanical paradox of the games, which formulate its progression systems of making *Pokémon* creatures

more powerful for human-directed battle sports as intertwined with the valuation of them as animals with unique and vital relations to the land they and their human masters inhabit (Bainbridge 2014). Since *Pokémon* is therefore consistent with the spirit of many popular media that at once reveal and embody such contradictions (Cubitt 2005; Parham 2016), the impetus of this initial assessment is to study how understandings of the *Pokémon* franchise as an ecopolitical phenomenon can be enhanced through, instead of in spite of, these contradictions.

This paper develops the argument that the contradictions of *Pokémon* both substantiate and complicate some fundamental ecocritical understandings of games. Chiefly, Alenda Chang's (2019) concept of games as *mesocosms*, i.e. mini-ecosystems that model environmental processes, can be considered through the lens of *Pokémon*. This theoretical connection can be productive both because of the franchise's reliance on physical locations for its world-building, and in *Pokémon*'s interpretation of animals as at once indispensable to the environment, and commandable by humans for recreational purposes. This phenomenon underscores understandings of the climate crisis as intricately interrelated with modern life's neoliberal conditioning (Chakrabarty 2009; Klein 2015; Moore 2016). At the same time, *Pokémon*'s scientific kernel of understanding, categorizing and collecting wildlife creatures according to its essentializing 'Pokédex' relates to both the scientific substantiation of conservation efforts, and a reliance on a universal idea of an external 'Nature' (Latour 2004) that can be mapped and explained away by increasing technical dominion over the environment (Bianchi 2024).

Beyond this conceptual level, *Pokémon* suggests a complication of aesthetic and material concerns in ecocriticism as well. Whereas the global success of games like mobile game *Pokémon Go* demonstrate the emancipatory influence of the franchise to have players engage with their local environments (Dorward et al. 2016), their reliance on energy-intensive mediation likewise suggests that this reconnection must itself come at an additional environmental cost. Conversely, even though *Pokémon* games have historically been materially confined to fit the less power-intensive hardware of handheld games, their aesthetics follow the tendency of mainstream games to desire more expansive worlds, utilizing more features and things to do (Atkins 2006; Nieborg 2011) – and culminating in more extensive, expansive and emissive games.

Considering these constitutive elements of the *Pokémon* franchise, this paper urges ecocritical game scholarship to cultivate new ecopolitical understandings of *Pokémon*, especially as it is a media franchise with a history of making a global impact. Regardless of the contentious question whether games can change the world for better (McGonigal 2011; Raessens 2019), *Pokémon*'s global impact attests to the fact that new ecopolitical imaginaries can easily proliferate under the fraught circumstances of the climate crisis.

## BIO

David Harold ten Cate is a PhD Candidate at the Digital Media Research Centre of Queensland University of Technology. His PhD research concerns the ecopolitical interrelations of videogames between aesthetic, industrial and environmental perspectives. These interrelations are conceptualized as a dialectic between finite and infinite ideas of games. Embracing this dialectic as a productive contradiction, rather than one in need of resolution, his research pursues new avenues of understanding games within ecomedia theory.

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