

Nova Miller

Kumiko Saito

JAPN 4010

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Japanese Folklore and Yōkai in the *Pokémon* Franchise

Japanese products, especially movies, television shows, and video games, have gained immense international interest over the last few decades. Animes like *Naruto* or *One Piece*, Studio Ghibli films such as *Spirited Away*, and game series like *Super Mario Bros.* or *The Legend of Zelda*, among many other franchises, are well-loved and extremely famous outside of just Japan. Arguably one of the most unique and best-selling Japanese franchises of all time is *Pokémon*, which originated with a set of games centered around capturing and befriending creatures of the same name. There are many reasons why the *Pokémon* games are so popular, from the endlessly explorable world to the level of customization in the player's team of Pokémon, but the main appeal of *Pokémon* is the characters, each with their own visual design, personality, backstory, and battle style. Inspirations for Pokémon can come from a variety of sources, including *yōkai*, supernatural phenomena in Japanese folklore that are a key part of Japanese culture and are often adapted into modern Japanese media. While *Pokémon* is one of many series to take inspiration from *yōkai*, it does so in a strategic way that maintains the core aesthetics of *yōkai* characters but modernizes it for a young, international audience, creating interesting characters for players of *Pokémon* games all over the world to bond with.

The term *yōkai* describes a wide variety of supernatural creatures and characters from traditional Japanese folklore. It encompasses all strange or otherworldly phenomena, such as ghosts, spirits, demons, monsters, and everything in between, that are often based in Shinto

beliefs (Foster 14). The earliest recorded information on Japanese folktales discussing *yōkai* comes from 8th century documents like *Kojiki* or *Nihon Shoki* that describe prominent Japanese gods, creatures, and stories. Stories of *yōkai* can be complicated and self-contradictory, especially since there are many different descriptions of them across multiple generations, making it difficult to prove anything concrete about them (Foster 21). It is often stated that they are generally not worshipped by humans (unlike *kami*, or gods) and are often mischievous, dangerous, and powerful creatures, but there are many exceptions to these rules as well, as there are countless types of *yōkai* in Japanese folk tales and legends that cannot be easily categorized (Meyer “Introduction to Yōkai”). These phenomena appear all throughout Japanese history and culture, not just in traditional Japanese texts, but also in modern Japanese media forms such as anime, manga, and console games. One of the most famous examples of *yōkai* being adapted into contemporary media is in the *Pokémon* franchise.

Pokémon is a Japanese console game series turned massive multi-media franchise created by Nintendo, Game Freak, and Creatures, Inc. in 1996. It centers around the often animal-like creatures called Pokémon, the diverse world they live in, and the relationships between Pokémon and humans. The player takes on the role of a Pokémon trainer, someone who catches, trains, battles with, and befriends Pokémon and travels through a specific region of the *Pokémon* world to carry out various quests. Typically, the main story of an individual game will include battling Gyms containing high-level trainers, catching Pokémon to fill the Pokédex (a device that gathers data on Pokémon), capturing Legendary and Mythical Pokémon, and becoming the Champion, or the strongest trainer in the region, after a series of difficult battles, all while exploring the region you’re traveling through and learning its history. The game series began with the release of *Pokémon Red & Green* on the Game Boy and has consistently added new installments over

the years, with the latest being *Pokémon Scarlet* and *Violet* in 2022 that introduced the ninth generation of Pokémon. Following the success of the main series games, an anime series, card game, numerous spin-off games, and many other products have been created to expand on the world of Pokémon. The franchise has been immensely successful both in Japan and internationally, creating a massive dedicated fanbase of both children and adults, despite the games being primarily marketed to children.

The *Pokémon* series, despite being an international product, is closely tied with Japanese culture in many aspects. Japanese influences appear everywhere in the games, such as in the first four geographical regions and their similarities to real Japanese regions, the legends told throughout the *Pokémon* games that are inspired by Japanese and other East Asian myths, and most obviously, the Pokémon that resemble specific *yōkai* creatures. The clearest connections come from Pokémon that mirror *yōkai* both visually and in their personality; for example, Ninetales, a powerful and cunning yellow fox Pokémon with nine tails and fire-related powers, clearly represents *kyubi no kitsune*, a wise fox *yōkai* with golden fur, nine tails, fire magic, and a trickster personality (Sumilang-Engracia 17-18). In most cases, these connections are intentional by the creators of Pokémon, with many official Pokédex entries describing unique characteristics of Pokémon that are without a doubt drawn from Japanese mythology. The game designers have also discussed the influence of *yōkai* on the character creation process at events, further confirming fans' suspicions about Pokémon and their connections to *yōkai* (Sumilang-Engracia 7). However, Ninetales is a rare case of a nearly direct recreation of its *yōkai* counterpart; most Pokémon inspired by *yōkai* have their appearance or personality traits changed to better fit into the *Pokémon* world and appeal to children.

There are hundreds of other Pokémon characters that share traits with *yōkai*, but the level of similarity varies between each one. For example, some Pokémon like Espeon and Meowth have a close physical resemblance to their *yōkai* counterparts – *nekomata* (forked cat) and *maneki-neko* (inviting cat), respectively – but don't share the same personality traits; Espeon is loyal to humans instead of aggressive like a *nekomata*, and Meowth is sneaky and impulsive rather than a sign of good fortune like a *maneki-neko*. Others lack obvious visual similarity but are alike in their backstories, such as Froslass, which is like a *yuki-onna* (snow woman) in that it feeds on the souls of human men and freezes its prey, but unlike a *yuki-onna* because it does not appear fully human (*Bulbapedia.net*; Meyer “Yuki-onna”). Many Pokémon are also inspired by a broad category of *yōkai* rather than a specific creature, such as Rotom, Banette, or Klefki, which can all be considered *tsukumogami* since they are spirits inhabiting household items like lightbulbs and keyrings (Foster 17). These examples show that there is not a sole blueprint for how *yōkai* are used to create Pokémon; rather, there are countless ways that *Pokémon*'s creators draw inspiration from *yōkai* for their characters and adapt them to match the aesthetic of the game series.

In most cases, the changes made to Pokémon from their *yōkai* inspirations come in their appearance being made less frightening or level of aggression being decreased. Espeon is a clear example of this, as its *yōkai* counterpart, *nekomata*, is extremely aggressive to humans, which wouldn't have matched Espeon's calm, loyal, and sensitive personality, nor would it have made sense for the fact that it requires a close bond with its trainer to evolve. However, since the key visual characteristic of the forked tail is still present, the influence from *yōkai* and traditional Japanese culture stays apparent. By picking and choosing what elements of *yōkai* to keep in a Pokémon's design and making them more friendly or cute, it becomes more appealing as a

partner to *Pokémon*'s primary market of young children, which is instrumental to the main objective in the games of befriending Pokémon, while retaining a Japanese aesthetic (Allison 384). Steering some Pokémon's appearances and personalities away from the terrifying ones of most *yōkai* also better distinguishes which Pokémon are designed to be partners and which are intentionally designed to be powerful and aggressive. This tactic adapts traditional Japanese folklore characters in a creative but subtle way and keeps each Pokémon unique, in turn making their individual personalities more exciting for the player to discover.

Despite the common observation that most Japanese products have lost their "cultural aroma" (Allison 383), *Pokémon* is an obvious exception to that trend. While many core traits of the games are not uniquely Japanese, such as the regions inspired by countries outside of Asia like Spain and France or the role-playing game style, references to Japanese culture and folklore still appear in every new installment, especially in the Pokémon themselves. By using *yōkai* to inspire the franchise's characters, the Pokémon gain interesting backstories for the player to learn about and visual traits that make them memorable, especially to someone without extensive knowledge of Japanese folklore. However, by adapting the characters to become cuter, more loyal and friendly, or otherwise modifying their character, they also become more modernized, better matching the feel of the *Pokémon* series and the target demographic of young children. *Pokémon*'s approach to character and overall game design allows players to engage with a world that is rich in non-Western cultural ideas and characters but still interests players of any national origin thanks to its interactive and competitive gameplay style. It provides a blueprint for how to adapt Japanese stories and characters into modern media and shows that not only can traditional Japanese culture be modernized in countless ways, but that it also still has relevance in the modern world and can be a crucial part of the appeal for a successful international product.

Works Cited

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