

Monstera pocketii*: The Botanical Vitality of *Pokémon

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The over one thousand fantastical creatures that populate the world of the *Pokémon* franchise have been the subject of scholarly writing on their ability to raise popular environmental awareness (Dorward et al. 2017), relationship to millennial Japanese culture (Allison 2006), and apologetics for animal cruelty (Walsh 2014). Common to these arguments is an emphasis on framing the Pokémon themselves as representations of animals, connecting this scholarship to wider representational discourses in games and screen studies (Chang 2019; Bianchi 2024). Following Claire Colebrook's call to foster ecocritical thought through a "more intensified disenchantment and evacuation of meaning" (2014, 55), this paper estranges its discussion of *Pokémon* from this representational approach to screen media in order to emphasize elements of its media ecology that exceed the category of the animal. Existing screen studies scholarship already contains analyses of the biological qualities of media as distinct from representations of animals, but this still focuses predominantly on animal life for these comparisons (Parikka 2010; Flusser and Bec 2012; Brown and Fleming 2020). This paper performs its theoretical abstraction by emphasizing the plant-like qualities of Pokémon and that of the franchise itself in its construction of a virtual "living surface" atop the material world (Gil-Fournier and Parikka 2024). This botanical framework does not preclude further representational readings of the franchise, enriching existing discourses on textual elements such as the "Grass type", consumable herbal items, as well as existing analyses on the animal like qualities of Pokémon. Indeed, ethical critiques of the Pokéball as a form of confinement are not as self apparent if one shifts their metaphorical referent from a cage to a pot.

Sean Morey and Jason Crider coin the term "Hyperanimal" to describe the aspects of Pokémon that not only exceed animality through their virtual and fantastical existence, but serve as an example for discussions of "emerging, networked beings traditionally understood as simply nonhuman animals" (2019, 289). One can find an intellectual scaffold for the properties of this form of life that fall outside the bounds of the animal in the "excessive" vitality of plants (Marder 2013). That the cognitive and communicative capacities of plant life exceeds our animal senses' apprehension

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of them (Hayles 2017, 20) does not mean that we cannot use terms like ‘feel’, ‘think’, or ‘want’ in relation to these forms of life, even if such language requires a significant re-evaluation of these terms as they apply to humans as well. The biochemical mechanisms that facilitate inter-plant communications are difficult to conceptualize as agential, but it is through their entanglements with humans that their affective qualities can be discerned and reified through human creativity (Hustak and Myers 2012). Plants therefore offer a model of describing communication between animal and non-animal life in a way that retains an emphasis the forms of agency commonly used by animals like ourselves. A well-used example of animal-plant communication is that of orchids that mimic female wasps as a means of attracting male pollinators as described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2013). This “transversal communication (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 10) is taken up by Donna Haraway as an example of interspecies artistic production (2016, 69). Just as the communication between the wasp and the orchid exceeds the wasp’s perceived engagement with another wasp, so too do our engagements with Pokémon exceed our perception of a virtual “animal”. This production of transverse images also affords scholarly engagements with the virtual as an ontological category (Guattari 1995, 83), complementing discussions of the technological virtuality of *Pokémon*.

This liminality within cultural understandings of animal, plant, and machinic agency is exemplified by the portrayal of Pokémon modelled after carnivorous plants. These organisms are themselves strongly associated with the uncanniness of botanical vitality through their ostensible violation of its perceived passivity. Carnivorous plant Pokémon such as Victreebel and Carnivine themselves make up a large portion of all screen depictions of carnivorous plants, but academic writing on this topic scarcely mentions the franchise (Meeker and Szabari 2019; Keetley and Tenga 2016; Sánchez Verdejo Pérez and Poveda Arias 2023). This paper contends that *Pokémon* is the most significant contemporary media portrayal of carnivorous plants, further warranting its inclusion within critical plant studies. The sinister liminality of these virtual insectivores contrasts with the franchise’s insistence that Pokémon are indeed “*our best friend, in a world we must defend*” (1999), drawing our attention to the cultural lacuna within any relationship we forge with the non-human. Following this thread, this paper hopes that the seeds it sows through its study of virtual plants, will germinate and take root within emerging discourses on thinking machines, and the tempestuous agency of a rapidly changing biosphere.

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