

1 Enchanted Commodities

Peter and His *Yu-Gi-Oh!*

The boy is sixteen years old: a good student, a star athlete, and college-bound. A colleague's son, Peter is polite but bored as we chat on a warm North Carolinian fall day in 2003. When the subject turns to hobbies, however, and I ask about Japanese fads, the sober-looking youth immediately transforms. Practically jumping out of his seat, he announces, "I'm obsessed with *Yu-Gi-Oh!*"—an obsession his father confirms while confessing total ignorance about the phenomenon himself. A media-mix complex of trading cards, cartoon show, comic books, video games, movie, and tie-in merchandise that became the follow-up global youth hit on the heels of *Pokémon*, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* entered the U.S. marketplace in 2001, promoted by the New York-based company 4Kids Entertainment. Here, as my teenage interviewee makes clear, lies a fantasy world where monsters, mysteries of ancient Egypt, and tough opponents all entwine in card play—his preferred venue of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* play, as well as that of his (mostly male) high school buddies.

As I learned from fieldwork over the last decade, there is a veritable boom these days in Japanese fantasy goods among American youth. This is not the first time, of course, that U.S. mass culture has been influenced by Japan; Japanese cartoons like *Speed Racer* have played for years, for example, and *Godzilla* was such a hit in the 1950s, it spawned Japanese monster sequels for decades. But as one twenty-something young man told me recently, J-pop (Japanese pop) is far more ubiquitous today. According to him, properties like *manga* (comic books) and *anime* (animation) are "kicking our ass" because they are better, more imaginative, and way beyond what Hollywood can muster in terms of edginess, storytelling, and complex characterizations. The comparison with American pop culture is instructive. For what is new here is not simply the presence of Japanese properties in the

United States or the emergence of American fans (I routinely meet diehards who, raised on *Godzilla* or *Speed Racer* as youths, have carried the flame into middle age). Rather, it is the far greater level of influence of Japanese goods in the U.S. marketplace these days and upon the American national imaginary/imagination.

As with Peter, part of the appeal of the game play is its novelty. Whether because of the Japanese script, foreign references, or visual design, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* has a feel that is distinctly non-American. Retaining, even purposely playing up, signs of cultural difference is more the trend today than simple Americanization of such foreign imports.

In 2003, for example, when the popular Japanese youth (comic) magazine *Shōnen Jump* was released in the United States, it was formatted to be read Japanese style, from right to left. Yet, why such an aesthetic is enticing seems to do “less with a specific desire for things Japanese than for things that simply represent some notion of global culture”—as a reporter writing in the *New York Times* has said about the current *manga* craze in the United States. For the “Google generation,” worldliness is both an asset and a marker of coolness (Walker 2004:24). But whether the attraction is coded as global culture or as culturally Japanese, it involves not only a perceived difference from American pop but also a constructed world premised on the very notion of difference itself—of endless bodies, vistas, and powers that perpetually break down into constituent components that reattach and recombine in various ways. And, as with Peter and his *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards, the pleasure of play here is studying, mastering, and manipulating these differences: an interactive activity by which something foreign soon becomes familiar.

Pokémon at LAX

It is a fall day in 1999, and a crowd of children gathers excitedly by a window at LAX airport. Gazing at the runway in front of them, they are captivated by a 747 just landing from Japan that has been magically transformed into a huge flying monster toy (figure 1). Cartoonishly drawn down the side of the aircraft is a figure recognizable even by adults: yellow-bodied and red-cheeked Pikachu, the signature fantasy creature from the biggest kids' craze of the decade, *Pokémon*. Known for its cuteness and electric powers, Pikachu is one of the original 151 *pokémon* (short for “pocket monsters”; there are now more than 300) that inhabit an imaginary world crafted onto a media-mix entertainment complex of electronic games, cartoons, cards,



Figure 1. Mobile culture/character carriers: the ANA *Pokémon* jet. (Courtesy of Shōgakukan Production.)

movies, comic books, and tie-in merchandise.¹ By 1999, what had started modestly as a Game Boy game in Japan three years earlier had become a megacorporation and the hottest kid property in the global marketplace. Given the currency and spread of the *Pokémon* phenomenon, it is hardly surprising that children would thrill at the sight of its popular icon Pikachu plastered on the side of what otherwise would be a mere vehicle of transport. More remarkable is that an airline, a business usually prone to promoting the “seriousness” of its service to adults, would willingly turn itself into an advertisement and carrier for a children’s pop character. Remarkable as well is the fact that this fantasy fare causing such a splash in the United States came not from Disney or Hollywood but from Japan.

For the children hugging the window at LAX airport, excitement comes from seeing a familiar pop figure extended onto what is a new and unexpected playing field: a passenger plane. Yet for those traveling inside the car-

rier, the encounter goes much further than an external facade; it defines, in fact, the entire flight experience. Attendants dress in *pokémon*-adorned aprons, and passengers are surrounded by images of the pocket monsters on everything from headrests to napkins to food containers and cups. For in-flight entertainment, there are *Pokémon* movies and videos. And, disembarking from the plane, passengers receive a goody bag (like those at a birthday party) filled with *Poké*-treats—a notebook, badge, tissue container, comb. To fly on an All Nippon Airways (ANA) *Pokémon* jet is akin to visiting a theme park; it means total submergence in *Poké*-mania, from the body of the plane to one's own bodily consumption of food and fun. According to an ANA ad aimed at Japanese children, such an atmosphere promises not only recreation but also intimacy and warmth: "It's all *Pokémon* inside the plane. Your happy *Pokémon* friends are waiting for you all!!!" (*Kinai wa zenbu Pokémon da yo. Tanoshii Pokémon no nakamatachi ga minna o matteru yo*). Commodities of play and travel become personal friends on an ANA jet thematized as pop culture.

Another ad, directed as much to adults as to kids, evokes similar sentiments (figure 2). The image, drawn to resemble the material of a snuggly sweater, shows a huge smiling figure of Pikachu set against a background of a blue sky dotted with fluffy white clouds. Flying into Pikachu's tummy and scaled at about one-tenth the figure's size is an ANA plane that looks as if it is trying to cuddle up against the monster. The cartoon plane has a disproportionately large head and a small tail that flips up cutely as if it were a baby bird practicing its flying technique. Against what is both a playful image and an image of playfulness, the message reads across the top, "Enjoy Japan!" or "Make Japan fun!" (*"Nippon o tanoshiku shimasu!"*). Here the referent for fun has shifted; *Pokémon* jets are not only imaginary friends but also vehicles for viewing, experiencing, and selling Japan. By appropriating Pikachu, this ad sells domestic travel around Japan for ANA airlines but also carries another message about the prominence of Japanese play industries in a national economy that has suffered a debilitating recession since the bursting of the Bubble in 1991. Exports in fantasy and entertainment goods (comic books, animated cartoons, video games, consumer electronics, digital toys) have skyrocketed in the last decade, providing much needed revenues at home and making Japan not so much a fun site (as the ad promotes) as a leading producer of fun in the global marketplace today. Douglas McGray (2002), an American reporter, has referred to this as Japan's GNC (gross national cool), noting how the stock in Japanese cultural goods has recently soared (the *Pokémon* empire alone has sold \$15 billion in



Figure 2. Plane as jumbo toy: advertisement for the ANA *Pokémon* jet. (Courtesy of Shōgakukan Production.)

merchandise worldwide). Here the commodification of play becomes a national resource and cultural capital for Japan.

Crossover Vehicles/Global Culture

In such crossover character goods as *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and the ANA *Pokémon* jets, Japanese “cool” is traveling popularly and profitably around the world and insinuating itself into the everyday lives and fantasy desires of postindustrial kids from Taiwan and Australia to Hong Kong and France. This global success in transactions of images, imaginary characters, and imaginative technology marks Japan’s new status in the realm of what is sometimes called soft power (by Joseph Nye and others) and cultural power (by the mass media and government officials in Japan). This is a recent development, because even when Japan was most economically strong (through the Bubble years and at the height of its economic superpowers in the 1980s), its influence in the sphere of culture (images, ideas, films, publications, lifestyle pursuits, novels) penetrated little further than its own national borders. Curiously, though, along with the bursting of the Bubble, Japan has started to soar in one domain of its economy: creative goods whose value outside (as

well as inside) the country is taking off like never before. And, at the same time that Japan's place in cultural production rises in the worldwide marketplace, so does the hegemony once held in this sphere by the so-called West and particularly the United States begin to erode.²

What interests me in these new global flows of Japanese children's properties are the ways in which fantasy, capitalism, and globalism are conjoined and (re)configured in toys like *Yu-Gi-Oh!* trading cards and an ANA *Poké-jet*. The lines between these categories blur here, for whereas *Yu-Gi-Oh!* is more clearly a play product marketed to youth, a *Poké-jet* extends the meaning of "playtoy" in a new direction by (also) being a clever marketing strategy to extend profits for a capitalist corporation not usually associated with children's entertainment. Further, according to some people at least, both these products are also vehicles of/for Japan's "cultural power"—high-tech fun goods that, in traveling popularly around the world these days, are spreading Japan's reputation as a first-class producer of imaginative fare. As a group of American kids (aged eight to eighteen) told me in 2000, the associations they hold of Japan are neither of kimonos, tea ceremonies, or kamikaze pilots nor of Honda, Toyota, or Mitsubishi but of Nintendo video games, Sony's Walkman, and *Pokémon*. It is as consumers and players of Japanese *manga*, *anime*, video games, trading cards, and entertainment technology (Walkman, Game Boy, Sony PlayStation) that postindustrial youth today—an ever-increasing demographic in consumerism more generally—relate to Japan.³ And, given their abiding fandom of such properties, many of these kids also said they hoped to learn about Japan, study the language, and travel there one day. This is a fascinating shift from the early postwar period, when few American kids were interested in studying Japan at all, to the 1980s (the era of the Bubble economy), when Japanese-language classes were filled by eager American students hoping to do business someday in Japan, to the present, when Japanese fantasy creations are inspiring a wave of Japanophilia among American and global youth.

What exactly is it about Japanese *anime* or video games that is driving such a worldwide appetite to consume these virtual landscapes and imaginary fairy tales at this particular moment? Further, how are we to understand the interest(s) paid this "soft business" by the Japanese themselves, by a press that reports on the success of *Pokémon* overseas as front-page news, by writers who have proclaimed Japan the new "empire" of character goods, and by a government that is treating *manga* and *anime* like national treasures? From both sides, that is, made-in-Japan fantasy goods are becoming invested these days with particular kinds of (affective, aesthetic, financial,

trans/national) value in the global marketplace where they are bought and sold with much vigor.

How to excavate, decipher, and situate these sets of values is the aim of *Millennial Monsters*. To be sure, the orbit of the Japanese play market today is global, and this is how I refer to it throughout the book. I have chosen, however, to focus on two specific sites in this traffic: Japan as the generator and the United States as one of many consumer marketplaces for Japanese cultural goods today. This is in part because these are the two sites in which I have lived and conducted research, but also because of the long-standing and particular attributes the United States brings to this nexus of trade/politics/play/power with Japan. Because of its size and wealth, the United States is a coveted market. It is also loaded with symbolic cachet for the dominance U.S. cultural industries have held in setting the trends and standards of mass entertainment around the world. In Japan, too, and particularly during the decades following its defeat and occupation by the United States, American influence on popular culture and, more generally, on shaping desires for a lifestyle marked by modernity, materialism, and McDonald's has been strong.

But in this era of late-stage capitalism and post-cold war geopolitics, global power has become more decentered, and American cultural hegemony has begun to disperse. In what Iwabuchi Kōichi (2002) refers to as the "recentering" of globalization, there is a rise today in new sources of cultural influence in global trendsetting (such as Japan) and also an expansion of new consumer marketplaces (such as China). As he and other scholars have pointed out, it is important to study such recentered globalization outside the scope of a Western anchor: looking, as he does, for example, at how Japan operates as a cultural broker and power in the "inter-Asia" region (of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, Thailand).⁴ Equally important, however, is to test what is happening in the old center of global culture itself, the United States, examining what kind of influence Japanese goods are actually exerting in the market and on the imaginations of American kids in this moment of changing globalization.

Throughout *Millennial Monsters*, I tack between Japan and the United States and move dialectically between the level of fantasy and play and that of context and the politico-economic marketplace. The book is organized around three main issues: (1) fantasy—the composition and grammar given to the imaginary characters and fanciful world(view)s at work in specific entertainment products from Japan that have been globally successful in recent years; (2) capitalism—the ways in which these products are marketed

for both domestic and global sales, and are inflected and shaped by the conditions in which children actually live in specific places (namely, the United States and Japan); and (3) globalization—how the flow of Japanese character goods into the globalized market of the United States actually takes place and is invested with certain (and competing) meanings, interests, and identities (such as Japanese, American, and transcultural).

A case in point is Miyazaki Hayao's evocative *anime* movie *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (*Spirited Away*). Released in 2001 by Studio Ghibli, *Spirited Away* was the highest-earning movie to date in Japan and won an Academy Award in the United States for best animated film (in 2002). In Japan, sentiments congealed around what the movie expressed about lost (cultural) values. A tale about displacement and loss (a young girl, moving to a new town, is temporarily stuck in an abandoned theme park and is separated from her parents, who are turned into pigs for their slothful eating habits), the movie is also redemptive (the girl learns how to work in a bathhouse for spirits and, trusting in herself and her new loyalties to spirited allies, earns the return of her family to the "real" world). The movie is arguably an allegory about millennial capitalism, as all the characters save Sen (the young girl, whose name is changed to Chihiro) are grossly self-interested and materialistic (her parents pig out on food, and her fellow workers in the bathhouse gorge on everything from leftover food to the gold dispensed by "No-face," the mysterious spirit who also consumes a few workers in return). Notably, the heroine becomes a paragon not only of hard work and loyalty to friends but also of sobriety; she refuses to consume anything (figure 3) except two old-fashioned rice balls (*onigiri*), which, given to her by Haku, her new friend, she forces down along with tears.⁵ These rice balls—a sign of traditional food, traditional values—were reproduced as a plastic toy and accompanied the release of *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* in Japan; embodying the pathos evoked by the film, they circulated as a mini-fad for months.⁶

In the United States, *Spirited Away*—released by Disney—earned rave reviews from both critics and audiences, making it one of the most popular Japanese movies to circulate in the United States (*Pokémon: The First Movie*, beat it in sales, however, though *Shall We Dance?*, released in 1997 and considered a success at the time, earned far less).⁷ By contrast, Miyazaki's earlier *anime* *Princess Mononoke*, released in November 1998 (the same week as *Pokémon: The First Movie*), did far less well and was treated as obscure Japanese fare. Why *Spirited Away* was so much better received is undoubtedly due to a number of factors, including the fact that adults flocked to the theater (much as in Japan, where *anime* is considered a



Figure 3. Refusing gold: the anticonsumption stance of Sen in Miyazaki Hayao's *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (*Spirited Away*). (From the book *Spirited Away*, vol. 4 [San Francisco: VIZ Media]; courtesy of Studio Ghibli.)

serious medium not limited to kids).⁸ And what they, as well as children, picked up about the film was a story with an intriguing and different cultural coding: one whose appeal came largely, it seems, from the intermixture of a spirit world (otherworldly, haunting, intriguing) with that of a contemporary, modern, and familiar setting. The fantasy here triggered not nostalgia for lost traditions but fascination with something different: the recognizable signs of modernity (dislocation, separation, and materialism) reenchanting with spirits, witches, and a tough girl—what Arif Dirlik has called the “articulation of native culture into a capitalist narrative” (1997:71). What precisely was appreciated and understood in the fantasy of *Spirited Away* differed, that is, between these two audience bases. Yet both brought to it shared experiences as well: of living in a world conditioned by postindustrialism, global capitalism, and—as their contingent effects—dislocation, anxiety, and flux.

Where's the Fix?

Animistic Technology and Polymorphously Perverse Play

Similar to the way in which *Pokémon* moves from mere images on the exterior of an aircraft to the total immersive experience of a flying theme park, there is a polymorphous perversity in Japanese play products in how they spread—and incite desires—across various surfaces, portals, and avenues for

making and marketing fun. As Freud ([1910] 1963) has used the term, pleasure that is polymorphously perverse extends over multiple territories, can be triggered by any number of stimuli, is ongoing rather than linear, and invites a mapping of gendered identity that is more queer than clear.⁹ Such a construction of pleasure, I will argue, is key to the appeal of Japanese play products—the reason they have earned world renown and have sold so successfully in the global marketplace of popular (kids’) culture today.¹⁰ Indeed, the spread of kid-oriented fantasy creations across ever-new borders, media, and technologies defines this business more than anything, making Japanese children’s goods a ubiquitous presence in a world itself marked by shifting identities, territories, and commodity trends.

These properties, recognized worldwide as the cutting edge of postindustrial youth and blended, as in the case of ANA, with capital(ism)s of various kinds, include Game Boy (Nintendo’s handheld game system); Walkman (Sony’s portable tape player that revolutionized music listening); the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (the live-action television show, originally produced by Tōei Studios, that ignited a worldwide “morphin” craze in the mid-1990s); Hello Kitty (the cute white cat by Sanrio currently boasting thirty-five hundred specialty shops around the world); *Mario Brothers* (video software by Nintendo, whose Mario is more popular with American kids today than Mickey Mouse); *Sailor Moon* (a cartoon and comic about female superheroes with toy merchandise marketed by Bandai); *tamagotchi* (Bandai’s handheld electronic game that hatches a virtual, digital pet); and, of course, *Pokémon*. In all these goods, polymorphous perversity is produced, at one level, through marketing and product development. A property that begins in one iteration is continually refashioned and regrafted onto new forms (from a Game Boy game to an ANA *Poké*-jet, for example).

But what is considered a principle of perpetual innovation (or perpetual obsolescence) in product design, in fact, drives capitalist production all over the world today and is not in itself unique to Japan (except perhaps in degree). Far more distinctive is how the very construction of fantasy across the spectrum of Japan’s “soft power” is itself one of polymorphous perversity—of mixing, morphing, and moving between and across territories of various sorts. In the television series *Power Rangers*, for example, teenagers transform into warriors empowered by both spirits and cybernetic technology to battle evil foes. In the technology of Walkman, the act of listening to music is transformed from a more stationary soundscape into the body itself, becoming a prosthetic attachment/experience. Such a logic of creative reconstruction is particularly well suited to today’s world of rapid change, speeded-up economy, and flows (of people, goods, ideas, and capital) across

geographic borders marking global capitalism. It accounts, in part, for the zeal with which Japanese cool has been taken up by (kid) consumers around the world today; its techno-spun fantasies of mutable identities and disjunctive imaginaries are in sync with lived experiences of fragmentation, mobility, and flux.

But why has Japan assumed the cutting edge in a popular play aesthetics that could be called postmodern, in what theorists of late capitalism call the cultural logic of late capitalism, or virtuality, in what Manuel Castells calls the cultural logic of today's informational global capitalism (Castells 1996; Harvey 1989; Jameson 1984)? Is there something distinctive about Japan as a particular place/culture/history or about Japanese cultural industries that accounts for the production of a fantasy style that is gaining so much currency in global circuits today? I want to suggest that Japanese "cool" is certainly rooted in the industry itself—in the design, marketing, and creative strategies that have been adopted and promoted through consumptive practices over the years—but also, and more important in my mind, is the influence of two other factors: one historical and the other involving consumer aesthetics. The first factor is the specific conditions and policies in postwar Japan that shaped both the nation's mass fantasies and the vehicles through which they are communicated in particular ways. This starts with the wholesale disruption, defeat, and despair Japan found itself in following the war that fed a popular imaginary in the 1950s of mixed-up worlds, reconstituted bodies, and transformed identities—monstrosities of various types. This was exemplified by the movie spectacle *Gojira* (*Godzilla*), which, released in 1954 and spawning a host of monster sequels, featured a country terrorized by a prehistoric beast that, thanks to nuclear testing by Americans in nearby waters, mutates into an atomic weapon. Though Japan's historical fate at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was rendered dystopically in *Gojira*, the country's exposure to New Age technology was configured far more utopically in what was arguably the other most popular mass fantasy of the early postwar period, *Tetsuwan Atomu* (Mighty Atom).

Designed as a *manga* and, later, a television cartoon by Japan's leading animator, Tezuka Osamu, *Tetsuwan Atomu* was a high-tech robot, crafted by the head of the Ministry of Science as a replacement for the son he lost in an accident. With a boyish body, admirable character traits (sweet, industrious, altruistic), and mechanical superpowers (including a nuclear reactor as a heart), Atomu embodied the future of Japan: a technological powerhouse rebuilt from the dead. Both these pop icons from the 1950s were hybrid entities that, birthed from horrendous events, cross over and remix different eras. Following the concept of polymorphous perversity, they also

were figures at odds with what Freud called the paternal signifier: a father figure dictating the familial drama by which normal/normative desires are structured.¹¹ Atomu is a boy (whose “father” abandons him for not growing bigger like a real boy and later becomes deranged), and Gojira is a monstrous antifather (trying to destroy rather than defend the human world). Reflected historically here, amid all the other upheavals experienced by Japan/ese following the war, is the collapse of paternal authority (from the desacralizing of the emperor to the national condemnation of the military leaders who had misled the country into a disastrous war—a discrediting of fathers that trickled down to the male soldiers who returned to the family and household, where adult men no longer commanded ultimate respect). Thus, the dismembering of the nation—physically, psychologically, socially—in wartime and the postwar years helped propel a particular fantasy construction I am referring to here as one of polymorphous perversity: of unstable and shifting worlds where characters, monstrously wounded by violence and the collapse of authority, reemerge with reconstituted selves. By contrast, the 1950s in the United States was an era of (comparative) domestic stability and postwar pride yielding a different tropic orientation in pop culture: the presumption of family intactness and paternal authority underwriting such shows as *Father Knows Best*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, and *Leave It to Beaver*.

But another factor is at work in the development of a consumer and entertainment style internationally recognized today as “Japanese.” This is more an aesthetic proclivity, a tendency to see the world as animated by a variety of beings, both worldly and otherworldly, that are complex, (inter)changeable, and not graspable by so-called rational (or visible) means alone. Drawn, in part, from religious tendencies in Japan, these include Shintoism (an animist religion imparting spirits to everything from rivers and rocks to snakes and the wind) and Buddhism (a religion routed from India through China adhering to notions of reincarnation and transubstantiation). To be clear, I have no interest here in facile generalizations that pose animism as an essential, timeless component of Japanese culture as if the latter itself is stable, coherent, and homogenously shared by all Japanese (which it is not). Diverse orientations and behaviors certainly exist in Japan today (as in the past), and social trends have also changed, sometimes radically, over time. Yet it is also accurate to say that, fed in part by folkloric and religious traditions, an animist sensibility percolates the postmodern landscape of Japan today in ways that do not occur in the United States. Investing material objects and now consumer items with the sensation of (human/organic/spiritual) life, such New Age animism perpetually (re)en-

chants the lived world. This runs against the grain of Weber's thesis of the disenchantment accompanying capitalism. In this sense (and others), Japan offers an alternative capitalism to what modernization theory claimed in the 1950s would be the standardized (Western) form capitalism would take in any and all countries across the world.

This animist unconscious (a term I borrow from Garuba 2003) is particularly vibrant and noticeable in certain practices in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Japan. Included here is its industry of fantasy production where, in postwar properties like *Tetsuwan Atomu*, for example, one sees a universe where the borders between thing and life continually cross and intermesh.¹² The entire world here is built from a bricolage of assorted and interchangeable (machine/organic/human) parts where familiar forms have been broken down and reassembled into new hybridities: police cars are flying dog heads, and robots come in a diversity of forms from dolphins and ants to crabs and trees. Not only is boundary-crossing promiscuity rampant here, in the sense that there seems no limit to what can be conjoined and cross-pollinated with something else, but also technology (*mecha*) is a key component to the way life of all kinds is constituted—a priority the Japanese state placed on technology as well in its reconstruction efforts following the war. Taking account of the centrality of *mecha* in Japanese play goods throughout the postwar period to the present, I call this aesthetic *techno-animism*.

As we will see, techno-animism is a style that is deeply embedded in material practices of commodity consumerism. In reenchanting the everyday world (ANA jets that convert to a flying Pikachu), this linkage also reproduces a consumer capitalism tied to commodities that stand (in) for fun, release from everyday stress, and the warmth of intimacy and friendship (one is surrounded by "friends" when traveling on a *Poké-jet*). This is where polymorphous perversity (detached from fathers) and techno-animism (reconfiguring intimate attachments) join together.¹³ Plugging consumers into cutely fun techno-toys, properties like *Pokémon* provide access to imaginary worlds but also map the desire to find meaning, connection, and intimacy in everyday life onto commodified apparatuses (goods/machines). Brand-name goods and trendy or chic fashions are so fetishized in the popular consciousness in Japan as to make this a consumer culture of excessive proportions even in post-Bubble times. Affective ties are formed with such objects, particularly when they are endowed with techno-animism: a cell phone accessorized by a Pikachu strap, a Sony PlayStation equipped with a karaoke system for the home.

Social critics often lament the materialism of contemporary Japanese so-

ciety, referring to it as a culture of transparency where people value personal acquisitions far more than they do the interpersonal relations once so key, it is often believed, in social traditions. But this trend, too, has historical roots in the postwar period: the replacement of subjection to emperor and group by the primacy of the individual in the democratization following the war (and according to the strictures of the “democratic” constitution imposed by the occupying forces in 1947), and of the turn by the national polity from militaristic takeover of Asia to industrial production, with its goal of material abundance for Japanese citizens. Today, after decades of a corporatist drive to perform and a consumerist orientation to seek individual pleasure(s), there is a profound unease (*fuan*) in Japan, piqued by the current recession that has led to a rise in unemployment, layoffs, homelessness, and suicide. In this moment of economic downturn, there is nostalgia for a past that is remembered and (re)invented as utopically communitarian: a time when people were plugged into each other rather than into headsets or computers. In what is said to be today’s era of heightened “solitarism,” people seek out companionship, but ironically (or not), the form this often takes is commodification itself: a machine or toy purchased with money that is wired into the (individual) self. “Healing” and “soothing” (*iyasu, iyashikei*) are perpetual tropes in the marketplace of play goods these days, and increasingly adults as well as kids engage the animate inanimateness of fantasy fare as “friends,” or even “family.” Said to be a relief from the stresses caused by consumer capitalism (and its downswing in Japan since the bursting of the Bubble), such devices are also capitalistic: commodities and things that stand (in) for spirits and kin. Such encodings of intimacy, consumerism, and techno-social interactions are part of Japanese play equipment as it travels so popularly around the world today, becoming familiar and familial to global kids.

A Postmodern Currency: Character Merchandise

Since the 1970s the cyberpunk author William Gibson has written Japan into his novels as the frontier of the new cyber world order. His sci-fi descriptions of Japan bleed into those of the world at large: a landscape in which borders dissolve, bodies continually transform, virtuality is more real than reality, and space simultaneously collapses and opens up into multiple dimensions. This is a world not unlike that described by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* (2000), their study of global conditions at this moment of the millennial crossover. Today’s empire, they say, is a place where

the ideology of the world market dovetails with that of postmodernism, differences proliferate, and mobility, diversity, and mixture are the very conditions of possibility (for communities, corporations, existence). Space is always open, modernist distinctions (private/public, inside/outside, self/other) disappear, and power is exercised not through nations or disciplinary institutions (family, state, school) but through international bodies and corporations (the United Nations, the World Bank, Microsoft, CNN). In this era of globalization, *flexibility* and *portability* are keywords for the ways in which bodies, capital, and material objects continuously move through and inhabit (shifting) space.

Flexibility and portability are also signature features for the new wave of Japanese children's properties circulating so widely in the global marketplace. In the imaginative universe of this play empire, bodies of multiple kinds are broken down, recombined, newly invented, and fluidly transported (teenagers morph into cyborgs, virtual pets are raised on digital screens, ANA planes transform into *Pokémon* theme parks). This construction and characterization of play have been fostered by specific conditions and trends in postwar Japan. They are also resonant with the millennial era/world of empire in which postindustrial kids across the world are navigating the dispersals, fluctuations, and deterritorializations of everything from bodies and identities to relationships and basic sustenance. This book will examine how Japanese play properties articulate (in Stuart Hall's usage of the word) these different planes—postwar Japan/millennial empire, play/capitalism, culture/commodity, globalism/localism.

While my subject is the business of Japanese play, I am not interested in simply tracing the history and operation of the kids' entertainment industry in Japan. Rather, I aim to track the ways in which specific children's properties have emerged in Japan, have circulated in export markets outside Japan (specifically, the United States), and have been imprinted with meanings and pleasures of various kinds (including the new imprint of Japan as a producer of cuteness and "fun," as encoded in the ANA travel campaign). The book is organized around four waves of entertainment properties, selected for the timing and differential treatment and success with which they entered the U.S. and global marketplace, and also for the diversity of play product/fantasy they represent (superheroes, girl morphers, virtual pets, collectible monsters across the media of cartoon, comic book, electronic games, and media-mix empires). In all cases, I concentrate on the production and circulation of these entertainment waves within Japan, as well as their marketing and reception in the United States. My time frame runs from the year 1993, when the Japan-based *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (a live-