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# Japanese Seasonal Play

## A Prehistory of *Pokémon GO*



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The popularity of *Pokémon GO* has been credited to its branding by the Japanese multinational consumer electronics and video game company Nintendo, the technological innovations of the game's developer Niantic, and the historical traditions of European avant-garde locative play. The author, instead, offers a different explanation that involves a radical new take on *Pokémon GO*, pointing to its ancestry in the seasonal play of Japan. Based on his fieldwork during residencies at Studio Kura in Itoshima, Japan, and through Asialink at Tokyo Art and Space, he explores the Japanese roots of the game in insect collecting, shrine pilgrimage, leisure tourism, and stamp rallies as modes of play. He relocates the genealogy of *Pokémon GO* and invokes the largely untold history of Japanese seasonal play, both of which hold significant implications for the ways we consider and conceptualize pervasive and location-based games globally. **Key words:** *asobi*; insect collecting; Japanese religious pilgrimages; Japanese seasonal and location-based play; pervasive games; *Pokémon GO*; stamp rallies

### Introduction

IN THE SUMMER OF 2016, *Pokémon GO* “fever” swept the world. Appearing seemingly “out of nowhere” (Robson 2020), the sudden global rapture with *Pokémon GO* became impossible to ignore. In accounting for its abrupt emergence and incredible success, academic scholarship has explored the digital aspects of *Pokémon GO* with a focus on its mobile, locative, and augmented reality (AR) delivery for pervasive games—electronic games that extend play into the physical world. Additional scholarship placed *Pokémon GO* in a lineage of avant-garde physical and location-based play in urban environments. These range from early folk scavenger hunts and nineteenth-century flâneurism to the playful interventions of the twentieth-century Situationist International (S.I.)

and Fluxus artists to the urban play activities of the early twenty-first century (see de Souza e Silva and Hjorth 2009; Montola 2012; Stenros and Montola 2009; Leorke 2018; Keogh 2017; Davies and Innocent 2017). Histories of *Pokémon Go* have been extensively mapped.

Overlooked in these various accounts has been a history of Japan's own location-based and seasonal play—distinct activities and practices that informed the earliest versions of *Pokémon* and that come to be fully realized in *Pokémon GO*. As Koichi Iwabuchi (2004) convincingly argued, *Pokémon's* global success has relied on the removal of its Japanese origins to produce a culturally “odourless” product. Here, I wish to recover *Pokémon's* Japanese “aroma” by considering what is arguably the franchise's least Japanese product—*Pokémon GO*. My aim is twofold. I endeavor to trace the Japanese heritage of *Pokémon GO*, and, in the process, to reveal an untold history of Japanese locative games and seasonal play.

This body of research brings new attention to Japanese social, cultural, and religious practices that, I argue, constitute a deep history of *Pokémon GO*. Eschewing *Pokémon GO's* digital innovations—its smartphone interface, its augmented-reality imaging, and its precursor game, called *Ingress*, which have been well covered elsewhere—this study concentrates on the Japanese social practices and analogue technologies that inform the game. These include maps, indexes, ink stamps, administrative procedures of religious pilgrimage and insect collecting, infrastructures of tourism, and networks of railways and trains. Through ethnography undertaken in urban and regional Japan, I resurrect the Japaneseness of *Pokémon* and connect it to the historical and current locative practices of insect collecting, shrine pilgrimages, rail tourism, stamp gathering, and Japanese modes of play.

Japan's history of locative play blossoms with the transformation of religious pilgrimage into domestic tourism and manifests in collection rituals involving insects and varieties of ink stamps. I consider how once largely spiritual rituals became tourist attractions during the Meiji (1868–1912) and Taisho (1912–1926) eras yet remain cultural and economic forces today. With millions travelling each year (almost all by rail) to trace the sensory beauty of the spring *sakura* blossoming and autumn leaf reddening, or to sample local produce across the country's many distinct regions, or to sightsee, or to pay respect to deities at local temples, Japanese tourism has mingled, remixed, and gamified numerous traditional activities to create distinctly Japanese forms of *asobi* or play. *Pokémon* is but one manifestation of this phenomenon.

## Asobi—the Japanese Element of Play

What is Japanese play? The term asobi (遊び), although commonly translated as “play,” denotes something both broader and more precise. Its Hanzi pictogram alludes to its layered meanings. The original Chinese character (遊) denotes travel, tourism, or wandering (巡行), but the constituent character elements present a flag (旗) and a student (学子). At a textual and symbolic level, Japanese play is coded with markers of education and journey. In her expansive treatise interrogating the Japanese custom of play, Daliot-Bul (2014) emphasizes the respectful remixing of inherited culture as a defining feature of Japanese asobi. She recounts how Japanese arts and crafts demand rote learning of *katas*, or “ideal forms,” which are perfected and aestheticized through exacting repetition. Once internalized, a distinct sense of Japanese play finds expression through the subtle modification of these standardized forms. Daliot-Bul draws comparisons with Japanese fan communities who, with strict obedience to canon, replicate texts and imagery from popular manga and anime, altering elements—often almost imperceptibly—but only after a rigorous understanding of the original. These deviances from the original are at once errors, subjectivities, modes of creativity, and play.

Rupert Cox (2002), in his investigations of asobi, distinguishes sharp contrasts with Western interpretations of play. Although Western play is generally understood as free-form and spontaneous, Japanese play, Cox outlines, relies on discipline and order, and he deploys the austere terms *do* (道), which translates as “path” or “way,” and *shugyo* (修行), which translates as “self-enlightenment,” to describe it. These exacting disciplines of play, according to Cox, combine the “ludic and logical” to express a distinctly Japanese “relationship between nature and culture” (170). Both Daliot-Bul and Cox identify the creative recombination of the traditional and the contemporary as inherent to Japanese play.

Writing from within Japanese culture, Yoshida Mitsukuni offers the richest characterization. In his insightful study *Asobi: The Sensibilities at Play* (1987), Mitsukuni decisively augments Roger Caillois’s four categories of play (agon, alea, mimicry, and ilinx) by adding a fifth—the play of seasons. For Mitsukuni this includes cultivated activities such as flower arrangement, moon viewing, tea ceremony, and the “collection of crickets and other singing insects” (19)—highly refined and repeatable rituals that savor the natural elements evolved over countless generations. *Pokémon GO*, I argue, evokes Mitsukuni’s notion of seasonal play in its recollection and recombination of the established

seasonal activities of ritual, travel, collection and connoisseurship of traditions.

As the avid player well knows, *Pokémon* involves much more than collecting virtual insects. Its play is deep, requiring heavy excavation and learned connoisseurship of the collectible creatures to achieve the standing of an aficionado. The level of expertise encouraged by *Pokémon*'s transmedia products serve not only to embed franchise knowledge into consumers but also to reevoke understandings of the franchise's history and traditions (Keogh 2017). Christian McCrea (2017) calls attention to nostalgia as "critical to understanding how *Pokémon GO* operates culturally" (42) and expands on the game's dynamics to illuminate connections between *Pokémon GO* and previous decades of *Pokémon* games. Likewise, Hjorth and Richardson (2017) observe that, far from coming out of nowhere, *Pokémon GO* brings together "decades of mobile media, locative arts, gaming, and Japanese culture" (4). That the *Pokémon* universe has primed audiences to become aesthete collectors has been well demonstrated; I aim to elucidate how Japanese histories of collection practices run far deeper than previously understood. Tracing vectors of seasonal play through culture and religion and connecting them to *Pokémon GO*, I hope to open new understandings of Japanese histories of locative and seasonal play.

### Deep Histories of Collecting

Collecting, archiving, and play each evoke levels of sacredness—all are set apart from the everyday and the profane. Japanese rituals of collection or "getting" (*getto suru*) have been variously described as *otaku* (Lamarre 2004; Thiam Huat Kam 2013), "serial aesthetic" (Surman 2009) and "*Pokémon* capitalism" (Allison 2006). Common to these narratives has been the postwar intersection of Japanese and U.S. cultures and the ultimate melding of Western capitalist tendencies with Eastern cultural traditions. Within this academic territory, I seek to chart deeper vectors of travel and collection activities, based largely on what Mitsukuni (1987) has articulated as seasonal play—"forms of play symbolic of each of the seasons" (106).

In Japan, the sense of seasons is keenly felt. From the blanketing snow of winter to the suffocating humidity of summer, the saturating red leaves of autumn and pink cherry blossoms of spring, the extraordinary transformation of Japan's seasonal landscape is punctuated by festival and rituals with close links to folklore and animism. Mitsukuni, underscoring his notion of seasonal play,

notes that until the mid-nineteenth century, Japan's predominantly agricultural society was governed by the changing seasons, a fact still attested to by the country's myriad cultural entanglements with climate and nature.

Seasonal play exceeds the appreciation of seasons but manifests as earnest and cultivated relish for the contingencies those seasons bring. More than passive observation of the seasonal shift, seasonal play invites intense documentation, categorizing, and mapping of natural elements in all their vicissitudes. As Allison (2006) describes in her expansive treatise *Millennial Monsters*, the *Pokémon* franchise is equally steeped in the logics of natural history, presenting an encyclopedic and taxonomic "discourse of cartographies, categories, and charts," and "a game environment whose contours are grounded in nature (or 'fake nature')" (209). Seasonal play is both refined and comprehensive in detail.

The intensity of details and levels of commitment found in seasonal play evokes what Clifford Geertz (1973) characterized as "deep play"—a rapturous enthusiasm for play in which the stakes are so high that it becomes illogical for an individual to participate. Miracle (2015) applies Geertz's deep play to *Pokémon*, suggesting that its tournament structure, levels of social competition, and rapturous player involvement extend far beyond casual pastime. Miracle directly connects the Balinese cockfighting studied by Geertz with Japanese insect collecting, tracing both to Tang dynasty China, while underscoring their mutual focus on amiable interspecies relationships. For both Geertz and Miracle, deep play results in no clear win or loss, but it ultimately serves as a cultural ritual that reaffirms and preserves the traditions and the game itself. Yet deeper histories of seasonal play can be found.

Hinting at the origins of seasonal play, Mitsukuni (1987) reflects on how the collection of shellfish insects, crabs, and fish might evoke the "vague memories of an age" when such flora and fauna were hunted and gathered as crucial elements of the ancient diet (19). Similar scholarship by Gray (2009) situates playful attitudes within the hunter-gatherer societies in humanity's distant past. From an evolutionary psychological perspective, Gray proposes that in hunter-gatherer societies, the sharing of resources among adults took on game-like qualities, while children acquired the skills, knowledge, and values of their culture through free play and exploration. Such educational play, Gray notes, had serious implications. Nuts, berries, and mushrooms could prove fatal if incorrectly ingested, and insects could be edible, playful, or deadly depending on the variety. Moreover, certain fish and fungi could nourish, kill, or even reveal God to those who ate them. Therefore, arcane knowledge was mandatorily maintained to hunt, gather,

prepare, and consume these protein-rich food sources. In aspects of seasonal play, we can identify this encyclopedic lore detailing the traits, powers, and physical attributes of edible morsels, information that has been passed between generations and embedded into culture and religion. Through a long series of adaptations, such as those explored here, seasonal play evolves into new and sophisticated forms. In this way, *Pokémon GO* represents a hauntology of ancient practices of survival, now dynamically and playfully manifest in new guises.

## Methodology

I based my findings on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in Southern and Central Japan in the second half of 2017. Embedded within the context in which these practices occur, I observed playful locative activities and conversed and engaged with their practitioners in hopes of developing a “thick description” (Amit 2000; Geertz 1973, 5) of the phenomena. I have attempted to explore and explain these phenomena in context to make them meaningful for the reader. I am not Japanese, and I have only a partial understanding of Japan’s language and culture. As an outsider with Japanese culture as my subject of study, I have worked to avoid the exoticizations that sometimes plagues intercultural scholarship, although I recognize how embedded they are in the “quintessentially Western” anthropologic and ethnographic methods upon which my research relies (Biolsi and Zimmerman 1997, 28). The very nature of my project highlighting Japanese trends and traditions cannot avoid some generalization and, thus, cultural essentialism. I weigh these risks against the equal danger of avoiding such scholarship altogether and leaving untold these histories of pervasive games and Japanese seasonal play.

My fieldwork took six months from June 2017 through December 2017. In June, I worked from Studio Kura in regional Fukuoka, where I joined children collecting crickets, beetles, and crabs in the mornings, witnessed vast swarms of dragonflies take flight over rice fields in the late afternoon, and participated in centuries-old tradition of firefly appreciation, watching their luminescence lighting the summer dusk. Through July and August, I travelled the island of Shikoku, mapping living practices at railway stamp rallies, shrine pilgrimages, and cicada-song appreciations—all activities that imbricated locative knowledge-sets, animistic Shinto ritual, domestic tourism, and traditional games and play. From September to December, while based at the Tokyo Art and Space arts

center in the nation's capital, I investigated the proliferation of stamp rallies across metropolitan train networks, festivals, museums, and cultural centers. Through engagement with literature, images, and objects online and in museum and libraries in metropolitan and regional Japan, I read about the practices I encountered, retracing the *goshuin* pilgrims, station-stamp *otaku*, and insect collectors through English and Japanese sources. In the months and years since the completion of this ethnography, I have bolstered my fieldwork findings with interdisciplinary scholarship spanning art, tourism, religion, entomology, and play. Still, the fieldwork undertaken in Japan in 2017 constitutes the central support for my findings.

### **Ethnographic Introduction**

There are no bullet trains on the Japanese island of Shikoku. Instead slow trains weave through the mountainous landscape. In August 2017, my wife and I were seated in one of these carriages trundling through the pulsing humidity. We gazed at the breathtaking mountain scenery, catching the eyes of fellow passengers seated adjacent. The carriage's internal architecture lent itself to sociability, and, before long, we were sharing stories and snacks. We fell into conversation with an older man undertaking a famous shrine route, the eighty-eight stops of Shikoku. In addition to his maps and a pilgrim hat, he brandished a small book bearing vermilion ink stamps from each shrine he had visited. My wife and I carried similar maps in a comparable book, except ours were for the collection of ink station stamps found at each train stop and aboard the train itself. At the next stop, a class of heavily equipped school children boarded the carriage brandishing hiking equipment, butterfly nets, other unwieldy paraphernalia for an insect-collecting expedition, and field guides for insects and maps. They too were collecting ink station stamps (see figure 1). Commonalities between the activities were abundantly clear. Each involved the seasonal collection of flora and fauna and images or locative motifs. And each opened out with vast encyclopedic back stories of the items amassed. Each constituted what I came to understand as seasonal play.





Figure 1. Comparing maps, stamps, and field guides with fellow passengers and seasonal players aboard the Shikoku regional train.

## Insect Origins

In *Pokémon GO*, as elsewhere across the *Pokémon* cosmology, players must collect ‘*Pokémon*’ (ポケモン) a portmanteau of “pocket monsters,” small creatures that resemble Japanese insect life but that are imbued with unique powers. Once captured, *Pokémon* can be trained and battled against other *Pokémon* at *PokéGyms*. Players can also visit *PokéStops*—buildings and landmarks where players can access *Pokéballs* or other in-game objects. The *Pokémon* franchise presents a detailed universe of simulated reality (Nakazawa 1997), and to master *Pokémon* is not simply to become virtuosic at playing the game but to develop detailed knowledge and connoisseurship of the game’s branded wilderness and its creature inhabitants (Keogh 2017). *Pokémon*’s fabricated nature bears strong and clear resemblances to actual Japanese wildlife and physical landscapes. Fan communities have mapped *Pokémon* locales to Japanese regions, while academic scholarship has established numerous links between *Pokémon* and manga characters, Japanese insect life, and Shinto deities. Surman (2009) demonstrates that Ken Sugimori’s designs for the original 151 *Pokémon* characters drew heav-



ily from Japanese manga styles and miniature wildlife. Allison (2006) submits that *Pokémon* demonstrate a kind of “techno-animism,” imbuing digital technologies with a spirit or soul. For Shelomi and colleagues (Shelomi et al. 2012) and Kawahara (2007) respectively, the radical transformation of insects during metamorphosis from egg to caterpillar (larva) to chrysalis (pupa) to butterfly are mirrored in *Pokémon* where an egg hatches into a Caterpie, which turns into a Metapod, and then ends up as a Butterfree. The ecological, ethological, morphological connections between *Pokémon* and existent biology have been forensically mapped within arthropod (Prado and Almeida 2017), entomological (Kittel 2018), and ichthyological domains (Mendes et al. 2017). The visual, biological, and spiritual relationships between Japanese insect life and *Pokémon* are securely established.

Nonetheless, a deeper understanding of the insect phylum central to this study is required. It should be noted that the English word “insect” as a translation of the Japanese term *mushi* is imprecise. The ethnocategory *mushi*, as shown by Laurent (1995), is a much broader folksonomy, with varying interpretations differently held according to location, age, and gender. Through a semantic analysis of the ideograms combined with fieldwork in rural Japan, Laurent suggests that, although most Japanese people tend to recognize all insects as *mushi*, for many the term spans beyond the arthropod phylum to include fish, crabs, frogs, other small animals, and even fungi and other flora. Given the vast menagerie and morphological variability of the now 869 species of *Pokémon*, it is perfectly apparent that *mushi* rather than insects alone are the inspirational force behind these fictional creatures.

Locating and collecting *mushi* as a form of seasonal play constitutes the foundational activity from which *Pokémon* play has evolved. In a key anecdote instructive of *Pokémon*'s roots, game creator Satoshi Tajiri recalls growing up in Machida, Tokyo, at the edge of suburban limits in a fertile playground of miniature wildlife. Like many Japanese youth, Tajiri would spend the warmer months collecting *mushi* found abundantly in the local swamplands and waterways (Acorn 2009; Kritsky and Smith 2018). These creatures were captured, nurtured, and skirmished in sumo style bouts against *mushi* collected by other children. Tajiri's childhood neighborhood would undergo its own metamorphosis during the 1980s. The verdant ponds, swamps, and rice fields of Machida were swallowed up by Tokyo's expansion and supplanted with apartment buildings, convenience stores, and shopping malls. Video game arcades replaced Tajiri's attention and his former locations of play. In a 1999 interview discussing his

motivations for creating the original *Pokémon* game, Tajiri cites a desire to provide new generations of children the same exhilarating interaction with nature he had once enjoyed (*Time* 1999).

Journalistic retellings of *Pokémon*'s history tend to mark out Tajiri's interest in bug collecting as uniquely eccentric (Plunkett 2011; *Time* 1999). However, the activity of insect collecting enjoys enormous popularity in Japan, and a lucrative industry surrounds it. Having seen firsthand, I find it difficult to overstate both the fecundity and diversity of Japan's insect life during summer and the impulse of children to collect them all. As a children's accomplice to insect collecting in regional Kyushu, I was awestruck by the swarming bounties of grasshoppers, frogs, and dragonflies that thrive in rice fields. Moreover, in daily commutes, I encountered schools of tiny bright red crabs that boldly challenged me from the roadside as I cycled past (see figure 2). One warm morning, I watched an absurdly large centipede, or *mukade* (ムカデ), trek across my bedroom floor, a creature I instinctively took to be venomous (see figure 3). When I later inquired about its lethality, I was reassured that deaths were rare, especially when compared to the enormous wasp-like *ōsuzumebachi* (大胡蜂), literally "great sparrow bee," that kills approximately twenty people in Japan each year. No wonder *Pokémon*'s ecology has been rendered inert through virtuality; actual *mushi* collecting is dangerous business. Accordingly, an exhaustive array of insect collecting guides, implements, and other entomological regalia can be found in a variety of Japanese stores (essentially analogues of *PokéStops*) that collectively boast an annual turnover of tens of millions of dollars.

Kawahara (2007) has explored how capturing *mushi* has been integrated into contemporary Japanese society in terms of education, breeding, and the commodification that surrounds them, as each year millions of Japanese children comb through the countryside collecting insects, small lizards, and crabs. Kawahara maps the extent to which insect collecting has become celebrated and commodified within Japanese culture, with beetles "sold in vending machines . . . [and] department stores . . . and [made] accessible via petting zoos" (144), underscoring that Japan's commercialization of entomological practices exists well outside of the *Pokémon* franchise. Seen in context, Satoshi Tajiri's insect collecting was far from an unusual activity. Not only were former politician Kunio Hatoyama (Yoshida 2016), philosopher Takeshi Yoro (Kamiya 2005), animator Kobayashi Junji, and manga artist Osamu Tezuka (Marran 2013) all passionate *mushi* collectors, but the practice is enjoyed widely throughout Japan.

Akin to the play activity of *Pokémon GO*, *mushi* collecting is organized

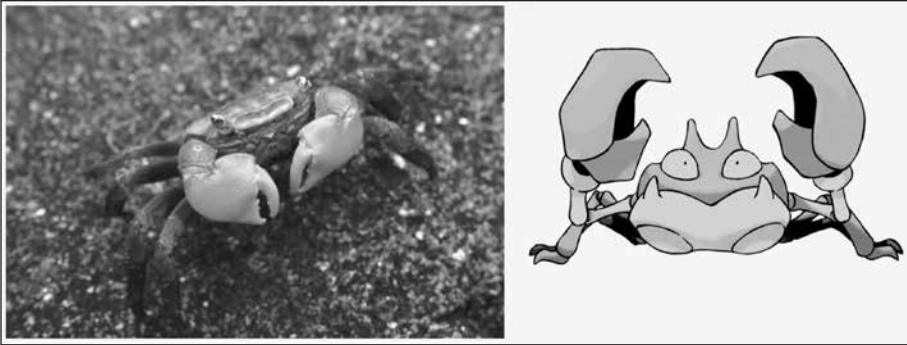


Figure 2. Left, a roadside marsh crab or Sawagani (淡水蟹) and right, its corresponding Pokémon: Krabby introduced in Generation I.

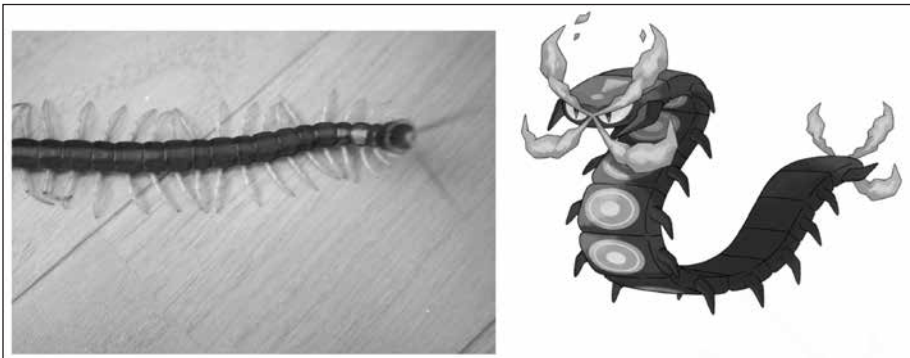


Figure 3. Left, a giant centipede or Makade (ムカデ) appears on my bedroom floor, and right, its corresponding Pokémon: Centiskorch introduced in Generation VIII.

temporally and spatially. Each species is linked (often symbolically representing) a place, a season, a time of day, a method of capture, and even a mode of play (Ryan 1996; Laurent 2000). As Laurent observes in a chapter concerning children, insects and play in Japan: “Games that concern *mushi* parallel the seasons.” (68). The traditions of insect collecting upon which *Pokémon* draws contains knowledge honed over centuries of insect habits and habitats in the seasonal cycle. Fastidiously documenting such information at the intersection of entomology and competition, Masuda’s *The Great Dictionary of Play* (1989) provides technical instructions concerning the gathering of flora and fauna and includes two sections concerned specifically with collecting *mushi*.

Visual correspondences and material clues reveal further links between

hunting *Pokémon* and insect collecting. For example, although captured insects in Japan have historically been housed in elaborate cages, for contemporary *mushi* collectors receptacles-at-hand such as lunchboxes, gift packages, and plastic containers operate as makeshift enclosures. In the mid-twentieth century, a flood of cheap plastic vessels arrived in Japan via U.S. toy vending machines. These plastic capsules became known locally as *gashapon* (ガシャポン). The vending machines dispensed small toys inside such plastic spherical packaging, receptacles that doubled as inexpensive cages for *mushi* collecting, fundamentally informing the visual design of *Pokéballs* (see figure 4). *Gashapon* vending machines soon became enormously popular and were installed extensively in convenience stores, train stations, and sightseeing spots, so that by the 1980s, their abundance made them appear more Japanese than American (Hornyak 2017). Nakazawa (1997) notes that when Tajiri first presented his game idea to Nintendo, it was not centred on “pocket monsters” but “capsule monsters” (93–94). Although the title did not survive, Sugimori’s designs for the *PokéBalls* closely reflect *gashapon* capsules in both their appearance and function as receptacles for small creatures.



Figure 4. *Pokémon* balls (left and right) and the Japan Rail *gashapon* (centre) from which they evolved. The word *gashapon* is onomatopoeia recalling the “gasha-gasha” sound of the hand-cranked vending machine, and “pon” representing the sound of the toy capsule hitting the collection tray below. The term *gashapon* is applied to the machines, the balls they dispense, and the toys obtained from within them.



Figure 5. Contemporary *gashapon* outlet at Akihabara station, Tokyo

Today, capsule machines proliferate like PokéStops across the Japanese landscape. Stationed in convenience stores, clustered in shopping malls, and stacked in rows at major train stations such as Akihabara which boasts several hundred such vending machines featuring collectable toys including miniature Gundam, *Pokémon*, and Hello Kitty (see figure 5). Some capsule machines even dispense tiny capsule machines.

Yet more evidence to the insect collection providence in *Pokémon GO* are found in their sorting arrangements into a register or Pokédex. These forensic catalogue systems provide details of species particulars including names, genus, and special characteristics. Although categorization methodologies resembling Pokédex parallel insect preparation standards internationally, Japanese practices of insect collection display or *Konchu hyohon* (昆虫標本) have been widely formalized into primary school curricula since the 1970s (Laurent 2000) (see figure 6). In recreational and educational settings, children are encouraged to collect, classify, and catalogue an array of insects, comparing and grouping them and

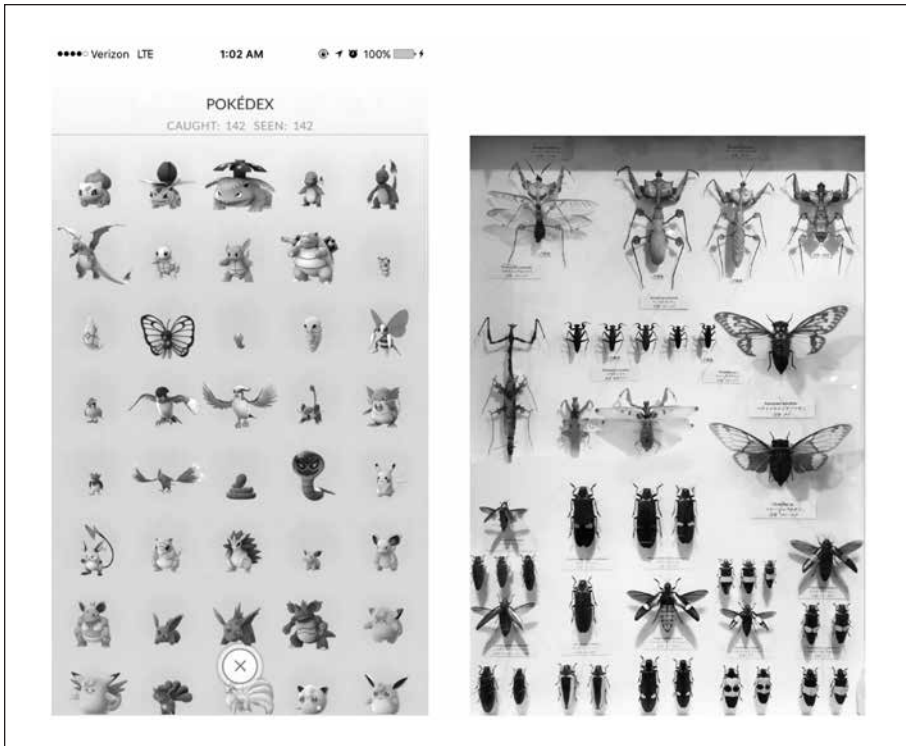


Figure 6. Left, Pokédex and right, a high school summer project insect collection or *Konchu hyohon* on right.

developing aficionado-level etymological knowledge in the process (Yoshimatsu 1984). More than educational play, these practices recall deeper connections with Shinto animism, a religion whose preoccupation with nature is both spiritual and scientific (Wright 2005). As with contemporary practices of Japanese play, ritual practices of Shinto require diligent adherence to tradition to establish a respectful connection between past and present.

Collecting *Pokémon* and building expertise in their diverse attributes primes players to a central component of *Pokémon GO*: gym battles, tournaments in which *Pokémon* are pitted against each other. Analogues for these activities again have origins in Japanese seasonal play. *Mushi* bouts range from beetle sumo (カブトムシ相撲) matches enjoyed by children and families, to the more intense *Japanese Bug Fights* (世界最強虫王決定戦) DVD series featuring various *mushi* battling to the death. Connecting insect combat to its Tang Dynasty



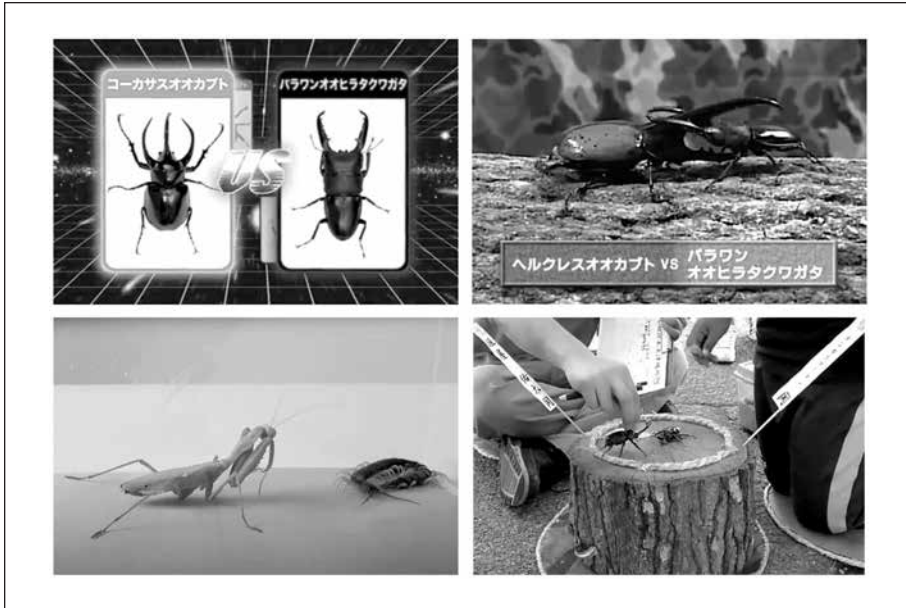


Figure 7. Top left and top right, screen shots of the *Official Beetle Battle Mushi Fighter!* children's television segment. Bottom left, *Japanese Bug Fights* DVD screen shot. Bottom right, beetle sumo played by children.

origins, Miracle (2014) catalogues frequent instances of martial arts culture within *Pokémon*, noting the comparative combat strengths and weaknesses of each creature are “clearly culled from the five elements (*wu xing*) philosophy” (n.p.). Miracle further identifies numerous explicit martial art homages within *Pokémon*, such as Hitmonlee resembling Bruce Lee in stature and title, Hitmonchan recalling Jackie Chan, and Throh and Sawk, appearing in judo and karate outfit respectively. Laurent (2000) also discusses the prevalence of insect battles in Japan noting their connection to religious ritual and annual events.

Japan's celebration of insects is ancient in origin. Among the country's earliest names are *Akitsushima*—Dragonfly Island—(Plutschow 1990), a title that hums with precision in the summer months as billions of grasshoppers, cicadas, and dragonflies take flight. Insect motifs decorate historical kimonos, samurai armour, painted screens, and lacquer-ware, and they feature extensively in Japanese classical poetry and literature. The eighth-century literature collection *Man'yōshū* features seven poems concerning the insects' serenade, while the four grandmasters of haiku—Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694), Yosa Buson



(1716–1783), Kobayashi Issa (1762–1826), and Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902)—composed countless haiku lamenting the impermanent lives of insects (Dunn 2000). Often lasting less than a day, the brief but vibrant existence of insects reverberates deep concepts of ephemerality and transience encoded in Shinto religion. Transcending historical literature and visual ornamentation, the music of insects is also held in high esteem (Ryan 1996). Throughout the Edo period of the Tokugawa shogunate, crowds flocked to forests to take in the songs of cicadas whose gradually shifting sounds over the season signalled the rising and falling of multitudes of *mushi* (Plutschow 1990). As poet Kobayashi Issa laments:

Autumn cicada—flat on his back, chirps his last song.

The fleeting existence of these tiny beings epitomizes that most quintessential Japanese concept of *mujo* (無常), the passing nature of all things. Accordingly, insects hold a central place in the Japanese symbolic register. Hosaka, Kurimoto, and Numata (2016) tallied a total of 911 insect-related festivals, ceremonies, and events held in Japan. These cultural and religious associations account for the ambient pervasiveness of insects from ancient Japanese art to numerous contemporary video games. While *Pokémon* represents only one recent iteration of insect video games, Japanese insect interaction has such a long and detailed history that “one cannot speak of the creation of new games as far as *mushi* are concerned” (Laurent 2000, 69).

*Pokémon GO* not only grows from the Japanese practices concerning insect collection, battle, and archivement upon which the original *Pokémon* was based but also contains the deep cultural affinities with the lives of small creatures evident in Shinto and Buddhist traditions. In concert with this, anthropologist Hannah Gould (2016) declares that Japan’s animist mythology provided rich inspiration for the *Pokémon* pantheon, and she identifies numerous links between the franchise creatures and Shintoist Kami. Similarly, Wright (2005) also calls attention to the aspects of Japan’s premodern animist spiritualism adopted globally by popular imagery and culture. Takahashi and others note that spiritual pilgrimage in Japan is by no means limited to religious structures but has always involved veneration of forests, mountains, and rivers and the various creatures that dwell in them (Takahashi et al. 2007). In the haiku of Kobayashi Issa, dragonflies not only attend Shinto rituals and events, they respectfully dress for the occasion:

Departing for the festival—all in red, dragonfly.

Yet in the practices of Shinto pilgrims, the collection of insects is overshadowed by another of *Pokémon GO*'s crucial precursors involving location-based collection: the accumulation of temple stamps known as *goshuin*.

## Pokémon Goshuin

*Goshuin* (御朱印) are red seal stamps unique to each Shinto shrine and Buddhist temple in Japan (see figure 8). Resembling in form and function a contemporary passport, these books and the stamps they contain are collected by temple and shrine visitors. Each stamp contains a message, the name of the deity or spirit enshrined, the official temple seal, and the date of the visit. Each includes handwritten calligraphy executed by a priest, priestess, monk, or volunteer while you wait. If the calligrapher is absent, or if the temple is too busy, visitors are provided the *goshuin* on a loose sheet of paper.

In a detailed history of *goshuin*, Megumi Abe (2017) notes the practice began in feudal Japan when permits were required for passage. Religious pilgrimage was a legitimate cause for travel, and *goshuin* stamps constituted proof of journey. Each stamp signified a location pilgrims had visited and the time of their visit. Thus, the stamps operated like an analogue locative tracking system. Although Japan's restrictions on travel disappeared over a century ago, the cultural momentum for *goshuin* collecting remains well intact. Representing more than legal formalities or religious tender, *goshuin* stamps constitute prototypical Japanese works of art.

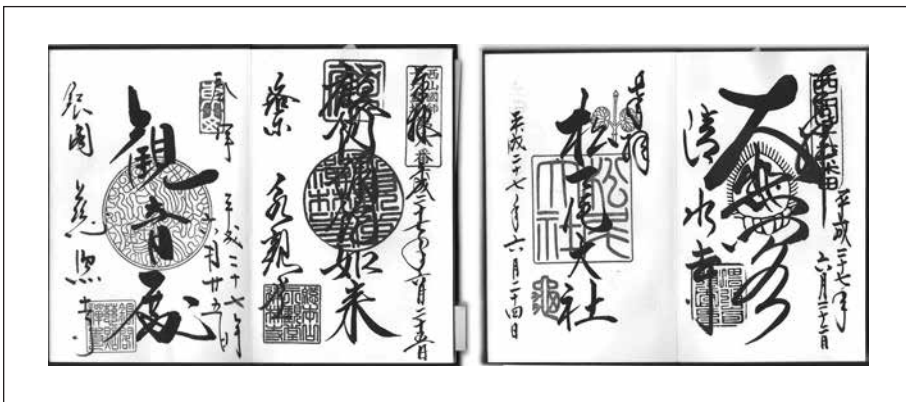


Figure 8. *Goshuin* stamps adorned with calligraphy collected in *goshuin-chō*.

Combining ink stamp, calligraphy, and often elements of *sumi-e* (墨絵) ink painting, each is skillfully executed in the strictest adherence to orthodoxy.

Sonia Gabriel (2017), in her exploration of the religious properties of *Pokémon GO*, calls attention to the situated connectedness of both PokéStops and PokéGyms with churches, cathedrals, temples, and other places of worship. What makes these spiritual locations ideal as PokéStops and PokéGyms, she observes, is not just their standing as sites of heritage, culture, or education recommended by Niantic, but the free passage they allow—their status as public accessible spaces. Within the contemporary Japanese context, temples, shrines, and other places of worship represent more than places of free movement, they are also locations at which stamps denoting place can be collected and insects can be found and appreciated. As with PokéStops and PokéGym, religious buildings are also locations at which ancillary products can be purchased to organize one's collectibles. Specifically, *goshuin* stamps continue to be gathered in series in a specific religious notebook called a *goshuin-chō* (御朱印-帳) purchasable at many temples and shrines. (figure 9). Echoing the accumulation layout of the



Figure 9. *Goshuin-chō* (御朱印-帳) stamp books on sale at the Yushima Tenmangu Shrine in Tokyo featuring, top right, more traditional design and bottom left, contemporary Hello Kitty.

Pokédex, these small books are about five inches by eight inches in size and aspect, with accordion-folded pages that allow for about forty *goshuin* stamps in the portrait format.

Collecting *goshuin* in *goshuin-chō* remains a popular activity for Japanese tourists and youths, and the practice is far more often a mode of tourist entertainment than a spiritual exercise. More recently, foreign tourists have also begun to collect *goshuin*, made evident by the countless blog writers who map their collected stamps and journeys. Here one can discover the depth to which the stamps are studied and cherished. Collectors keenly decipher the calligraphic text and trace their localized associations to Shinto and Buddhist customs. This veneration of collectibles recalls the concept of *otaku* (おたく)—the Japanese term denoting an unhealthy obsession with popular culture—indicating that the serial aesthetic Surman (2009) identifies in *otaku* culture might retrospectively be applied to earlier practices of collection and appreciation.

Originally a deeply spiritual outing, Japanese pilgrimage arose in the Heian period (794–1180). According to Kouamé (1997), the golden age of pilgrimage in the late Edo era saw these journeys evolve to fulfill therapeutic functions of reviving the mind, body, and spirit via nature walks and hot springs. Akai (2011) reports that Meiji-era pilgrim tours expanded to include historic sites, local cuisine, hot springs, music, and other entertainment. Eiki, Reader, and Nhat (1997) confirm that following the Meiji restoration, as Japanese society grew less ascetic and more atheist, pilgrimage took on tourist and entertainment traits, broadening to include local points of interest, extracurricular activities, and opportunities for play. These activities were marked on pilgrim maps as the religio-cultural landscape of Japan increasingly assumed tourist dimensions. New visions of both landscape and cartography proved key to this shift.

### New Spatial Understandings

Just as *Pokémon Go* relies on the development of Google street view and mapping technology, the shift from pilgrimage to domestic tourism during the Edo era was fueled by radical developments in cartography and spatial understanding. Upsetting centuries of adherence to Chinese perspective conventions, *Ukiyo-e* artists began to adopt European perspective techniques in mapmaking subversively flouting the country's strict isolationist policies in the process (Heathman 2018). Although three-point perspective techniques had been mastered by print-

maker Utagawa Toyoharu in the 1770s, it was some fifty years before they were famously deployed in Hokusai's "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji" (1830–1832) and Utagawa Hiroshige's "Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō" (1833–1834) respectively. These enormously popular wood-block series—produced only one year apart—had a profound impact on Japanese spatial reasoning. Together they stirred popular interest in tourism and established the *meisho* or “famous views” genre as a central development in Japanese landscape imagery (Heathman 2018). In a parallel development, Kitao Masayoshi's bird's-eye views of Japan subtly coalesced prior printed map iconography into new topographic arrangements entirely reinventing existing notions of cartography. In totality, this generation of wood-block artists sparked a spatial discourse that saw the Japanese landscape imagined in dramatic new ways. For Heathman, who devotes a dissertation to Edo print cartography, the enduring popularity of Japanese landscape prints has obscured the extent to which these mass-produced works ignited the spatial imagination of the late Edo elite. Heathman (2018) declares “for sophisticated Edo consumers, print culture produced place” (xi). Just as spatial thinking was shifted by Google's maps and street view imagery in the early twenty-first century (giving rise to spatial apps like *Pokémon Go*), Japanese understandings of place were transformed by the views rendered by Ukiyo-e wood-block prints almost two hundred years earlier (giving rise to the printing of place). The reforms of the late nineteenth-century Meiji restoration (明治維新) saw ink stamps pro-



Figure 10: Left, Shinagawa as featured in Hokusai's Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji, a series that established the landscape print, or *fūkei-ga* (風景画), with a special focus on “famous views,” *meisho* (名所). Right, to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the Edo shogunate in 2003, a series of station stamps were produced depicting Hokusai's Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji, including Shinagawa.

duced for all post offices, businesses, and organizations. Often carved or cast in rubber and recalling Edo wood-block stamps as modes of place making (see figure 10), these locative ink stamps offer hand-held and analogue precursors to the way contemporary mobile practices mediate embodied presence in place (Richardson and Wilken, 2012; Davies 2007).

### Train Station Stamps

As religious pilgrimage transmogrified into domestic tourism, Japan's transport infrastructure grew. While *Pokémon* is enabled by a background of ubiquitous digital networks, tourism and the seasonal play it enables relies on transportation networks.

The Meiji restoration saw rail networks fan out across the country and throughout Japan's colonies in Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria, each replete with locally distinctive *meisho* postcards and the introduction of station stamps. Documenting the shift in the thinking about travel at end of Taisho era, period, Akai (2011) notes the surge in tourist promotion and the emergence of taste-based travel propagated through the establishment of travel associations and the publication of timetables and guidebooks, each offering a range of seasonal excursions. Of these, Akai (2011) lists "New Year's trip," "cherry blossom tour," "impression of midsummer trip," "autumn leaves," and "hot springs," many of which simply traced and monetized shrine routes of old, while Kadota (2010) includes "group tours," "seasonal travel," "honeymoon," "female solo travel," and (notably) "play" as branded excursions. Kadota provides a detailed account of the transformation of Japanese religious culture into an economic resource through a market logic. Parallel findings shape the center of Graburn's (1983) *To Pray, Pay, and Play*, which charts the cultural structure of Japanese domestic tourism from religious pilgrimage to capitalist consumption, highlighting the role of play in each. In less than a century, travel had changed from a religious to a recreational affair, yet with the core practices, activities, and traditions largely intact.

With the rising tide of tourism, a market grew for collectible souvenirs of place. In 1931 an entrepreneurial stationmaster at Fukui named Tominaga Kanichi drew on the enduring popularity of traditional *goshuin* stamps and the visual principles of Ukiyo-e wood-block prints to pioneer the first train station stamp (Nobuyuki 2004). In a direct reference to the *goshuin* at the popular shrine nearby, Kanichi's station stamp, or *eki* stamp (駅スタンプ), featured a view of



the mountain gate of Eihei-ji temple (see figure 11, left). Word of Kanichi's station stamp spread through Japan's rail networks, and stationmasters nationwide soon developed their own stamp insignias (Akai 2011). Station stamps quickly expanded to rival *goshuin* stamp as one of the distinct collectibles of travel. Today it remains so. In adherence to the formalities of Japanese play, each station stamp is a respectful descendent of Kanichi's original; each is locally tailored to reflect the unique offerings of the district it represents; each bears the station name and pictorially conveys sightseeing spots, mascots, local cuisine, specialty products, and local attractions.

Like the holy stamps of the Shinto temples, the station stamps rewarded travellers with visual references for their journey, but they also gradually developed into communities of connoisseurship for the study of designs and symbolism of each stamp. Today, the local attractions depicted, the upkeep of stamps in each station, the tone of inks used, and the execution of each impression all provide valuable details worthy of appreciation by communities of station stamp *otaku* known as *Oshi-tetsu* (押し鉄). Mirroring the communities of *goshuin* collectors on pilgrim routes, *Oshi-tetsu* traverse rail routes among connoisseurs of train paraphernalia including passenger *otaku*, timetable *otaku*, carriage *otaku*, train engine *otaku*, and uniform *otaku*, each with their own taxonomies, histories, and literature within a broader ecology of train *otaku* or *densha otaku*.

Within the hierarchy of *otaku* subcultures, train *otaku* occupy a lowly rank. Nonetheless, Izumi Tsuji (2012) dedicates a fascinating chapter to their emergence in the 1910s, situating them as foundational in the *otaku* ecosystem. Con-



Figure 11. Left, replica of the Kanichi's original station stamp featuring a view of the mountain gate of Eihei-ji temple. Middle, station stamp from Terai, Hokuriku for the 1970s Discover Japan tourist campaign. Right, Japan Rail Ferry Station Stamp from Miyajima near Hiroshima.



trary to the notion of image-obsessed *otaku* of post-World War II era, Tsuji finds in train *otaku* a melancholic longing for the actual. Dubbing trains as “media of the imagination,” Tsuji (2012) suggests that for train *otaku*, trains “evoke desire for the somewhere and sometime of their destination” yet are simultaneously “soundly grounded in the everyday” (5). In a similar subordination to technological infrastructures, train *otaku* are dependent on pervasive rail networks and the movement of trains, just as *Pokémon GO* players are reliant on wireless networks and mobile devices for their play.

According to the Railway Museum in Saitama, by the 1970s station stamps were offered at the majority of Japan’s more than five thousand train stations. Responding to the station stamp boom, in 1970 Japanese National Railways (JNR) formalized the folk practice of station stamp collection by launching the Discover Japan campaign in an effort to further boost tourism (Uichi 2014). Supplying fifteen hundred train and ferry stations with individual stamps bearing the words “Discover Japan” in English to augment existing station stamps (see figure 11), JNR also produced custom notebooks reminiscent of *goshuin chu* in which travelers could accumulate their station stamps (see figures 12 and 13). What emerges in this period is the gamified activity of gathering stamps in exchange for prizes, now known as a stamp rally (スタンプラリー) (Hattori, Hayami, and Kobayashi 2014). The success of the Discover Japan campaign saw JNR add more stations to the program so that, by the end of the 1970s, the popularity of station stamp collecting had entirely overtaken the *goshuin* practices from which they developed (Uichi 2014). Such was the overlap that not only did religious stamp rallies appear, but according to Shu (2012), temple monks began to insist pilgrims accumulate their station stamps and *goshuin* stamps in separate albums, enforcing a distinction between religious and secular pilgrimages—a distinction enforced to this day.

Stamp rallies now number in the tens of thousands and are found extensively through summer festivals and holiday activities across Japan. Although seasonal play occurs throughout the year, it peaks in summer alongside children’s holidays during which crowds of youths can be found participating in a range of seasonal play activities, many of which are formalized into stamp rallies. Rally participants are rewarded for completing circuits with in-brand merchandise from the myriad of Japanese franchises, mascots, and fictional characters. Examples include *Yōkai Watch*, *Hello Kitty*, *Ultraman*, *Rilakkuma*, *Animal Crossing*, *Doraemon*, *Monster Hunter*, *Kamen Rider*, and, of course, *Pokémon*. Today, stamp-rally stamps and the ink pads upon which they rely are

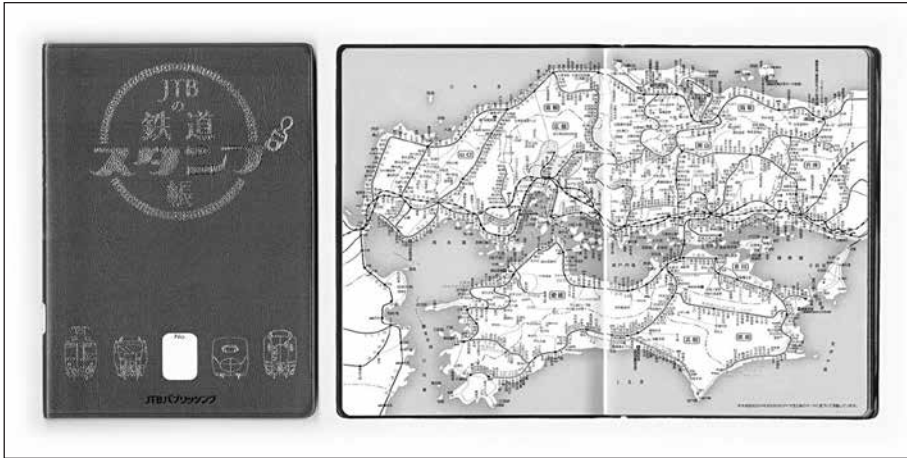


Figure 12. Official station stamp collection book (right) featuring a map of major regional rail lines and stations in East Honshu and Shikoku (left)

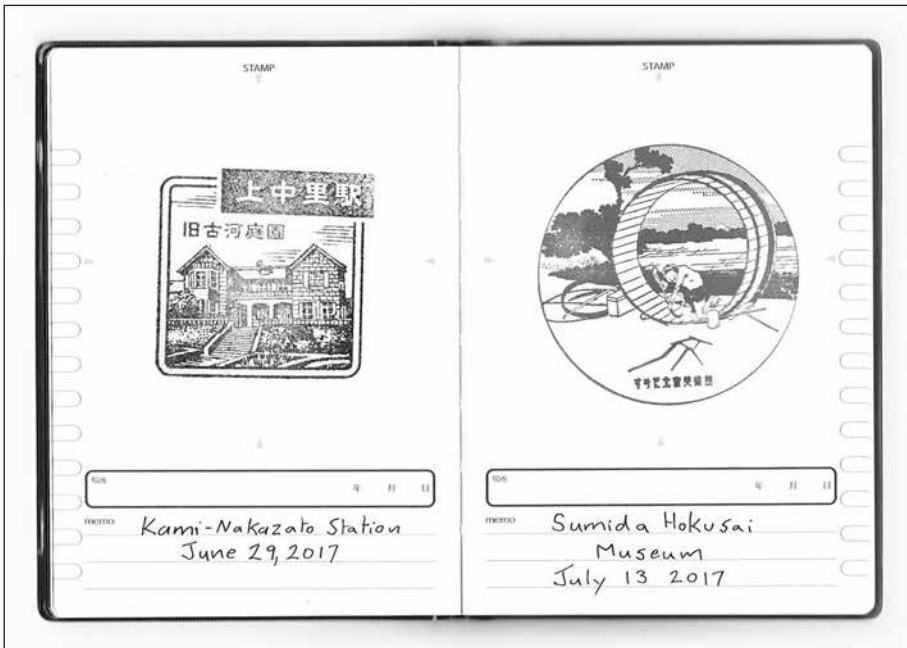


Figure 13: The Hokusai Museum in Morishita, Tokyo, boasts a signature blue stamp pad evocative of the Prussian Blue used in Hokusai's most celebrated wood-block prints

found at almost any official, cultural or commercial building in Japan. Many will offer multiple ink stamps for collection (see figure 14).

In the decades leading up to the launch of *Pokémon GO*, direct links between the game, *goshuin*, and stamp rallies appear in two separate contexts. First, clear connections arise in Japanese mobile technology scholarship. As early as 2001, Sugimoto and colleagues filed a patent for a mobile telephone navigation system involving souvenir photography of sight-seeing destinations and promising game and orienteering features (Sugimoto et al. 2001). The experience, the authors note, will be “like a Stamp Rally” (n.p.). In 2005 Kawakita and others presented a mobile phone enabled stamp rally that used RFID tags (Kawakita et al. 2005). Likewise, in a discussion of their own locative smartphone tour, Nago et al. (2013) compare it to a “stamp rally,” an activity “where the tourist or pilgrim stamps a book or a special sheet of paper with a uniquely designed rubber stamp at each location visited” (243). Each of these mobile locative projects substituted ink-based location stamping with a variety of digital alternatives such as RFID tags, QR codes (Hattori, Hayami, and Kobayashi 2011), GPS, and near field communication (Nagao et al. 2013). Further digital technologies, such as *Butai*



Figure 14. A stamp station at Nijō Castle in Kyoto featuring stamps from multiple franchises

*meguri* (舞台めぐり), and the broader field of content tourism that combines popular culture, games, tourist sites, and AR photography also appeared prior to *Pokémon GO*, but the abundance of these projects lay beyond my remit to expound. My focus here is on the nondigital cultural and social practices of collection on which *Pokémon Go* is predicated.

The second decisive link occurs with the *Pokémon* stamp rally that appeared in 1997, a full nineteen years before *Pokémon GO* and only months after Nintendo launched the original *Pokémon* game. Installed in thirty stations across Tokyo and attracting long lines of competing players, the 1997 *Pokémon* stamp rally was a recognizable extension of already popular stamp rallies and *goshuin*.



Figure 15. Top left, *goshuin cho*-like stamp book from the first *Pokémon GO* stamp rally in 1997; top right, stamp book from the *Pokémon GO* stamp rally in 2000; bottom left, detail of stamp book from the 2004 *Pokémon GO* stamp rally; bottom right, stamp pamphlet from the 2011 *Pokémon GO* stamp rally



Within a decade, Japan Rail's Pokémon rally had tripled in size to more than one hundred stations, expanding to include monorail and Shinkansen stops. Moreover, hundreds of other *Pokémon* stamp rallies had appeared across rail networks in other parts of the country (see figure 15). When *Pokémon GO* launched at the height of seasonal play in July 2016, it occurred simultaneously with multiple *Pokémon* stamp rallies. Nonetheless, recognizing the enthusiasm for *Pokémon GO*, JR East Japan rebranded its *Pokémon* stamp rally as a *Pokémon GO* stamp rally in 2017, but the collecting activity that drew on centuries of seasonal play remained otherwise unchanged.

In July 2017 I participated in the first JR East Japan *Pokémon GO* stamp rally. Free to play with pamphlets and maps plentifully found at participating stations, I followed the game to traverse Tokyo's rail networks and collected all six stamps to receive prizes—a Pikachu draw-string bag and a *Pokémon* stamp booklet. Predictably, the awarded stamp booklet invites travel to an additional fifty stations to collect more *Pokémon* stamps from each (see figure 16). Extra prizes are offered, and the more you play, the more you travel and the more train fares you accumulate.



Figure 16. *Pokémon* stamp rally pamphlet from 2017

Participating for a few hours, I met several fellow players, mostly parents accompanying their children, but also seasoned *oshi-tetsu* equipped with cleaning products and their own ink pads to ensure they produced the perfect impression of each stamp, be they station stamp or *goshuin*. I could not help but compare and contrast *Pokémon GO*, *Pokémon* stamp rally and *goshuin* stamp collecting as they occurred alongside each other. Indeed, I could collect this body of research only because all the practices are still living. It seemed that, compared with its previous versions of seasonal play extending back centuries and once imbued with natural elements and even deities, the notion of seasonal play in the *Pokémon GO* stamp rally was somewhat hollow. Unlike the vast “outdoorsiness” offered in earlier iterations of seasonal play, *Pokémon* stamp rallies and *Pokémon GO* alike see players tethered to networks—of trains, or wireless Internet, or mobile devices. Although these networks fundamentally enable play, the magic circle of these games are bounded by technological infrastructures in a way that their insect-collecting forebears are not. The dynamics of collection, cyclic journeys, and complex story worlds continue, but the virtualizations and augmented realities do not compete well with the sensorial impact offered in the physical world. I preferred the analogue and seasonal play within the humid forests mountainous amid the din of the *mushi*.

In locating the activities of *Pokémon GO* within unbroken lineages of seasonal play, I upset understood histories that have focused on the situationists, flâneurism, orienteering, and *Ingress*. In doing so, I raise far more questions than I answer. How could this hauntology of Japanese locative practices manifest in the largely U.S. developed *Pokémon GO*? Was Niantic attempting to re-create stamp rally experiences? Was *Ingress* imagined as a stamp rally? Although I leave these questions concerning the digital present for other researchers to pursue, I do offer one suggestion. All the activities and practices revealed here are all already embedded in the entire *Pokémon* franchise. Just as Niantic drew on the *Pokémon* franchise’s mechanics and mythology set out by Tajiri, Tajiri drew on Japanese religion, mythologies, and cultural practices—including insect collecting, stamp rallies, and *goshuin*—in his creation of the original *Pokémon* game. My aim has been simply to illuminate that past.

## Conclusion

Since its launch in mid-2016, *Pokémon GO* has elicited considerable scholarly interest, largely in relation to its technological innovation and its popular recep-

tion in non-Japanese contexts. In contrast, I evoke again the Japanese aroma of *Pokémon GO* and assert a Japanese history of locative games and seasonal play, in turn complicating existing genealogies of *Pokémon GO* specifically and genres of pervasive and locative games more broadly, widening the scope of their understanding. In addition, I have illuminated practices and philosophies of Japanese seasonal play connecting *Pokémon* to their lineage. In linking these practices of insect collecting, shrine pilgrimages, rail tourism, and stamp gathering as Japanese modes of seasonal and locative play, I have focused purely on *Pokémon GO*, and, in doing so, have not explored related practices of Japanese locative tourism including anime pilgrimage (Yamamura 2009), *otaku* tourism (Okamoto 2015), and content tourism (Yamamura 2015; Beeton, Yamamura, and Seaton 2013), which are worthy of research as relatives of *Pokémon GO*.

In revealing the locative practices, playful collection, and serial connoisseurship within *Pokémon GO* earlier in locative activities of temple pilgrimage, stamp rally, and *mushi* hunting and collection, I speculate that, as the experiential descendants of food gatherers, Shinto pilgrims, insect collectors, and rail travelers, *Pokémon GO* players represent archetypal albeit unconscious participants of traditional culture, spiritual activity, and Japanese modes of play.

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