

Aly Rinehart
Siebler
English 301
19 November 2012

PETA and Pokémon: Are Video Games Promoting Aggression and Animal Cruelty?

Introduction

I'll admit, as the only child of a single parent much of my childhood was spent with television and video games. When I was seven years old, my favorite was Pokémon. I remember playing the games for hours, how attached I would become to my team of little critters and how upset I would get whenever they got hurt. Growing up with these games and this TV show, I learned important values like responsibility and teamwork. In their most recent campaign, PETA would have us believe that all Pokémon does is encourage children to engage in animal cruelty. PETA uses Pokémon to illustrate that video games send children the wrong message, and promote violence and animal cruelty. However, research has proven otherwise, and their parody of the games is far from cute and innocent. It actually harms their cause because it is contradictory, and unfounded on several levels.

Fighting Fire with Fire?

PETA targets Pokémon specifically in this campaign because they claim it promotes cruelty and violence toward animals. They say that capturing the creatures and forcing them to fight is akin to dog-fighting rings; that keeping them locked in Pokéballs mimics the cages that confine circus animals; that trainers are oppressors instead of caregivers and friends. In an article by Kaitlynn Kelly (2012) on PETA's website, she describes the parody as "paint[ing] a rosy

picture of what amounts to thinly veiled animal abuse” (para. 1). But this seems to be a rather inaccurate description.

Consider that while playing this game the characters consist of four Pokémon who have been brutally, physically abused: the blue and white otter Oshawott has been skinned for its fur and is naked and bleeding; a lizard-like Snivy has a hypodermic needle stuck in its skull; a curly-tailed, hog-snouted Tepig wears a spiked collar and has had its ears and tail docked as a dog trainer might do to fighting pit bulls. Even Pokémon’s poster-boy, the famously yellow and red-cheeked Pikachu, is bruised, bandaged, wears a choke chain and is missing a piece of his ear. The world played in is a macabre mockery of the Nintendo games, a small dirt path in a forest that features blood-soaked pine trees, barbed wire fences, and bear traps scattered on the ground. And instead of fighting other Pokémon, these Pokémon are fighting people. In order to gain their freedom, these four must face off against their trainers who are depicted as hunters, scientists, and thugs with attacks like ‘tail docking’, ‘meat cleaver’, and ‘bullwhip’ that inevitably produce spurts of blood when they make contact.

Given these details, this game is not rosy or thinly veiled in any way. And it seems that creating a parody with ten times the violence of the real game is a poor way to show children that cruelty and aggression are wrong. Pokémon never featured tyrannical, abusive trainers and it certainly didn’t have blood and gore involved. Fans on the internet have questioned if PETA has ever even played a Pokémon game. Considering the most basic parallels, PETA must be familiar with the style and look of the game, and maybe the simplest concept – Pokémon fight a lot – but it is also quite clear that they have missed the real message of this franchise entirely. Certainly they have now lost the support of many Nintendo and Pokémon fans. It’s hard to imagine they gained any new supporters with this act either.

Reality vs. Fantasy

Besides the gore factor, there is another essential problem with PETA's reasoning that needs to be addressed. PETA is trying to bring real-world problems into the fantasy realm of Pokémon. For example, observe the characters in PETA's parody, specifically the scientist and the hunter/trapper. In the original Pokémon, there were people known as professors, researchers who devoted themselves to understanding Pokémon and their relationships with each other and with humans. PETA's professor is working for a laboratory that uses Pokémon for medical and cosmetics research. This is why she features a large scalpel and syringe as weapons. PETA also created a character who now hunts and traps Pokémon, who uses their meat for food and their fur for clothing. Pokémon were never used for food, clothes, or medical research at any time in the show or any of the games. For the fifteen years it has existed, these topics were never even mentioned in the Pokémon universe. This is because most television shows and video games are meant to be an escape from the real world. Pokémon did not address any of these things primarily because it is not real and not meant to be taken as such. In Pokémon, like most fantasy worlds, real cruelty and corruption don't exist. PETA's argument is weakened when they attempt to incorporate these things.

Continuing with the subject of fiction and nonfiction, the online fan forum Nintendo Life featured an article regarding PETA's parody the day of its release as well. The author is a fan of the franchise and also a professional journalist who states "It's interesting to note that the purpose of Pokémon is to capture and train creatures to fight...[but] there's a big difference between playing a Pokémon game and being a participant in animal cruelty...so it's a question of how literally anyone, especially children, actually takes the concept behind the series" (Whitehead, 2012, para. 5). Here it should be noted that the parents are also responsible. Ideally,

children are taught at an early age the difference between fantasy and reality. Therefore, if this teaching is reinforced, they will not relate the things you can do in a video game to things you can do in real life. They will know the difference and will act accordingly. They will see the Pokémon games as a fun pastime but will know that nothing on the TV screen can ever really be done.

The Great Debate

Whenever researching video games, we must also discuss the continuing debate over the effects the violence within them may have on children. PETA thinks that Pokémon promotes animal cruelty; many parents worry that video games will encourage aggression and violent behavior in their children. Multiple studies have been conducted on this subject. Some will say that the cons outweigh the pros, and some will say that the good overpowers the bad. But most of the recent studies have found no relation between violent video games and violent lifestyles. There is a study by Ferguson and Kilburn (2010) which states that while most people are concerned that the violence of video games will cultivate violence in children and teens, “we are seeing the opposite relationship, in which dramatic increases in [violent video games] are correlated with dramatic decreases in youth violence” (p. 176). They go on to say that as these games gain popularity, the rate of youth violence in the United States and elsewhere has dropped significantly. With their research is included a chart that further depicts this occurrence. It shows that between 1996 and 2006 the average number of video games sold skyrocketed from 75 million to 275 million while the number of violent youth crimes in America plummeted from nearly 200 to only 10 in every 100,000.

Pokémon began its rise to stardom in the mid-nineties and continued to be a hit with children all over the globe, right as this rise in games and drop in violence began to occur. It can

safely be assumed that Pokémon is one of many games that has miniscule, if any, harmful effects on the children who play it. As a child of the nineties who thoroughly enjoyed Pokémon and other video games, personally I was never the school bully, I love animals, and I have no more desire to harm anyone or anything than a person my age who did not grow up with this influence. If my example and that of the children in these studies is anything to go by, parents need not worry about their children playing Pokémon or other video games. Research has proven PETA wrong in the assumption that the violence in these games promotes violence in people who play them. And like teaching the difference between fantasy and reality, if the parents enforce responsibility and moderation, video games are an acceptable activity for children of all ages.

The Bright Side

While the potential dangers of video games are minimal or even nonexistent, there are several benefits to be gained from gameplay. Most games promote skills in leadership, teamwork, and problem solving. Cheryl K. Olson (2010) recently conducted a study that revealed what motivated children to play these games and what traits they inherited from them. In her analysis, the greatest motivator was the ability to compete at something against other people and have a chance to win. She says, “the sense of accomplishment and pride that came with winning were key motivators...especially if they had less success in other areas such as academics or sports” (p. 181). This sense of accomplishment is just one thing a child can get from gaming. There are valuable lessons to be learned while playing. In games that require teams, they will learn how to cooperate with others and get the chance to be a responsible leader of their group; in games of competition, such as Pokémon, they will have that sense of pride when winning but will also learn to take losing with grace; puzzles encourage determination and raise tolerance for frustration; playing a game with friends or siblings can also give them the

chance to teach and motivate someone else (many children in Olson's study said they liked to do this). Another strong motivator Olson saw was stress relief. Many people – children, teens, adults – play games to vent anger or escape their problems for a little while. And isn't it better for them to beat up fictional characters – zombies, monsters, Pokémon – than the other children at school or the local pets and other animals in their neighborhood? In addition, Olson noted that children who really enjoyed games that featured sports like football or skateboarding were then motivated to try these things in real life, thus becoming more active and social.

For children who have watched the Pokémon television show, it is obvious that there are several moral lessons being taught there. Pokémon always promotes teamwork and friendship, determination, bravery, and kindness. Where PETA only sees fighting and exploitation, fans like me see people and Pokémon standing up to those who really are cruel and uncaring. For example, looking back at PETA's parody, the star of the beloved show is portrayed as the ringleader in a twisted circus. Ash Ketchum is more concerned with profit and entertainment in PETA's world. But in nearly every episode of Pokémon I know, Ash put Pikachu's feelings first. He risked his life countless times to protect his partner. He once saved a Pokémon from a trainer that wanted to abandon it; he raised one Pokémon its whole life and then allowed it to leave and join a colony of its own kind when it fell in love; once another Pokémon tried to force Pikachu and the others to fight against their will, but Ash sacrificed himself to stop it (of course, he was brought back to life, because no one ever dies in this show). The point remains that he would have died to stop something he knew was wrong.

To further contradict PETA's claim, other studies have also found that violent video games can actually promote feelings of empathy for in-game characters rather than desensitize and detach players from moral concerns. In a study done by Tilo Hartmann et al. (2010) it was

proven that players of violent video games often felt guilt or empathy as a result of their actions, depending on several factors. For instance, while most participants in the experiment could kill virtual characters who were adults, they felt bad about harming children in-game, intentionally or accidentally. In situations that required killing or torture, players could do these things to enemies and villains but never felt right about massacring civilians. Hartmann says, “That the violence is depicted in a video game does not inevitably eliminate users’ moral responses” (p. 340). These feelings can be brought on by different aspects of the game. First, newer games work very hard at creating realistic characters and environments, at bringing the unreal to life. Players become attached to these characters and places emotionally, as with their Pokémon in those games. Also, it was clear that the players could still differentiate between right and wrong; unjustified violence caused guilt while violence that was deemed necessary did not. This study shows that playing violent games, games like Pokémon, does not make a person condone violence. They will still see violent acts as wrong when the act is unjustified, and they will not participate in a similar act. This disproves PETA’s claim that Pokémon will encourage children to abuse animals. The games can actually make players more caring toward their virtual partners and therefore to their real-life pets as well.

Conclusion

I can’t say I approve of what PETA did with their Pokémon parody, even though I share similar beliefs. Animals should not be abused, and parents should be better educated on video games to enhance gameplay and avoid violent content. I believe PETA’s intentions were good, but they presented it in a way that will garner no support from fans of Pokémon or video games in general.

In the end, it is unlikely that Pokémon or any other game or show has the potential to turn a normal child into an animal abuser or violent individual, especially in moderation. I spent most of my life with this game and show, and games and shows similar to it, and I believe I learned more valuable lessons and morals from Pokémon than bad habits or aggression problems. Given the research and example set by fans like me it can be seen that PETA's portrayal of Pokémon is inaccurate and unhelpful to their campaign.

References

- Ferguson, C.J., & Kilburn, J. (2010) Much ado about nothing: The misestimation and overinterpretation of violent video game effects in Eastern and Western nations: Comment on Anderson et al. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136(2), 174-178.
- Hartmann, T., Toz, E., & Brandon, M. (2010) Just a game? Unjustified virtual violence produces guilt in empathetic players. *Media Psychology*, 13(4), 339-363.
- Kelly, K. (2012). *PETA's new parody game encourages kids to fight for Pokémon rights*. Retrieved October 25, 2012, from <http://www.peta.org/mediacenter/news-releases/PETA-s-New-Parody-Game-Encourages-Kids-to-Fight-for-Pok-mon-Rights.aspx>
- Olson, C.K. (2010). Children's motivations for video game play in the context of normal development. *Review of General Psychology*, 14(2), 180-187.
- Whitehead, T. (2012). *PETA targets Pokémon Black and White 2 in latest campaign*. Retrieved October 25, 2012, from http://www.nintendolife.com/news/2012/10/peta_targets_pokemon_black_and_white_2_in_latest_campaign