

ARE POKÉMON SLAVES OR WILLING COMPANIONS?

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Introduction

In the first Pokémon movie, *Mewtwo Strikes Back*, there is a scene where a large number of Pokémon are fighting in a brutal manner¹. They are viciously attacking each other with teeth and claws rather than the usual flashy powers in a fight to the death. This battle royale is witnessed by several humans, including Nurse Joy. In the Pokémon universe when a Pokémon is sick or injured they are taken to Nurse Joy who is an authority on both Pokémon health and behavior. Nurse Joy goes onto remark “Pokémon aren’t meant to fight, not like this.” This comment references the idea that, within the Pokémon universe trainers compete with one another by having their Pokémon fight one another in a friendly battle. The main antagonist of the movie Mewtwo has a difference in ideologies with the main protagonists, Ash Ketchum, Brock, and Misty, and forces their Pokémon into the brutal death match. Mewtwo, the movie’s eponymous character, views his relationship- as a Pokémon-with humans to be one of master and slave. This paper will give a brief introduction into the history of Pokémon but will be focused upon giving a concrete definition of slavery and then showing how the human- Pokémon relationship has similarities to this definition but is ultimately different from it.

Background

Pokémon was created by Tajiri, Satoshi in 1996 for Nintendo’s Gameboy system. It was originally released as two separate games, *Pokémon Red* and *Green*. Tajiri felt that the experience of getting a bike, going on an adventure and catching bugs/animals was an experience that all players could connect and identify with. Players could even trade your Pokémon from one Gameboy cartridge to another, a feature that still exists within the game to this day, another

¹*Pokémon: The First Movie*, Directed by Michael Haigney (1998; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2009), DVD.

feature he felt players would enjoy.² The massive success that is the Pokémon franchise proves that he was indeed correct. Pokémon has entered a very exclusive club in the video game industry, joining the ranks of Mario, Zelda and Sonic, as having lasted as a franchise for more than fifteen years.

In its heyday of popularity Pokémon caused an outbreak of concern on its effect on youth in America. This outbreak was in result to the large amount of children who would take their Pokémon toys/games/cards into school and then subsequently either have them stolen by other students or not complete their work. Pokémon has even graced the cover of *Time* magazine in regards to the controversies. Many of the controversies concerning Pokémon eventually died out among the media because moral panics have a tendency to die after the money runs out. Conversations among the fans however, would continue up to today. One of the biggest controversies among fans, that oddly did not get much airtime despite its incendiary nature, was the concept that Pokémon are actually indentured servants or outright slaves. Not only have the fans of the games and other media discussed this, the actual developers and storywriters have discussed it. In fact the entire storyline of Pokémon Black/White deals with the idea as Pokémon as merely tools³. Tool in this case is a substitution for the word slave; let it not be forgotten this a game meant for children and slavery brings to light many dark memories for Americans.

Defining Slavery

When one thinks of slavery images from history texts, people in chains working the fields come to mind but these do not provide a working definition outside America's "peculiar institution." There has been research done as far back as ancient Greece concerning the use of

² 1Up Staff, "Top 5 'Late to the party' Games." *1up.com*. Accessed 4/1/12. <http://www.1up.com/features/top-5>.

³ *Pokémon Black*, directed by Junichi Masuda (2011; Redmond, WA: Nintendo of America Inc, 2011), Videogame.

slaves in history⁴. There are many kinds of slavery but the type most people are familiar with is chattel slavery. In this form of slavery a human being is reduced to nothing more than property to be used and disposed of when its usefulness has ended. Pokémon may not be human but they are sentient beings with intelligence rivaling some of the most intelligent animals in the story world, including humans. Sometimes their intelligence is greater than humans such as in the case of Alakazam. Because of these facts, applying the word “slave,”- a term generally used only to describe humans, is understandable. By being considered property this being is totally at the mercy of their owner. This means that the owner can buy this being, sell, trade, adopt, abuse or even kill it⁵. This absolute ownership was discussed and dismissed by Blackstone in his commentaries on English law⁶. He maintained that while master servant relationships could exist under the law, chattel slavery did not enjoy this protection because of the total lack of liberties on the part of the slave. In other words it was an uneven or unfair partnership where only one party reaps the rewards.

Another important aspect is the idea that the one who is a slave is separate from society and its protections⁷. The chattel slave cannot own property because it *is* property and is isolated from its family group and society. This isolation from society and family is important because it makes the slave dependent upon the master for direction and protection. Isolating the slave also makes the control of information reaching the slave easier. As long as they are cut off from their family group they are reliant upon their master.

⁴ Timothy Taylor, “Believing the Ancients: Quantitative and Qualitative Dimensions of Slavery and the Slave Trade in Later Prehistoric Eurasia,” *World Archaeology* 33, no. 1 (June 2001): 27-43.

⁵ Timothy Taylor, “Believing the Ancients: Quantitative and Qualitative Dimensions of Slavery and the Slave Trade in Later Prehistoric Eurasia,” *World Archaeology* 33, no. 1 (June 2001): 27-43.

⁶ William Blackstone, “Blackstone’s Commentaries on the Laws of England Book the First: Chapter the Fourteenth: Of Master and Servant,” *Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Library*.
http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/blackstone_bk1ch14.asp

⁷ Alain Testart, “The extent and Significance of Debt Slavery,” *Revue Française de Sociologie* 43, (2002): 173-204.

A third aspect would be that the slave's will is not their own⁸. There is no room for the will of the individual because they must do as they are told. Any resistance to the instructions or order of the master can be met with severe punishment. The slave must accept these punishments because there is no protection of society's laws for them. This treatment is allowed and may even be encouraged. Some slave states in the antebellum American South enacted their own slave codes. These codes were intentionally harsh in order to keep the slaves too afraid to rebel⁹. Many former slaves after the abolition of slavery in America wrote about how cruelly they were treated. Minor infractions could be met with severe beatings that could lead to blistered skin or in some cases even broken bones. Sometimes these injustices were not of a physical nature.

One case of a fugitive slave writing about their experiences under the Antebellum Southern slave trade is that of Henry Goings¹⁰. Through the Underground Railroad Goings escaped his bondage and fled to Canada. In his writings, Goings articulates in great detail the numerous harms that befell him such as beatings and the separations from close family members. He states that as a groom to his master he was subjected to frequent floggings for alleged incompetency.¹¹ In another instance he talks about the forced separation of himself and his sister, to whom he was close.¹²

Finally, all three of the previous points combine to create a total lack of fulfillment and happiness in the slave's own life. This lack of fulfillment leads to anger and discontentment with the status quo. Many writings by former slaves of the American South mention the misery inflicted upon them by their masters. This misery was a daily part of their lives and caused them

⁸ Alexander J. "Islam, Archaeology and Slavery in Africa," *World Archaeology* 33, no. 1 (June 2001): 44-60.

⁹ "Slave Punishments," *Spartacus Educational*, Accessed 4/19/2012.

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USASpunishments.htm>.

¹⁰ Henry Goings, *Rambles of a Runaway from Southern Slavery*, ed. Calvin Schermerhorn, Michael Plunkett, and Edward Gaynor (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2012)

¹¹ Goings, 6.

¹² Goings, 9.

to hate their masters. Happiness or even its lesser form, contentment cannot exist in this environment of beatings and demeaning treatment, all of which is designed to make one feel as if they are less of a human being. In fact, I would go on to say the treatment was designed to make one feel as if they were just property because no human would treat another human that way.

This working definition of slavery thus comprises four parts. In order for it to be considered slavery there must be a combination of the following: The one being called a slave must have a legal/societal definition of property of another being. There must be a total disconnect between the slave and his/her native family group and/or society. The slave's will must take a back seat or subservient role to their masters will, that is to say the slave's thoughts and intentions are not taken into account at any point. Finally, there must be a lack of happiness or fulfillment. Even attempts to make the one being made a slave feel as if they are nothing more than property. The one called slave must identify itself as such. These are the components necessary for true slavery to be apparent as it has been in world history.

Connections, Similarities and Differences

Now that a working definition of slavery has been worked out one can begin to analyze the Pokémon world as first presented to us by Professor Samuel Oak¹³ in Pokémon Red/Blue. Professor Oak greets the player with welcome informs the player that people use Pokémon as pets, some to fight and for people like him, to study. One of the first people encountered is an unnamed woman who says that she uses strong Pokémon to protect herself¹⁴. This on the surface is considered fine if the Pokémon are merely animals, akin to a Seeing Eye or hunting dog, but when one looks at other media associated with the franchise such as the manga or the TV show then this concept of Pokémon as mere animals becomes dodgy at best.

¹³ In the Japanese versions of the anime he is known as Shigeru Okido.

¹⁴ *Pokémon Red*, directed by Tajiri Satoshi (1998: Redmond, WA: Nintendo of America Inc.), Videogame.

Pets tend to have a certain level of intelligence and many people are fine with the keeping of them but they do not display levels of intelligence and self-awareness, two of the defining traits of humanity. In the TV shows, movies and manga Pokémon are shown as having a high level of intelligence and even within the original game the PokéDex entries state that several Pokémon have human level intelligence and awareness such as Gengar and Alakazam. The idea of Pokémon as slaves begins to take on a real significance. This awareness and intelligence separates them from the level of mere animals and puts them closer to our own.

There are several similarities between the working definition of slavery and the relationship between a Pokémon and their trainer. The first of these similarities is that the entire relationship is non-consensual. The trainer goes out into the wild and captures a Pokémon by hitting it with attacks until it is weakened enough to be captured by a PokéBall. This is oddly reminiscent of forced slave labor in the real world, where people would be rounded up and put to work against their will.

Another thing about this that is similar is the fact that the trainer uses other Pokémon to capture the Pokémon he/she is after. This Pokémon is usually given to them by an older well-meaning Professor, a highly respected position in the Pokémon world, who then proceeds to teach them how to capture and battle their Pokémon. This professor then asks them to capture more Pokémon to further their knowledge of the creatures. This shows that the practice of capturing Pokémon and forcing them to do your bidding is part of society and an accepted even noble profession. The paragons of this profession are the Pokémon masters such as the Elite Four and the Gym Leaders. These individuals progress to highest levels of power by catching ever stronger Pokémon and battling them against one another.

One part of our definition of slavery is that there must be disconnect between society and the slave and this is where the PokéBall comes into effect. When the trainer no longer desires for the Pokémon to be roaming about the simply throw their PokéBall at the Pokémon and it is absorbed by a beam of light. Whenever the trainer wishes they can retract their Pokémon from the outside world thus maintaining complete control and social isolation. If the trainer wishes they can keep their Pokémon isolated from the rest of the world by transferring them via electronic transfer to farms that will keep their Pokémon for them while they are out traveling.

Pokémon can also be traded from one trainer to another and this adds greater weight to the idea that Pokémon are merely property. If they were viewed as thinking individuals one trainer would not be able to arbitrarily trade one from one trainer to another as shown in the Pokémon episode, “BattleAboard the SS. *Anne*,” when Ash trades his Butterfree for a Raticate¹⁵. All that needed to be done was put the Pokémon into a machine and ownership was transferred. There was no consultation of the Pokémon to see if they accepted the transaction. It was just Ash deciding he wanted a Raticate. This ease of transferability does not seem to promote the idea of a valued partnership between Pokémon and trainer.

While these points must be made they are not the whole story. We must also analyze how the people themselves feel about the relationship between themselves and Pokémon as well as the actual Pokémon’s feelings about the situation. This is where major differences begin to appear between slavery as we know it and the relationship between a Pokémon and its trainer.

Where the argument that Pokémon are slaves and just tools of their respective trainers begins to fall apart is when we examine the relationships of the major characters in the Pokémon universethat are held up as kind of paragons or archetypes for the proper way to raise and relate to Pokémon. These primary characters,the main protagonist Ash Ketchum, and his companions

¹⁵*Battle Aboard the S.S. Anne*, Television, (1998:Oriental Light and Magic and TV Tokyo.)

Brock, and Misty¹⁶. In the same episode mentioned earlier, “The Battle Aboard the SS. *Anne*”, Ash goes into a deep contemplative process after trading his Butterfree to the mustached gentleman. He thinks about how he originally caught a Caterpie and diligently trained it until it evolved into the Butterfree stage¹⁷. It is during this contemplation that he realizes he cares too much for Butterfree to let him go for such an arbitrary reason as the chance to own a cool, new Raticate. Ash then goes back to the mustached gentleman and requests his Butterfree back. The mustached gentleman has every right to deny the request but acquiesces. He does this because the bonds between trainer and Pokémon are deeply sacred and while new ones can be made, the original bonds are important. Another important event to note is that after he has Butterfree back, Ash asks for Butterfree’s forgiveness. A slave owner would not ask a slave to forgive it for an ill-conceived trade. This sets up the conflict in a later episode where Ash decides to release his Butterfree into the wild so that he could be with its mate and raise young. What is most important about this episode is that not only is Ash conflicted about the issues of letting Butterfree go, Butterfree himself is conflicted. He hesitates and even starts to go back to Ash until Ash encourages it to go on and have a family, promising that they would meet again someday¹⁸. Ash’s last thought on the issue of Butterfree as his Pokémon is Butterfree’s ultimate happiness.

Another prominent character in the Pokémon world is the Gym Leader Brock of Pewter city and a Pokémon nutritionist and breeder. His goal is to create the healthiest food and best ways to provide for Pokémon in order to ensure their continued health and happiness. He goes

¹⁶ It should be noted that even though they are considered main characters, Brock and Misty do not have last names.

¹⁷ Pokémon evolution in all of the associated media works fairly simply. A trainer catches a Pokémon and then has it battle other Pokémon to gain experience and power. Once a certain level of both has been reached the Pokémon evolves. In this case, Ash catches a Caterpie and trains it through the Metapod stage into the Butterfree stage. This process is observed numerous times in the series and is an important part of the videogame franchise.

¹⁸ *Bye-Bye Butterfree*, Television, (1998: Oriental Light and Magic and TV Tokyo.)

out of his way to make sure that all of his Pokémon are well fed and cared for¹⁹. More importantly however, is that he pays special attention to their happiness. This is very important in regards to the working definition of slavery discussed earlier. In this definition happiness or even contentment of the slave is not necessary or even wanted. The exact opposite is actually desired, a being in constant fear and misery, too afraid or too weak to rise up in opposition of its masters.

The character Misty also displays this concern for the well-being and happiness of her Pokémon displayed by Brock and Ash. She is often seen in the series carrying a small egg like Pokémon Togepi around and treating like a small child. In the episode, “Who Gets to Keep Togepi,” -Misty wins the right to train and care for Togepi due to it imprinting on Misty as its mother²⁰. Misty then goes on to promise to love and raise it just like its real mother would. This is another example of how people in the Pokémon world view their relationship to Pokémon as one of partners or in the case of some like Misty, parenthood. This directly goes against points one and four of the working definition of slavery. These people do not view the Pokémon as property or slaves but as valuable family members and friends.

The goal of a Pokémon trainer as stated in *Pokémon Red* and subsequent titles is to capture as many Pokémon as you can find and then train them to their ultimate strength or guide them through their evolutionary chain to their ultimate form. A Pokémon trainer’s expressed goal is to make sure their Pokémon is as strong and healthy as it can be. This requires them to pay attention to the natures and temperaments of their Pokémon and guide them accordingly.

The world of Pokémon is filled with many different people and even more Pokémon. The interactions between these two groups vary from person to person. Some people view their

¹⁹*Pokémon*, Television, (1998: Oriental Light and Magic and TV Tokyo.)

²⁰*Who Gets to Keep Togepi*, Television, (1998: Oriental Light and Magic and TV Tokyo.)

Pokémon as helpful companions or partners, while others view them as essential members of their family. There are some who view them as tools or slaves but they are in the vast minority. Pokémon trainer and Pokémon relationships do have similarities but the core essence of the relationship operates on vastly different principles and ideas. The principles that govern the relationship of slave/master are ownership, domination and fear. This differs from the relationship of trainer/Pokémon in that the relationship is based off mutual trust, kinship and sportsmanship. The relationship is based off such dramatically different ideas and operates so differently that they cannot be called the same thing.

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