



Translated by Dogasu of Dogasu's Backpack (<https://dogasu.bulbagarden.net>)

## Pokémon Story



Translations by Dogasu  
([dogasusbackpack@gmail.com](mailto:dogasusbackpack@gmail.com))

Version 1



## Table of Contents

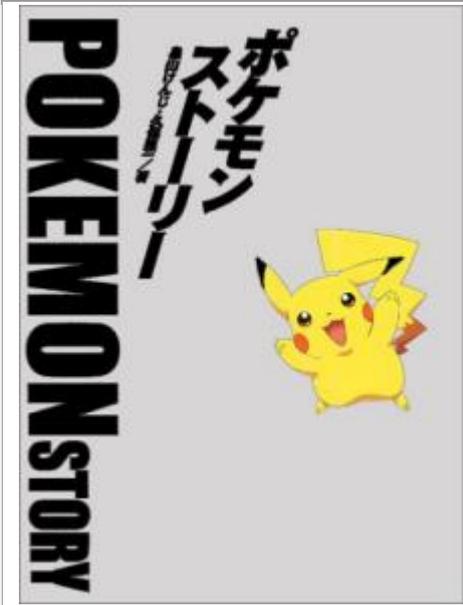
About this document.....	3
1. Pokémon's Big Break.....	4
2. Children fall ill -- The Incident Occurs.....	5
Notes from Masakazu Kubo (Part 1).....	14
3. Hiatus .....	15
Notes from Masakazu Kubo (Part 2).....	24
4. Wrapping Up the Incident.....	26
Notes from Masakazu Kubo (Part 3).....	39
About the Authors.....	40



## About this document

This document is a translation of pages 355-391 of the 543-page Japanese book *Pokémon Story*, written by Kenji Hatakeyama and Masakazu Kubo. It is intended for informational and entertainment purposes only.

If you would like to check out the book yourself you can order it from one of the links below:

About the Book	
	<p><b>Pokémon Story</b> (ポケモンストーリー) <b>Written by:</b> Kenji Hatakeyama and Masakazu Kubo <b>Published by:</b> Nikkei BP-sha <b>Language:</b> Japanese <b>Page Count:</b> 543 <b>First Printing:</b> December 10th, 2000 <b>MSRP:</b> 1,400 yen (not including tax) <b>ISBN-10:</b> 4822241998 <b>ISBN-13:</b> 978-4822241995</p> <p><b>Available from</b>   <a href="#">Amazon Japan</a>   <a href="#">Amazon US</a>     <a href="#">Amazon Canada</a>   <a href="#">Amazon UK</a>     <a href="#">National Library of Australia</a>     <a href="#">Yodobashi.com</a>  </p>
Blurb	
<p><i>How was Pocket Monsters brought into this world? How was it able to evolve from the games into the world of comics, animation, and the movies? And why was it able to succeed in capturing the hearts of children all over the world? In this, the first business story book of its kind, one of the producers himself tells us by talking directly to the people who were there! Also includes an original interview with the creator of Pokémon himself, Mr. Satoshi Tajiri.</i></p>	



# 1. Pokémon's Big Break

*"The flow of the river never ceases,  
And the water never stays the same.  
Bubbles float on the surface of pools,  
Bursting, re-forming, never lingering.  
They're like the people in this world and their dwellings."*

From "Hōjōki: A Hermit's Hut" by Kamo no Choumei, from the Collated Japanese Literature Compendium 3, the National Central Library Inc., 1925

The new *Pokémon* TV series was a huge deal to children all over Japan. They went from being hunched over their small monochromatic LCD Game Boy screens, where the hero and his Pokémon barely moved, to looking up at their TV screens and seeing those same characters displayed in full color, laughing and crying and running and battling. It was really a sight to behold. To the kids who had been playing the video games, the TV series was like something straight out of their dreams. "So that's the way Satoshi acts, huh? He seems like a really great guy." "And that's the way you throw a Monster Ball?" "Ah, that Nyarth really is weak, huh?" "I wanna go into the Tokiwa Forest someday." "But it seems like they're maybe overdoing it with the Pokémon Center..." Kids were falling in love with *Pokémon* like never before.

When *Pocket Monsters* got turned into an animated series it was able to attract an even younger group of kids, as well as young girls, than it had been able to up until that point. In fact, one of the reasons the show chose Pikachu to be Satoshi's partner is because they were trying to widen the fanbase even further. This plan, clearly, succeeded with flying colors.

The TV ratings for the show's initial April 1st, 1997 broadcast was 10.2%. It hovered around 10% throughout the rest of the month and then went up to 12% in May and 14% in June. In September, after summer vacation had finished, the show was regularly getting between 14% and 15% in the ratings. In October those numbers went up to 15 ~ 17%, and every episode that aired in the month of November achieved at least a 17%. The November 11th broadcast of



Episode 33, "The Flaming Pokémon Race," earned the show its highest TV ratings to date with a whopping 18.6%. In that week's episode, the story revolved around Satoshi and his friends meeting the Laramie family, a group of Pokémon ranchers who work on a Safari Land / Pokémon sanctuary on the outskirts of Sekichiku City. Ratings fell a little bit to around 16% the following week, but then the week after *that* the show bounced back to earn a solid 17.7% rating. The show's average ratings of 17% continued into December, and just about everyone assumed the *Pokémon* animated series was going to be heading into the new year triumphant, celebrating its status as one of the new powerhouses of Japanese animation.

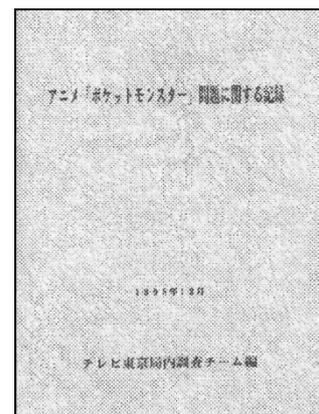
And then December 16th happened.

When you talk about *Pokémon*, you can't *not* talk about that day.

## 2. Children fall ill -- The Incident Occurs

During the December 16th, 1997 broadcast of the *Pocket Monsters* animated series' 38th episode, "Cyber Soldier Porygon," an incident occurred in which large numbers of children suddenly fell ill.

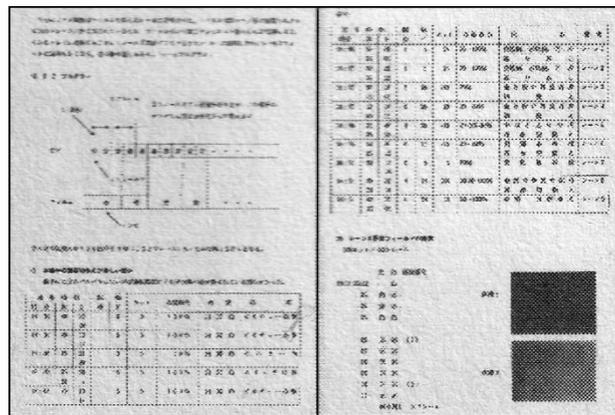
We'll be talking about the incident in question in just a little bit, but before that I wanted to introduce you to the document I'll be citing as my main source. It's called "The Record of the Pocket Monsters Animated Series Problem" and it's an 8 x 11 (A4) sized, 165-page bound report released by TV-Tokyo in December 1998, about a year after the incident, that was distributed to anyone involved, not just those within the network. Think of it as TV-Tokyo's official report on the incident. It's a meticulously compiled collection of documents that includes the research report from TV-Tokyo's internal investigation team, the newly formulated TV broadcast guidelines, records on the internal training courses that had been held at TV-Tokyo, a document breaking down the guidelines created by



*"The Record of the Pocket Monsters Animated Series Problem" (cover)*



the National Association of Commercial Broadcasters in Japan, abstracts from the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications' report, an overview and then breakdown of the Ministry of Health and Welfare's clinical research, and a report by the Tokyo Women's Medical University Pediatrics who acted as advisors to help determine the root cause. If you flip past the cover and over to the Table of Contents you'll see this report has also been given the title "The Pocket Monsters Animated Series Problem's Full Report." And so from here on out I'll be referring to this document as simply the "Full Report."



"The Record of the Pocket Monsters Animated Series Problem" (excerpt)

In the episode of *Pocket Monsters* that aired that day, Satoshi and his friends visited a town called Maccha City and go inside the world of computers to solve an incident caused by the Rocket-Dan. *Pocket Monsters* is a show set in a world where Pokémon are digitized and then beamed into Monster Balls and so an episode like this was bound to be made sooner or later. In the real-world Kanto region of Japan, the episode received a 16.5% TV rating.

According to the network's internal investigation shared in the "Full Report," there was a grand total of 25 places in that night's episode, lasting a second or more, that used techniques such as "Paka-Paka," an industry term used to refer to background colors being swapped out rapidly, as well as effects like strobe lights, flashing, and sudden quick cuts. This large number may be because the episode featured a battle with the Rocket-Dan that takes place inside a world of lights and circuits. When compared to Episodes 1 - 37, where the average was around 7.6 places per episode, the investigation team determined that Episode 38 had significantly more of these stimulating scenes. "Paka-Paka" is one of the



techniques used to make a scene stand out more.

On top of that, "Paka-Paka" had never been used in any of those first 37 episodes to make the entire background continuously flicker between the colors red and blue. In other words, Episode 38 was the first time that combination had been used. Later, those red and blue "Paka-Paka" effects would be singled out as an important trigger for the photosensitive epilepsy seen in this case. According to a chart used for a technical break down in the "Full Report," the parts that continuously use what it calls "Red/Blue Paka-Paka" are centered in the latter half of the episode, for the approximately seven minutes between 6:46 PM and 6:52 PM JST. It was the scene where Pikachu uses its electricity to counterattack a missile that had been fired at it by the Rocket-Dan. Immediately after that scene aired, calls to 1-1-9 (the Japanese equivalent of 9-1-1) started coming in from all over the country.

The calls were about children who had fallen ill while watching that night's episode of *Pocket Monsters*. According to the Ministry of Health and Welfare's report "Clinical Study on Photosensory Seizures: Abstract and Explanation," the symptoms cited by children who were taken and/or admitted to medical institutions included seizure-like symptoms, audio and visual impairments, general malaise, dysphoria, headaches, and nausea, among others. In the end, TV-Tokyo was aware of around 750 children who had been taken to the hospital, with 135 of those being admitted to stay overnight. It was the worst broadcast-related incident in the history of Japanese television.

The first news channel to report on the incident was the public broadcaster NHK, who first mentioned it during its regular TV and radio news broadcasts at 8 o'clock that night. TV Asahi stations were the first commercial broadcasters to pick up the story, and the Kyodo News Service made *its* first report after 10 o'clock that night. TV-Tokyo, meanwhile, made its initial report during its 11:00 PM "World Business Satellite" broadcast with a statement that said "Children who watched tonight's episode of *Pocket Monsters* have fallen ill, with around 200 people being taken to the hospital. We are looking into this incident." During this time, multiple members of the mainstream media reached out to TV-Tokyo for materials from the show (either the actual episode itself or just the scene in question) but the network denied those requests. This was the obvious response to make.



Newspapers from the day after. Left: Nikkei Newspaper, Right: Sports Nippon

When the mainstream media started conducting its initial interviews the thing that immediately caught them off guard was realizing just how many children actually watched *Pocket Monsters*. They knew the show was popular, of course, and they understood that the show consistently got high ratings. But when you take those rating percentages and actually work out how many viewers that all translates to the numbers can be shocking. The research team who worked on the Ministry of Health and Wellness' report I mentioned earlier conducted a "Fact-Finding Survey" of school aged children between the ages of 6 and 18, and they found that out of the 9,209 respondents, 43.7% of them -- that's 4,026 people -- said they watched Episode 38 of *Pocket Monsters* that night. The Ministry of Health and Wellness' research team even makes it a point to include a comment in their report about how surprised they were to realize just how many kids actually watched *Pokémon*.

From there, we can predict that close to half the children in TV-Tokyo stations' main viewing areas of Hokkaido, Tokyo, Aichi, Osaka, Okayama, Kagawa, Fukuoka, and Saga -- all of which aired *Pokémon* at the same time -- watched "Cyber Soldier Porygon" that night. And according to the investigation conducted by the TV-Tokyo Planning and Research Office, while the age ranges of the children were limited to elementary school kids, 1 million 650 thousand children between the ages of 4 and 12 were watching in the Kanto region, while 3 million 450 thousand children were watching nationwide.

The following day, the incident was all that was being talked about on the morning shows and newspapers' morning editions. With the latter, however, the early



submission cutoffs editors had to meet in order to meet their printing deadlines meant they didn't have enough time to get in all the facts. And so all they could really do was report something very broad, like "A lot of the children who watched *Pokémon* last night suffered symptoms like convulsions and nausea and had to be taken to medical institutions." But when it came to that night's evening editions, however, the idea that the incident was caused by animation techniques used in the making of the episode started to become more prevalent. The narrative then turned into that of *Pokémon* attacking children. It doesn't matter how popular *Pokémon* was, they argued, the fact remains the show wasn't able to take the measures needed to ensure the safety of the children watching. But even *that* narrative started to lose steam after NHK News' broadcast at 7 o'clock that night.

That's because during the December 17<sup>th</sup> nightly edition of NHK News, the network revealed that earlier that same year, in March 1997, four children had been watching an episode of their educational cartoon *YAT Relieved! Space Vacations* when they started to feel ill, just like what had just happened with *Pokémon*. One of those four children even had to end up being admitted to the hospital.

We can assume NHK saw what was happening with the TV-Tokyo incident and thought it could no longer keep its own incident under wraps. But it doesn't matter what their reasoning was; NHK's confession changed the tone of the media's coverage. The mainstream media took a step back and realized that "If we stick to the facts, we can see that the animation techniques used by *Pokémon* are not all that uncommon. It doesn't really matter how often or not they're used, the fact remains that the cartoons both our networks and our affiliates put on the air all seem to use those same techniques." For all the networks out there, this incident wasn't just somebody else's problem; it was something that affected them as well.

And then on the afternoon of the next day, December 18th, NHK announced the establishment of the "Animation Problem Analysis Project." While they were at it, they also made some additional comments about how their show *YAT Relieved! Space Vacations* made four children fall ill back in March, saying that "If we had looked into the root cause of the problem back then, maybe this new incident wouldn't have happened. We did not do our due diligence." They then apologized.



The mainstream media accepted that apology, and it was thanks to this that NHK and the Japan Commercial Broadcasters Association (JBA) were able to get their joint investigation off to such a smooth start. By this point, the media fully understood that the Pokémon Incident was a widespread phenomenon of photosensitive epilepsy, an outbreak caused by television the likes of which Japan had never seen before. Scientific explanations and clinical studies hadn't really ever been done on this topic in Japan before and so the media was starting to understand just how difficult a problem this was going to be to crack. This was, after all, something that every network who used the medium of television had been neglecting. Japanese media had to take a good hard look at what they had done wrong and become more self-aware.

On that same day -- December 18th -- the Ministry of Health and Welfare launched the "Clinical Research Team on Photosensitive Epilepsy." The JBA also decided to establish its own research team. On the 19th, NHK and the JBA agreed to work together to formulate a set of new broadcast guidelines. The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications also announced the formation of "The Broadcast and Audiovisual Conference."

TV-Tokyo, as the party most directly involved, set up a particularly robust investigation team, even going so far as to look into penalties other countries had enacted for violations of their own broadcast guidelines. There was a particular focus on the U.K.'s Independent Television Commission (ITC) and its guidelines, all in an effort to set up similar rules for the production of Japanese animation moving forward. The goal was to have a research team ready to go right after the new year. But the U.K. and the rest of Europe uses PAL, an encoding system that broadcasts light at 50 fields per second (50 Hz), while Japan uses NTSC, an encoding system that broadcasts light at 60 fields per second (60 Hz). The U.S. also uses NTSC, however, and so it was decided to go ahead and dispatch a research team to the U.S. as well.

This issue also made it all the way up to the Japanese National Diet. At the House of Representatives Communications Committee held on December 24th at 10:00 AM, the president of TV-Tokyo, Yutaka Ichiki, and the senior managing director, Masao Oka, spoke at the conference as witnesses, explaining the chain of events that took place as well as offering their opinions on how to prevent a reoccurrence.



The two did the same thing at the House of Councilors Communications Committee held the following day.

The mainstream media extensively covered this National Diet meeting and the statements made there, bringing *Pokémon's* name recognition and visibility to an all-time high. Looking back, you probably wouldn't be wrong to say that there was no longer a single Japanese person in all of Japan who didn't know what "Pokémon" was.

TV-Tokyo, being the network that aired the problematic TV show in the first place, shouldered all the responsibility. When you read through the "Full Report" it becomes obvious the network was humbled by the experience. The *Pokémon* animated series incident was a huge story that even became top news worldwide and yet the Japanese mainstream media was, once that initial 24 hours had passed, being surprisingly very level-headed about the whole thing.

One of the biggest reasons for this, probably, was because the root cause of this incident wasn't just a problem with a single cartoon but a danger inherent in the very medium of television itself. It was, therefore, an extremely serious problem for everyone. TV-Tokyo took the initiative to set up a team to directly confront this problem that threatened any of us with a TV, a problem that could spell the end of the very medium itself, and it's this aggressive response that probably helped calm down both the mainstream media and the public at large.

This is a personal anecdote, but there was a writer about 20 years ago who spent a year as a member of a "Discussion to Elevate Our Shows' Content" committee that TV-Tokyo had set up at the time. Back then, the members of this discussion would often talk about how humble the network really was. And, well, I could see that same spirit intact as I read through the "Full Report" all these years later. Going to pay the victims a visit, pulling *Pokémon* from the air, refraining from broadcasting any *Pokémon* related TV shows or segments, sending out formal requests to stop airing the show to the 31 affiliate networks that had also been airing *Pokémon* at the time, sending out formal requests to video rental stores to pull all their *Pokémon* videos from their shelves, agreeing on the formation of both internal and external investigation teams, formulating internal guidelines, dispatching research teams, creating and then airing reports and inspection



specials, developing a device called the "Anime Checker" and then installing it...if there was anything that could be done to prevent a reoccurrence then TV-Tokyo probably did it.

The U.K.'s ITC guidelines that TV-Tokyo was using as a model were created by more than 30 years' worth of clinical research conducted by the world authority on photosensitive epilepsy at the time, Professor Graham F.A. Harding. Professor Harding is a professor at Aston University in Birmingham specializing in neurophysiology. TV-Tokyo's British research team had asked the ITC, the BBC, Channel 4, and others to help do a breakdown of *Pokémon* Episode 38, and Professor Harding was one of the ones asked to participate.

This is when TV-Tokyo's research teams first found out that there were even rules in the U.K. regarding the way police car sirens spin and light up in order to prevent triggering photosensitive epilepsy. The U.K. was, after all, the world's leader in the field of photosensitive epilepsy. And so from the start of the year to about the end of March 1998, TV Tokyo called upon Professor Harding to sit down for interviews to be used in upcoming news specials, as well as to attend the network's various workshops. And then later, in August 1998, a flicker analysis device known as an "Anime Checker" was installed, with operations began shortly after that. The "Anime Checker" is a device that scans and analyzes video content automatically to check whether or not the frequency of light flickers has reached dangerous levels. Ever since the network installed this device any show thought to pose any sort of risk would be analyzed by the Checker.

It should be noted that the mainstream media didn't say a word about the piece of hardware known as "television" itself. You might reasonably expect TV manufacturers to jump at the chance to cooperate openly with the networks' research teams. But doing so would have been politically unwise.

Let's walk through a possible scenario. TV manufacturers could easily, from a technology point of view, start including some sort of sensor in their TVs that could detect things like the amount of light in the room and how far people are sitting away from the screen. Or, they could make it so that TV brightness levels can't be set to above a certain threshold depending on how bright or dark it is in the room. Things like that. After all, mobile phone makers operate in a similar way,



including various features in their phones and then leaving it up to the consumers to adjust these settings whenever they're around pacemakers or other medical equipment. But the problem with all this is that, unlike with mobile phones, the general public really never had any reason to believe television could be a dangerous piece of hardware up until the day of the *Pokémon* incident. If TV makers started taking any sort of action *now* then it would look like they're implicitly admitting that neither the TV networks nor the TV manufacturers had been doing their jobs up until then.

A collaborative effort would also be a hard thing to for the TV networks to propose since they receive so much of their funding from the manufacturers of household electronics. So the suggestion would have to come from the electronics maker side instead. If *that* happened then the makers of the TV sets, as the receivers of the network's broadcast signals, would have to get approvals from the networks sending out said signals in order to set the necessary baselines. Any important decisions would necessitate the TV networks and the TV manufacturers to come together and conduct joint research to settle on the set of rules on which these new hardware changes would be based. How many times per second can you have rapid color changes or flashing lights before the light dimming feature kicks in? How many concurrent lines in a black and white image are too many? Etc. etc. After all this work the networks that send out the broadcast waves -- in other words, the TV networks -- *might* be able reduce the likelihood of this kind of incident reoccurring.

But even then, according to TV-Tokyo's "Full Report," you could follow every single one of Professor Harding's suggestions and there would still be a 1 in 3 million chance remaining that someone could suffer a seizure from watching a show on TV.

To put it another way, this incident that happened to the *Pokémon* animated series made people acutely aware of the dangers of TV itself. This is a very important point.

It is possible that if the situation was like what happened with NHK -- and the number of children sent to the hospital after watching *Pokémon* had only been in the single digits -- then TV-Tokyo probably would've kept their mouths shut, just



like NHK had been doing. The same is probably true for all the other networks as well. But for this incident, where damages were caused to the approximately 750 children who were taken to the hospital, there was both a hardware and software component to it, though at the end of the day only the software side -- the TV networks -- ended up taking any sort of action.



*December 18 issue of Nikkan Sports*

## ***Notes from Masakazu Kubo (Part 1)***

### **As someone responsible for the *Pokémon* animated series**

I'd like to start off by apologizing again for any pain and suffering caused by the broadcasting incident involving flashing lights.

While it's true that the animation industry's "Paka-Paka" technique is not known to be particularly rare, it did end up causing more than 700 children to have to go to the hospital, and so I would like to offer my best wishes and sincerest apologies from the bottom of my heart.

The show was pulled from the air and we were even bracing ourselves to have the show canceled on us altogether. But we received so many messages of encouragement from fans saying things like "We want to meet Pikachu again!" And so, using that energy, we were able to return to the air on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1998. What really got the Japanese National Diet to agree to let us back on the air was all the phone calls, faxes, and letters from the fans, from both the kids and their mothers who loved the show. Some of the messages even came from



viewers who had to be taken to the hospital by ambulance the day of the incident. I have nothing but gratitude to all of you.

The animation production team at *Pocket Monsters* is working to re-learn everything we thought we knew in order to prevent anything like this from ever happening again. We will push forward to create shows in a way that is both meticulous and careful.

We hope you will continue to provide your warm support to Pikachu and all its Pokémon friends.

### 3. Hiatus

On December 20th, 1997, TV-Tokyo made the official announcement that *Pokémon* would be going on hiatus, stating that it would not return to the air until the Japan Commercial Broadcasters Association (JBA) completed its investigation. TV-Tokyo's kids' infotainment program *Oha Suta*, a show Kubo started up that October that had already become a staple of the before school morning blocks, had a very popular part of the show known as the "Pokémon Segment." That segment also went on a self-imposed hiatus. Every other TV special or show with any links to *Pokémon* were either canceled, postponed, or put on a self-imposed hiatus, and for a while there the word "Pokémon" completely vanished from TV-Tokyo's and its affiliates' TV guide listings in the newspapers and magazines.

At this point, ShoPro had a very important decision looming over them. Do they cut their losses and bow out? Or do they go all in on *Pokémon*?

TV-Tokyo wouldn't start its internal discussions about how to get the show back on the air until February 1998. Until then, the situation was still extremely touch-and-go. If the show was going to come back then, as far as ShoPro was concerned, it would be in everyone's best interests to hold onto the staff that had worked so hard to make *Pokémon* the success that it had been.

But in order for that to happen they would first need to figure out how to pay for production to continue during the hiatus. TV-Tokyo wasn't going to keep pumping



funds into a show whose fate was still so uncertain, and if they eventually did decide to just cancel the show altogether then ShoPro would've been out of luck. They wouldn't have been able to sell any of the newly created footage to any other network, and they wouldn't have been able to release it direct to video, either. All their work would've gone down the drain. But ShoPro, once again, stuck its neck out for *Pokémon*. For the three months between the beginning of January to the end of March 1998 -- while the show was still in limbo -- ShoPro foot the bill for the show's production themselves, enabling OLM and the other animation teams to continue their work on the *Pokémon* animated series throughout the hiatus. During that time, ShoPro shelled out more than 120 million yen in production fees. When combined with the amount they had put up to get the series started back in April 1997, ShoPro ended up investing around 300 million yen for *Pokémon*.

As far as *Pokémon's* ad agency JR Planning was concerned, the need to keep a timeslot open for *Pokémon* was the same, but in their case they needed to get the support of the show's sponsors. They had all *hoped* for *Pokémon* to return to the air someday, but whether or not they could actually wait it out for however long the show as going to be on hiatus for was another story. It was still very possible, after all, that any money provided by them would just end up going to waste as long as *Pokémon's* return remained uncertain.

In order for JP Planning and ShoPro to keep the timeslot open they had to continue keeping the sponsors happy. Their first order of business? Coming up with a replacement show to take *Pokémon's* spot during the hiatus. If you have a replacement show then you can at least keep that timeslot open, and if you can keep that timeslot open then you can continue working toward *Pokémon's* return.

Kubo came up with the idea of using *Gakkyuu Ou Yamazaki*, a series of five minute shorts that aired Monday through Fridays during his *Oha Suta* show's animation segment. If you take a week's worth of shows and re-edit them into a single 30 minute episode then voila! -- you've got yourself a replacement show. For the network this plan wasn't going to be easy plan to pull off. But, thanks to cooperation from the sponsors, ShoPro was able to at least continue keeping that timeslot warm.



Satoshi Tajiri, the man for whom the animated *Pokémon* series' Satoshi is named after, was at the Game Freak offices until around 8 o'clock the night of the incident. He doesn't remember exactly what time he left the office. He was in a car on the way back home when he flipped on the radio and happened to come across NHK's initial report on the incident.

"As soon as I heard that report I turned around and went straight back to the office. But when I got there none of the people still in the office had any clue anything was even going on."

Looking back, Tajiri had this to add:

"It was a huge shock. It took us all off guard, and I feel really bad for the people affected. And then to think that TV itself could be hiding such dangers...it was a lot to take in. Back in my day, our parents used to scold us if they saw us sitting too close to the TV. But now? You don't really hear about that much anymore, even though the size of TVs has gotten way bigger since then. While I think this incident in particular was truly an unfortunate accident, it's not like the dangers inherent with TV hadn't always been there. It's just that we adults had been too careless to realize that the medium's effect on children was even greater than what we had imagined."

Someone else who heard that same NHK report was Nintendo's future public relations manager Takashi Kawaguchi. Kawaguchi left the Nintendo offices in Kyoto after 8 o'clock and was heading home by car.

"Since I lived nearby I decided I might as well go home first. Once I got home I thought OK, we need to gather all the facts. But the truth is there really wasn't much to go on at that point."

The day after the incident, Nintendo put out a statement saying they have nothing to do with the animated series, that their video games are safe to play, and that, when it comes to the incident with the TV series, Nintendo accepts no responsibility.



"I wasn't a part of Nintendo's PR team at the time but I can imagine the company had no choice but to put out such a statement. Of course that doesn't mean they didn't feel bad for the people affected by the incident or the production teams that work on the animated series. But as the company that produces the *Pokémon* video games, their stance had to be that the incident with the animated series was separate from their *Pokémon* video games, because if people started lumping the two of together then that'd cause headaches for everyone. The biggest fear we had was that the incident involving this single aspect of *Pokémon* would end up bringing down the brand as a whole. If that were to happen then all those children who had been loving and supporting *Pokémon* up until then would've been let down."

There was also a part of them that thought this incident would be the end for them.

"Especially during that first week, those first ten days, we thought that this was going to be the thing that puts an end to *Pokémon*. It felt like an extremely dark, hopeless time."

Masakazu Kubo was in the editing department of the *CoroCoro Comics* offices the night of the incident. He got a phone call from ShoPro's head producer, Takemoto Mori, at around 8:30 PM.

"He told me that TV-Tokyo's Viewer Center had gotten a call from a doctor earlier that night. Apparently five children were brought in for convulsions, and all five of them said they were watching *Pokémon* when it happened. And so the doctor wanted him to tell them what kind of show it was. At that time I still had no idea what was happening but I could tell this was going to end up being something major."

Kubo and the others didn't really understand the full scope of what was going on until the local news started airing their reports at around 10 o'clock that night. Kubo had ordered everyone involved at Shogakukan to return to the office to have an emergency meeting about how to handle the situation moving forward. As the meeting went on more and more news stations started to pick up the story, and the number of people reported going to the hospital went up with each subsequent newscast.



"As we listened to the news, we felt really bad for the children taken to the hospital and their parents and guardians. Children who were just looking forward to watching their favorite cartoon had become victims, and for us on the production side this was the absolute worst outcome imaginable."

Kubo, like Kawaguchi, thought this incident might mean the end for *Pokémon*, that it would disappear from the face of the planet after this.

By the end of the meeting, it was decided that they would leave everything up to Kubo. This can be seen as a very prudent move on Shogakukan's and ShoPro's part during an emergency situation like this; since the companies both had structured hierarchies there was the very real chance that a higher-up somewhere might not always have the correct information and end up saying the wrong things, complicating things even further. Kubo's first orders of business were to establish a way of gathering accurate information and to set up a proper chain of command.

"Each of the networks started dispatching their news vans out to conduct interviews with the various production companies involved. Anyone involved with *Pokémon* would have been fair game and so we had to tread very carefully. If people started talking to the press and ended up saying something incorrect then it would be very difficult to set the record straight after the fact. The first things we had to do was to visit the hospitals where the kids had been taken, and to put out a message telling the kids who might've recorded that night's broadcast not to rewatch it."

Kubo set it up so that all reports went to him, and that all press from the production side would go through the then vice-chief of ShoPro's Media Division TV Planning Department, Takaaki Kii.

"Late that night, I took a taxi to the TV-Tokyo office together with ShoPro producer Toshihiro Nakazawa, who I knew from working at *Oha Suta*. The network had received early printings of each paper's morning editions, and everywhere you looked the *Pokémon* incident was going to be their front page news. After calling TV-Tokyo's senior managing director Mori and getting his approval, I went into the news drafts and started making a few changes here and there. It was



important to us to get the message out to families not to watch any recordings of the episode that may have been made the night before."

Kii is currently working as the department manager of ShoPro's Media Division's "Pokémon Room" that was established in 2000.

Tsunekazu Ishihara was having dinner in Tokyo when he got a call from Kubo.

"He told me he had been getting a bunch of strange phone calls about some kind of incident, but neither he nor I knew what was going on and so I thought oh crap, I'd better get back to the office."

But returning to the office didn't help clear anything up.

"I felt bad for the children affected by this incident, from the bottom of my heart, but I also couldn't help but wonder why something like this was even happening in the first place. This incident made me realize just how dangerous TV could be and that maybe we hadn't been doing everything we could to mitigate those dangers. We were always hyper focused on the visuals and so it's not like we didn't know the risks. But unfortunately, we just didn't pay enough attention. With an incident of this magnitude it was hard to imagine the *Pokémon* animated series would be allowed to continue."

Izawa of TV-Tokyo received a phone call from Kubo after the incident.

"I was on the train home when I got a call from Kubo telling me that it seems like something had happened. But I had no idea what was going on. So I immediately called my house and asked my kids, since I knew they had been watching every week, and asked how that night's episode of *Pokémon* was. But they just responded "Huh? What's up?" I later found out they had taped that night's episode so when I got home I watched it for myself. You see, my kids recorded every episode of *Pokémon* and would rewatch them over and over."

During this period, Izawa was not a member of any department that would've been interviewed by the mainstream media about the incident. Instead, he was the contact responsible for coordinating with the various sponsors. Izawa would



go around to each sponsor, one by one, together with ShoPro and JR Planning.

"We went around each company to apologize and to explain the situation. When we told them what happened the sponsors were all very understanding. And then! They would start asking us when we thought the show was going to come back. Amazingly, all the sponsors were anxious for *Pokémon's* return."

The producer in charge of the *Pokémon* animated series on TV-Tokyo's end, Keisuke Iwada, was riding the train home when he got a phone call. It was around 8:30 PM when he was approaching his next stop.

"I got a phone call from the network's Viewer Center saying they said they had gotten a call from some hospital. So I got off at the next stop, called Mr. Mori the ShoPro producer from the train platform, and asked him if he had noticed anything that stood out about that night's episode. Because I couldn't think of anything myself. And at that point we still didn't know about all the children falling ill or that *Pokémon* was the root cause. But Mr. Mori didn't know anything about what was going on either. When I got home I called the doctor who had reached out to the network's Viewer Center and asked him what kind of symptoms he observed. He also told me that none of the kids brought to his hospital had missed that night's episode of *Pokémon*. But that still could've just been a coincidence, I thought, and felt like we needed more to go off before we could definitively say that *Pokémon* was the root cause here."

After that, Mr. Iwada returned to the network at around 1:00 AM and, as the network's main producer, set out to identify the root cause. Iwada was the one who had spoken directly with doctors who had treated some of the victims and so he was the first person at the network to truly understand the situation. Iwada would later be added as a member of the network's investigation team.

The TV series' general director, Kunihiko Yuyama, was doing editing work in the studio the night of the incident. He found out at around 9 o'clock after he had gotten home for the night.

"Back then, we did our editing work during *Pokémon's* Tuesday night timeslot. I had no idea what was going on while I was doing my editing work. But when I got



home I got a phone call from a staff member at OLM who told me that something big was happening. But, we didn't know anything other than what NHK News was saying about kids falling ill while watching *Pokémon*. After we finished talking I decided to turn on the news and that's when I saw the report on *News Station*."

ShoPro's Kii was the one who dealt with the media and so Yuyama never ended up being interviewed about the incident. But that doesn't mean he wasn't extremely nervous while they waited to find out what the root cause was.

"It was a real shock. I felt like I was in a trance. Because we didn't know what the cause was, you see. If there was a problem with some of the images in our show then we wouldn't have known which images were the issue. In the beginning, especially, the media was framing the whole situation as "Pikachu Attacks Your Kids!" And when I read those articles I couldn't help but think about the children who might come across them, and how this kind of rhetoric might actually cause them even *more* pain."

Yuyama was also uncertain what the future held for the *Pokémon* animated series.

"Yeah, I thought the chances we'd be canceled altogether were pretty high. Or rather, I had no idea if we'd be allowed back on the air."

Shukichi Kanda, an animation producer at OLM, found out about the incident from a phone call he received when coming up streetside from the subway. This was at around 9 o'clock.

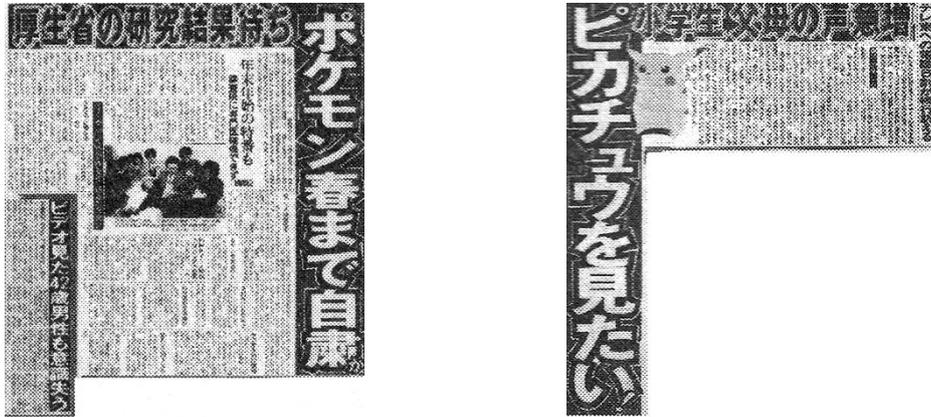
"I think the call came from Toshiaki Okuno. As soon as I'd hang up I'd get another phone call, and then another, and another, and so on and so on for the next half an hour, unable to move from the spot. When I finally got home I saw the report on *News Station*."

Kanda, as one of co-managers at OLM, felt a strong sense of responsibility.

"We had no idea what the cause was in the beginning. But the biggest shock was that something like this really happened, and that it happened to *children*. We had been making the show to entertain kids, to give them something to look forward



to that would make them happy, and then to have them suffer these types of symptoms...I felt this shock right away, before I even started thinking about my role in all this. I think we all felt the same way."



*Excerpts from the December 19<sup>th</sup> edition of Nikkan Sports*

Chouji Yoshikawa, a freelance producer, was working from home that night.

"Every now and then I'd get home early on Tuesday nights and would get to check out the live broadcasts. I watched that night's episode but didn't see anything that stood out to me and so I went about my business. Later, I got a call from Mr. Mori over at ShoPro telling me to check out the news. So I turned on the TV and my stomach just sank. I was there during the voice recording sessions for that particular episode and so I had seen it a bunch of times, in addition to the live broadcast I had just watched earlier that night. But I had no idea where the issue could've been. As I sat there watching the news it felt like I was getting a shot in my arm, or having an allergic reaction, where things kept happening to you that you just can't explain. I really had no idea what the cause was. It was an extremely uneasy time for us."

However, even though he didn't know all the details he could at least understand that something big was happening. He thought about what he should do next, as someone in his position, and decided to call Kubo.

"I called Mr. Kubo and told him that I was ready for whatever was coming. I thought if there really was an accident then I would be seen as the person responsible. But then Mr. Kami apologized and said, rather ominously, that we might be having a lot more time to ourselves coming up soon. When I talked to



Mr. Kubo he said "Well, we had a good run. I really had fun the last year and a half." I remember thinking "Yeah..." after hearing that."

Kubo also remembers getting the phone call from Yoshikawa.

"With every news report we came to understand that this wasn't something limited to just a single TV show. We realized that if we didn't have the involvement of TV-Tokyo, the Ministry of Health and Welfare, and even the Japanese National Diet then nothing would get resolved. If this was a problem due to a single animated series then Mr. Yoshikawa could have just taken responsibility for it but the situation was getting to the point where it was beyond any of that."

## ***Notes from Masakazu Kubo (Part 2)***



### **"Gakkyuu Ou Yamazaki"**

*Gakkyuu Ou Yamazaki* is a popular school gag manga that runs in CoroCoro Comics. The manga's done by Mr. Manavu Kashimoto.

The *Gakkyuu Ou Yamazaki* animated show aired for five minutes a day during *Oha Suta*, Mondays through Fridays.

© Manavu Kashimoto, Shogakukan,  
ShoPro, TV-Tokyo

In order to use it as a replacement for *Pokémon*, a week's worth of episodes -- that's five episodes -- would be combined and re-edited to make a roughly 25 minute show that could then be aired during *Pokémon's* original half hour slot.

Naturally, *Pokémon* and *Yamazaki* were each sponsored by different companies so asking *Yamazaki's* sponsors -- toy maker Bandai, among others -- to help us out with this was a lot to ask. So I would like to take a moment to say thank you all again for all your help.



## **The Day Known as December 16th**

It was the most depressing day of my life. It's like all the complicated emotions of my 41 years on this planet were condensed into a single, perplexing moment in time.

In a previous section I offered my apologies and gratitude to all the fans out there, and so now I'd like to offer those same feelings to all the people involved with *Pokémon*. During our time together we've lived through December 16th and then had the show come back four months later and so I'd like to express my deepest gratitude for all the people out there who helped get us through that difficult time.

## **To the people who made the original video games**

I'll never forget the phone call I got from Mr. Ishihara right after the incident took place. My memory of the conversation goes "I've run this by Game Freak, and we decided we're leaving everything up to you, Mr. Kubo..." I'm sure there were a lot of other things he wanted to tell me but couldn't, but in the end I'm grateful he and the company had as much faith in me as they did.

The day after, Nintendo had a press conference where they said "our video games and their animated program are unrelated." At that time all we had to go off of was what was written in the newspaper and so it was hard to know what Nintendo really meant by that. Some time later, people like general affairs manager Hiroshi Imanishi and Mr. Hiroshi Yamaguchi sat us down and explained exactly what they meant by those comments. I'm really grateful for that follow-up.

## **To all the sponsors, as well as JR Planning**

During the show's hiatus we asked a lot from Tomy, Nagatanien, Meiji Seika Factory, Media Factory, Banpresto, and our other sponsors. I am eternally grateful for you cooperating with us without any complaints. In particular, I'd like to thank Media Factory for all the hard work they did with the home video releases. The JR East Planning agency also did all sorts of work in order to allow the show to continue. Thank you all very much.



## To TV-Tokyo

I'm so grateful for how sincerely you handled every twist and turn thrown at you. I'd especially like to thank Mr. Iwada and his team at the movie department for all their hard work creating the rules we'd end up using in the future. We also received a lot of back up from Mr. Misawa and Mr. Izawa in sales. Having the help of president Kii's management team was also a really powerful ally during our time of need.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all of you.

It seems like I don't have enough space here to thank all the people I need to thank. So to wrap this up, I would like to express my gratitude to all the people who helped us in so many ways who I may have missed. And thank you to all the seniors and juniors at Shogakukan and ShoPro who entrusted so many important duties to a novice like me.

## 4. Wrapping Up the Incident

The amount of viewer feedback received by TV-Tokyo's Viewer Center, from the night of the incident up to January 30th, 1998, was eventually tallied up. According to the report, there were 3,076 correspondences altogether; of those, 2,223 said "We want *Pokémon* back on the air," 220 said they wanted to know what was going to happen to the show, 47 said "We want you to cancel *Pokémon*," and 586 can be filed under "miscellaneous."

On February 26th, 1998, a regularly scheduled press conference was held where TV-Tokyo president Yutaka Ichiki told everyone that "*Pokémon*'s return to the air is only pending the release of the JBA's guidelines." This marked the first time the president actually said, in public, that *Pokémon* will indeed be returning. Senior managing director Mr. Oka, who was also there in attendance,



The January 18th, 1998 edition of "Sports Hochi"



added that "custom-made guidelines, even more strict than what the ITC has in the UK, have already been submitted to the JBA." Mr. Oka is referring to the "Animation Production Provisional Guidelines" that were submitted to the JBA Animation Special Committee about a week earlier on February 13th.

And then, during the press conference held on March 30th, it was announced that since the JBA's guidelines were expected to come in any day now that "*Pokémon* could return to the air as early as April 16th." At the same time, the network also announced they'll be airing a special investigative report at some point before the show returns.

What was going through Nintendo's minds at this time? Takashi Kawaguchi had this to say:

"When we were thinking about what needed to happen for *Pokémon* to be allowed back on the air, those of us on the production side knew we couldn't just be like "Well we're all good to go so let's get started." And so a line in the sand was drawn; we wouldn't return to the air until we could establish a clear framework for moving forward *and* get public consensus on our side."

On April 3rd, the Ministry of Health and Welfare's research team released their report that stated the symptoms experienced by children due of the *Pokémon* cartoon were indeed caused by the strong flashing of red and blue lights. With this, the government had their long-awaited results. The "clear framework for moving forward and public consensus" that Kawaguchi had mentioned earlier were all in place, allowing *Pokémon* to plan its return to the small screen in earnest.



*The March 31st, 1998 edition of "Nikkan Sports"*

On April 8th, the JBA and NHK released their industry-wide guidelines for the making of visual content and the use of flashing lights, with a special focus on bright red ones. The following day, TV-Tokyo's president Ichiki and senior managing director Oka once again attended the House of Representatives Communications Committee. They attended as witnesses, providing an official timeline of the steps taken since the incident as well as the contents of their network's own internal guidelines. That afternoon, TV-Tokyo released those "Animated Program Production Guidelines" to the media.

Two days later, on April 10th, TV-Tokyo held an event to celebrate its 34th year on the air. At the top of the ceremony, president Ichiki greeted the attendees by telling them that "All of us here in the company have been able to come together and overcome great hardships in order to get *Pokémon* back on the air." This gave everyone a glimmer of hope that the incident caused by the *Pokémon* cartoon was about to be behind them. The previously announced special investigative report, titled "The "Pocket Monsters" Animated Series Special Investigation," ended up airing on Saturday, April 11th from 1:00 PM until 1:55 PM.

After a hiatus of exactly four months, the *Pocket Monsters* animated series returned to the air on Thursday, April 16th with an hour long special starting at 7:00 PM. The broadcast brought in viewership ratings of 16.2%.

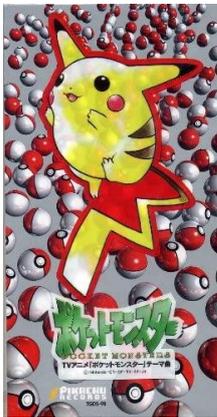
Despite the break, *Pocket Monsters'* popularity did not decrease at all. In fact, you could argue it had only gotten even more popular. It's possible that, during the cartoon's four month hiatus, children were so starved for anything and everything *Pokémon* that they consumed it even more voraciously.

Because even with the show off the air, *Pokémon* merchandise continued to fly off the shelves during the Christmas season that immediately followed. But it didn't stop there; *Pokémon's* popularity continued on into the new year as well.



*Pokémon's* fans hadn't abandoned it. The *Pokémon* broadcast incident, this horrible, horrible news story, ended up turning into a kind of teachable moment for the industry, allowing *Pokémon* to dust itself off and pick up where it left off.

"Once we made it through the Diet's review and the show's return was solidified, we were suddenly hit with this overwhelming feeling of utter exhaustion. But we didn't have time to rest, you see; everyone was waiting on us to reunite them with Pikachu. So it showed us that we can always count on our good pal Pikachu. The first episode we aired after the break was one that featured a lot of them, an episode called "The Pikachu Forest," and whenever I rewatch this episode all those emotions from that time come flooding back." (Kubo)



CD single for "Mezase Pokémon Master"

When the show came back its opening theme was replaced with a newly recorded version, *Mezase Pokémon Master '98*. The theme song used throughout 1997, *Mezase Pokémon Master*, saw a CD single release in June 1997 and was a huge hit, selling over 1.8 million copies. The newer version, *Mezase Pokémon Master '98*, can be found on the albums "Pocket Monsters Sound Picture Box: The Birth of Mewtwo" and "The Songs That Everyone Chose! The Pokémon Best Collection."

Sales of the *Pocket Monsters* video games continued to go up. In the roughly one year between the games going on sale in 1996 and the start of the animated series in 1997, more than 3.5 million copies -- 3.78 million, to be exact -- had been sold. By August 1997, half a year after the TV series started, total sales of the *Pokémon* games were passing by even heavy hitters like *Super Mario Bros*. When it comes to the *Pokémon* video games, Tajiri was starting to become revered as the "Big Brother of the Gaming World," able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with greats like Shigeru Miyamoto and Mario. *Pocket Monsters* took over the Christmas '97 season and, by the time we got to March -- right before the show came back on the air -- the number of video game copies sold surpassed



A game in the *Super Mario Bros* series



10 million.

*Pokémon* had burst onto the scene so dramatically that people didn't seem to notice that sales of the Game Boy hardware that everyone was using to play *Pokémon* on were going up as well. The Game Boy Pocket, which went on sale in July 1996, and the (Japan-only) Game Boy Light, which went on sale the same month the TV series started, both continued to do well even after the TV incident. Total sales of the Game Boy for the year 1997 were 55% higher than they had been the year before, coming in at over 11,020,000 units, making this the first time since the system went on the market that its yearly sales had surpassed 10 million units (Note: These are worldwide numbers)

*Pokémon's* effect could even be seen the year before as the Game Boy had seen a 70% increase in sales in 1996, to 7,090,000 units, but as evident above it didn't lose any steam in its second year either. The Game Boy hardware had already been on the market for eight years by then, and yet it was able to record its greatest sales figures up to that point in Year Eight. On November 13th, 1996, Nintendo addressed these fantastic numbers by announcing that they saw a 56% increase in sales to 203 billion yen in the first half of its fiscal year, with its operating income (a calculation rarely seen outside Japan) also seeing an increase of 64% to 49.1 billion yen. Nintendo added that they were going to have to re-evaluate the forecasts they had made for the sales and operating income for both the current year as well as the first half of 1997.

The Game Boy's sales didn't slow down after that, either. Far from it; every year the system kept breaking new sales records. In 1998, the number of units sold for the year increased to 13,560,000. By 1999, *Pokémon* had fully broken into the worldwide market, and the number of Game Boys sold reached an astonishing 20,670,000 units. And in June 2000, it broke a worldwide record by selling over 100 million units. While those numbers are huge, the surprising thing is that more than half of those sales -- 52 million of them -- were made after *Pokémon's* debut in 1996.

And out of those 52 million units, 45 million of them were sold after the start of the *Pokémon* animated series. You can see this as a marvel of multimedia synergy, the dream scenario of any modern content business.



But selling well wasn't all that *Pokémon* was doing; it was also a series receiving a ton of praise and accolades. In 1997, the *Pokémon* video games swept all the major gaming awards, starting with the fifth Japan Software Awards and then continuing with the CESA Awards, the Asahi Digital Entertainment Awards, and the Dime Trend Product Awards put on by Shogakukan's trend magazine *Dime*. In 1998, it took home the grand prize at the Nikkei Excellent Product Awards and also won at the Nikkei Ryutsu Newspaper Awards. The aforementioned Japan Software Awards win was the first time creators Satoshi Tajiri and Tsunekazu Ishihara had received this particular honor, but was the second year in a row that a Nintendo property had gotten it after *Super Mario 64* had won the year before.

The Pokémon Card Game also continued to fly off the shelves. Up until about a month before the TV series started there were around 16,310,000 cards being printed a month (yearly average), but once the animated series went on the air that number jumped up to 41,580,000 cards a month (again, yearly average). In 1997 the number of cards printed totaled 499 million.

The morning kids' show *Oha Suta*, with its super popular "Pokémon Segment," became a staple of the before school TV blocks, seemingly overnight.

The number of companies applying for new *Pokémon* merchandise licenses grew exponentially as well. There were around 150 new license applications a week with the yearly total surpassing 7,500 applications, though it should also be noted that only about one out of 20 of those applications actually resulted in a company being granted the license.



"Palm Pikachu"

When it comes to *Pokémon* merchandise, 1997 was toy maker Tomy's year in the sun. At the start of the year, Tomy's president and chief executive officer, Kantarou Tomiyama, forecast that "I have a vision of *Pokémon* and 10 billion yen," declaring that *Pokémon* merchandise would bring in 10 billion yen by the year's end. People seemingly brushed this off as Tomy just beating its chest, but the company ended up



having the last laugh as it managed to surpass that ambitious forecast in only ten months. The company had big hits with its Pikachu figure that could fit in the palm of your hand, "Palm Pikachu" (1,280 yen before tax), which sold 2.2 million units; and its 1/1 scale stuffed Pikachu (6,800 yen before tax), which sold 400,000 units. Just those two products alone accounted for 60% of that 10 billion yen target. Tomy's sales in March 1998 went up 70% from the year before to reach 57.4 billion yen.

The popularity of Tomy's *Pokémon* products have been going strong ever since. The company announced that its balance sheet for the period ending in March 2000 recorded its highest sales yet with 96.8 billion yen and an operating income of 7.86 billion yen. Newspapers reported that "Tomy's increase in income and profit are thanks to *Pokémon* and *Furby*." *Furby*, which Tomy had the distribution rights for in Japan, had earned them an impressive 8 billion yen, but even that was nothing compared to the total sales of all *Pokémon* products, which in its fourth year on the market managed to bring in 28.9 billion yen, up 4.5 billion yen from the year before.



"Pikachu 1/1"

When it comes to food, Nagatanien were the ones who hopped on the wave caused by *Pokémon*. Its two types of *Pokémon* Curry pouches, "Beef and Corn" and "Sausage and Corn," as well as its two types of *Pokémon furikake*, Bonito Flakes and Salmon, each surpassed the 1 billion yen mark in the half a year after they went on the market, causing Nagatanien to have to increase its earnings forecast in its midterm earnings report. Their *Pokémon furikake* also won at the Food Product Hit Awards that year.



Translated by Dogasu of Dogasu's Backpack (<https://dogasu.bulbagarden.net>)



Pokémon Curry



Pokémon Furikake

Various *Pokémon* events, meanwhile, also helped showcase the brand's ability to get people out there and moving. For the nine days between August 9th and August 17th 1997, a *Pokémon* Stamp Rally event proposed by *CoroCoro Comics* was held by JR East. The event was set up in 30 stations in the greater Tokyo metropolitan area, and if you went around collecting stamps from a certain number of stations and then took your stamp book to a certain station set up as a "goal station" then you could receive a special *Pokémon* card. The game was set up so that you could travel around the "Kanto Region" from the video games, going from town to town collecting *Pokémon* in the real world Kanto area of Japan. The participation fee, which included the guidebook and stamp set, was 2,000 yen for adults and 1,100 yen for children. When all was said and done, over 100,000 people -- far more than JR East had expected -- ended up joining the event. It was the largest stamp rally in Japanese history.



Pokémon Stamp Rally 1997



Pokémon Stamp Rally



What stood out about this particular event, probably, is how there were so many people moving around during a short span of time and yet nobody got in anyone else's way. During the rally you could see a lot of families on the trains on the Yamanote and Chuo train lines, all wearing caps and backpacks and T-shirts with Pikachu on them and whatnot, everyone smiling ear to ear. The long lines these groups formed didn't get in anyone's way, the noise was kept at a respectable level, and it was an event that both parents and their children could enjoy together. It couldn't have worked out more perfectly. In fact, JR East received a lot of letters from families who actually *thanked* them for putting together an event. According to parents, this stamp rally gave them the opportunity to rediscover the areas near where they live, have conversations with their kids, and have a fun little mini vacation at a reasonable price. Parents' support for their children's hobby wasn't just based on the video games and television series; it also manifested itself in events like this one.



"Ad Train" on the Yamanote Line

The Pokémon Stamp Rally would go on to become a yearly event, and in summer 1998, after the cartoon had come back from its hiatus, they made it so that it was now easier than ever to join. And in the year 2000, some of the trains on the Yamanote line had "Ad Trains" adorned with advertisements for that year's movie, and both JR East and JR West's relationship with *Pokémon* became even deeper. And if there were children who grew out of *Pokémon* then there would

always be the next generation of children to appear and take their place, and so events like this Stamp Rally, from the point of view of the creators of these characters, become important orienteering events.



A number of other plans were put into motion after the TV series' return in 1998. On April 25th, the "Pokémon Center Tokyo," a specialty shop aimed at the parents of the children who had been consuming *Pokémon*, opened up in the Nihonbashi area of Tokyo. In July, Japanese airline ANA started service of its Pokémon Jets, airplanes with Pikachu and other *Pokémon* painted on their exteriors. The airline also started selling exclusive *Pokémon* merchandise inside their aircrafts.



*Pokémon Center Tokyo*



*ANA Pokémon Jet*

But no matter who you ask, the tentpole of 1998 was none other than the *Pokémon* movie. Plans for a theatrical film were hatched as early as 1996, with production beginning in full immediately after the animated TV series launched in 1997. The one who proposed the *Pokémon* movie was, once again, Masakazu Kubo from Shogakukan's *CoroCoro Comics*' editing department. In a proposal dated April 15th, 1997 that he submitted to Nintendo entitled "Pocket Monsters: Plans for April '97 ~ July '98," Kubo looked at the success the *Pokémon* comics had after they expanded from just being in *CoroCoro Comics* to showing up in each of the grade school magazines, and so an additional magazine, the girls' magazine *Ciao*, was added to the list. *Pokémon's* addition to the grade school magazines was well received by each publication, with circulation going up 1.5 to nearly 2 times what it had been, all across the board.



But let's get back to the proposal. The report begins with the sentence "First, I'd like to congratulate everyone on winning at the Japan Software Awards." For anyone in the know, this one sentence alone immediately gives away who wrote this proposal.



*The Next Generation World Hobby Fair Dome Tour*

This written proposal would go on to make three pitches: 1) the Pokémon Stamp Rally, 2) The Next Generation World Hobby Fair Dome Special, and 3) a "Pocket Monsters" movie to be released in 1998. That first item ended up being for that first stamp rally held in 1997. The second item, the dome special, was to be a hobby convention lasting from December 1997 to February 1998. It would take place at the Fukuoka Dome, Sapporo Dome, Makuhari Messe, Osaka Dome, and the Nagoya Dome, and with the exception of the Makuhari venue the plan was to have the Next Generation World Hobby Fair travel around to all these dome stadiums across Japan. This CoroCoro Comics convention had previously taken place in three cities -- Tokyo, Osaka, and Fukuoka -- thanks to the success of both *Mini 4WD* and *Pokémon* and so this proposal was to expand the event nationwide. It also asked Nintendo if it would be willing to set up some booths at the convention. The main idea was that the event would show off the "Pokémon 2" video game (the name it was known by at the time), set to be released sometime in 1998, offer distributions of the mythical Pokémon Mew, gather *Pokémon* merchandise in a "Pokémon World" area, hold a Mini 4WD dome special tournament, hold a competition to determine the "B-Daman New Year B-Da Champion," hold a Futsal Dragon Cup tournament, and more. Nothing about this event had any direct connection to the *Pokémon* TV incident and so it was able to move forward as scheduled.

And then there's the movie. Here's what Kubo wrote in his proposal:

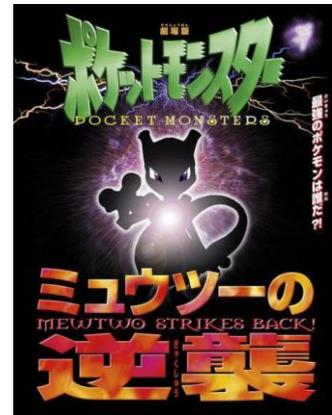
"If we're able to get production started this June then we'll be able to deliver you a film far beyond what's possible with the TV series. For the film itself we're



thinking of basing it on "Pokémon 2"" (this is the game we now know as Gold / Silver).

Just like *Doraemon* and *The Racing Brothers Let's & Go* before it, production of the *Pokémon* movie was to be overseen by a committee set up by investment companies. The proposal was for it to have a total budget of 300 million yen, bookings in 100 movie theaters nationwide, and a box office revenue's break-even point set at 800 million yen. The idea was that the movie would be aimed at families, particularly boys and girls in elementary and junior high school.

That film, the double feature *Pocket Monsters "Mewtwo Strikes Back!"* and *"Pikachu's Summer Vacation,"* would go on to shine bright as the best earning Japanese film in history, bringing in 8.6 billion yen domestically and 19.4 billion year globally (and counting). However, the movie's production hit a snag thanks to the TV series incident and its subsequent hiatus.



When the incident with the animated series took place, the movie's production had already gotten all the way up to the storyboard stage. The plan was to make the stories of the movie and the TV series link up perfectly, but when the TV show was taken off the air the film's staff had to rework the story of the movie from the ground up.

After the December 16th incident there were the winter holidays, and so all production work had come to a halt. But once the root cause of the incident was more or less singled out production was able to restart in mid January, first with the movie, and then with the TV series.



Pamphlet from the Pocket Monsters The Movie #1 Press Conference

"We first turned our attention to any scene that wasn't going to use bright lights. You could even argue that, for all intents and purposes, we never really stopped working on the show at all. If we had paused production and released our amazing staff to go work on other projects then there'd be no guarantee we'd have been able to get them to come back once we were ready to start up again. We had a movie we had to make and we were of course all adamant about resuming work on *Pokémon*, but until we knew how the deliberations at the Diet were going to go resuming production was going to be a risk." (Kubo)



Scene from "Mewtwo Strikes Back!"

© Nintendo • CREATURES • GAMEFREAK • TV TOKYO • SHO-PRO • JR Kikaku © Pikachu Project 98

Once production had resumed, the staff was able to take its time and proceed cautiously. It's thanks to this extra time allotted to them a system was able to be put in place that allows the TV series' main animation staff to also work on the movie, on rotation, instead of the way it's usually done which is to bring in a whole other staff and have *them* be the ones to work on the film. Work on the series had stopped until the Diet finished its deliberations, but the moment they got the



government's OK production started right back up, presumably firing on all cylinders. Of course there was still uncertainty in the air as nobody knew when exactly the show was actually going to go back on the air, or even if their work would just end up getting shelved in the end. But thanks to the extra time granted to them by the TV incident, the members of the staff returned to their roots and, as an unintended side effect, were able to give the show their all.

Whether it's the video games, cards, or animation, *Pokémon* was a hit. After the TV show returned to the air, one could reasonably expect the upcoming movie to be a hit as well. Even so, nobody, not even the film's distributor Toho, could have foreseen that it would eventually bring in 4.2 billion yen at the box office. If you just do a straight up calculation, it made back 14 times its budget in a very short time. With the hit that was 1998's *Pocket Monsters the Movie "Mewtwo Strikes Back!"*, people were finally able to see that *Pokémon* isn't just some fad, it's the face of a new type of character business never before seen in Japan.

### ***Notes from Masakazu Kubo (Part 3)***

#### **Mr. Kantarou Tomiyama**

Representative director and chief executive officer of Tomy Company, Ltd. Born January 22nd, 1954. After graduating from the University of Hull in the United Kingdom in 1982 he started work at Tomy Manufacturing Ltd (present day Tomy Company, Ltd.). He's been with the company since 1986. In 2000, he changed the company's logo from the round logo written in red to a more sharp logo written in blue. The company's new catch copy is "Dream Energy."





## About the Authors



Photo by Tsunekazu Ishihara

### Masakazu Kubo (Right)

Born July 25th, 1959, from Asahikawa City, Hokkaido. Moved to Tokyo when he was in second grade at junior high school. Graduated from Waseda University's Faculty of Education. Joined Shogakukan Inc. in 1983. After working in the company's materials department and as a member of the editing staff at the magazine *Televi-kun*, Mr. Kubo went on to work on the editing staff of *CoroCoro Comics*. He was also in charge of *Obocchama-kun* and *Mini 4WD* while in the editing department. Currently has multiple responsibilities including working as an executive producer on the *Pokémon* movies, the vice director of Shogakukan's 9th editing division, the section chief of the character planning office, and the general producer of Shogakukan Production's media division, among others. In November 2000 he left the world of editing when he stepped down as editor-in-chief and now focuses on character business. Used to be an avid off-road biker. Member of HOG. Father of two sons and one daughter.

### Kenji Hatakeyama (Left)

Born March 22nd, 1954, from Kamogawacho, Okayama Prefecture. Raised in Setouchi's Onomichi City, Hiroshima Prefecture from the time he was a third grader in elementary school. Graduated from the law department of Chuo University. After working in news agencies and publishing he became chair of Hatakeyama Office in 1990. Received the 1994 Kibi Japanese literature award of excellence. He studies foreign advisors hired by the Japanese government to aid in the modernization of Japan during the Meiji period (1868 - 1912) but doing the interviews for this book was the first time had had stepped foot in the world of character business. As an author, Mr. Hatakeyama wrote *Kuwata and Yuming: How They Became Great*, *The Vessel of the Forest*, *The Legend of Josiah Conder: The Man Who Built the Rokumeikan*, and *The Story of the Airplanes in the Land Where the Sun Doesn't Set*. Also translated *Desmond Fernandes' Skincare Handbook*. Member of the Kyou Sai Kawanabe Research Society and the Japan Architecture Society. Father of two sons.