

Once upon a time, children's games were a byword for innocent happiness, and 'joy' was the obvious rhyme for 'toy'. Hoops and kites, tin soldiers and china dolls seemed to be uncomplicated things in which the young took a simple delight. A novelty nutcracker could transform a little girl's Christmas.

How different today! Childhood has been redefined as a market to be exploited to the max. The toymaker is no longer the hero of childish fantasy: now he is just another manufacturer, single-minded in his pursuit of profit. The only lives his products must enrich are those of his shareholders.

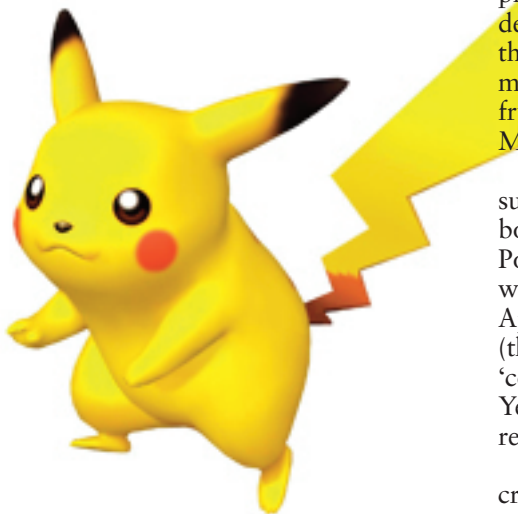
In recent years, the world has seen a succession of crazes as the industry has reached a new level in manipulating immature appetites and fears. Not only do children now have significant sums of disposable income themselves, but a culture in which family life is governed by negotiation rather than authority has given them serious leverage on their parents' purses. The media call it 'pester power', which makes it sound rather sweet.

The opportunism of the early spin-offs from successful films or television shows has given way to something much more calculated. Films are now conceived as extended promos for the merchandise – which people pay to see.

Pokémon raises the whole game to a new pitch. Its creator, Satoshi Tajiri, is a computer nerd who sold Nintendo an electronic game based on his boyhood obsession with collecting insects. What

they have made of it is a multi-format phenomenon which some predict will this year gross \$6 billion. One dollar for every human being on the planet.

The Pokémon catchphrase, 'Gotta catch 'em all', would seem to be the company's own motto. The brand has multiplied through computer games to



## Icon of the Month

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comics to trading cards to TV shows to just about anything that can legally be sold to the young. Every childish urge is caught in its appeal: the desire to collect, to swap, to fight, to nurture, to become an expert in arcane lore – and, maybe above all, just not to be left out.

Pokémon is an abbreviation of 'pocket monster', and its mix of violence and cutesiness – a distinctively Japanese marriage of Godzilla and My Little Pony – has proved equally attractive to both sexes. Pikachu, who has become the mascot of the whole menagerie, is now the world's most desirable mouse. He has big eyes and pink cheeks and goes goo-goo, but also delivers a nasty electric shock. Mice of the past, from Jerry to Reepicheep, must be chewing their tails in frustration. Someone is taking the Mickey out of our children.

This is not the triumph of style over substance so much as the trashing of both by marketing power. The latest Pokémanifestation is 'the first movie', which hit British cinemas on the 14th April. Not only is the plot 'desultory' (the *Independent*) but the animation is 'contemptuously lazy' (the *Guardian*). Yet it is still expected to gross a respectable \$100 million worldwide.

It is typical of our times that the craze has been greeted with irritation rather than anger. Bit by bit, we have become acclimatised to the idea that children – the ultimate 'little guys' – are proper targets for big business.

The purpose of play, according to psychologists, is to prepare the young to meet the demands of adult life. Perhaps it is fitting that Pokémon seems to teach children nothing except to covet and consume – and, in some cases, steal and extort. But what was it Jesus had in mind for those who caused 'these little ones' to sin? **Huw Spanner**