

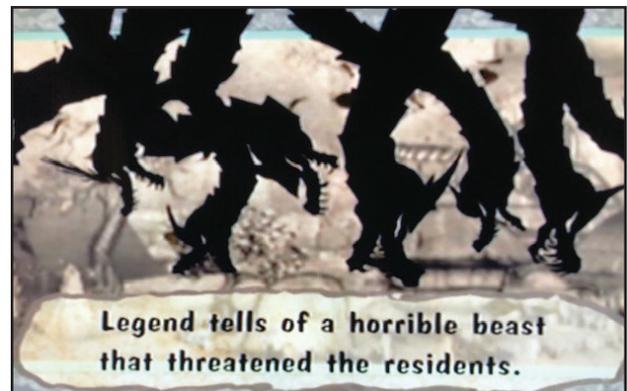
Japanese Monsters and Yōkai in Videogames

by Rachael Hutchinson

Includes Pedagogical/Classroom Resources

Abstract

Japanese videogames frequently feature monsters and *yōkai*—supernatural beings drawn from folklore, mythology, and religious belief—yet their cultural significance is often overlooked in discussions of global game culture. This article provides an accessible overview of Japanese monsters and *yōkai* in videogames, situating them within broader historical, social, and aesthetic contexts. Through case studies of three globally popular titles—*Pokémon Scarlet and Violet*, *Ōkami*, and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*—the article examines how *yōkai*-inspired creatures function within gameplay mechanics, narrative worlds, and visual design. It explores how players encounter monsters as both adversaries and allies, and how mechanics such as collection, combat, befriending, and elemental systems encourage engagement with culturally specific knowledge. Drawing on folklore studies, game studies, and media scholarship, the article highlights the ways in which videogames act as conduits for Japanese culture, while also addressing issues of cultural packaging for export and the appropriation of Indigenous beliefs for entertainment. The article includes pedagogical resources and suggested classroom activities, demonstrating how videogames can be used effectively to teach about Japanese culture, mythology, and media in interdisciplinary educational settings.



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Introduction

Videogames from Japan are dominant on the world stage, with characters like Mario and Sonic starring in their own movies and retro arcade games like *Pac-Man* or *Space Invaders* instantly recognizable in any context. Considering the global games industry, worth billions of dollars, it is impressive how many development companies are based in Japan. Nintendo, Sega, Konami, Square Enix, Capcom, Namco Bandai, Kōei, SNK—the list goes on and on. Gameplay culture in Japan is in some ways analogous to that of North America, with videogames an increasingly significant sector in the entertainment industry and players of all ages enjoying games of different genres. But there are also some important differences: action and roleplaying games are favored over shooters, for example, and more people play games on handheld devices in the commuter culture of taking a train to school or work. As an important part of Japan’s “media mix,” games demonstrate how the arts are intertwined, with many franchises encompassing manga, anime, games, films, “light novels” and other forms of cultural entertainment that together form a narrative world with which consumers can engage at their leisure. To understand the cultural landscape of contemporary Japan, I believe that videogames should be taken seriously as artistic works that tell us just as much about Japanese attitudes, thoughts, and belief systems as these other media products.

It is perhaps not surprising that so many Japanese videogames feature monsters and *yōkai*—supernatural beings like ghosts, demons, shape-shifters, and the like—in a range of different genres. The use of monsters and *yōkai* in anime, manga and games has been noted by scholars such as Zilia Papp (2010), Deborah Shamoon (2013) and others, providing an exciting visual spectacle as well as a conduit to Japanese mythology, history, and culture. Other scholars note the export value of monster-based toys and games for overseas markets (Allison 2006, Kelts 2007), where the exotic and unfamiliar stimulate the consumer’s interest and desire to learn about the country of origin (Consalvo 2022). In terms of gameplay mechanics, monsters in videogames also provide the player with opportunities to level up and progress, through both combat and befriending strategies (Hutchinson 2025). This article gives a brief descriptive overview of Japanese monsters and *yōkai* in a cultural context, showing what kinds of monsters appear, how they relate to Japanese folklore, and how the player can gain knowledge of Japanese culture by interacting with them.

For case studies, I have chosen three popular videogames from Japan: (i) *Pokémon Scarlet and Violet* from the *Pokémon* series (Game Freak 1996–); (ii) *Ōkami* (Clover Studio 2006); and (iii) *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017). Readers may have heard of these games but not necessarily played them before, so links to playthroughs (videos of gameplay) are included here, with explanations in the notes. Games used here are all AAA or blockbuster titles with global distribution, not minor independent or hard-to-find titles, so gameplay videos are easily accessible through platforms like YouTube. Some other game series are more dedicated to *yōkai* specifically, but these tend to be either violent (for example, the *Nioh* series, Team Ninja 2017–) or horror-based, and not as suitable for a wide audience. I will discuss the cultural content of the games through their representation of monsters, and how the player interacts with them in the course of regular gameplay. Japanese content is apparent not only in the culturally specific look of the monsters, but also in their in-game descriptions and categorization. Along the way, I will also take account of the game designers’ intentions regarding gameplay culture and how monsters and *yōkai* from Japan have been understood and interpreted by players and critics from around the world. Points of contention arise in relation to violence, “packaging” Japan for consumption, and colonial appropriation of Indigenous monsters and myths for entertainment purposes.

Although I focus on Japanese monsters and *yōkai* in this article, it is also important to note that the games I have chosen for my case studies do not singularly feature Japanese monsters to the exclusion of all other supernatural beings. In *Pokémon* games, the player collects, trains, and cares for different Pokémon creatures to deploy them in battle and help them evolve. Some of these are connected to Japanese *yōkai*, while others are based on animals, plants, inanimate objects, or mythical creatures from other cultures. In *Ōkami*, monster opponents based on Japanese *yōkai*, musical instruments, and tools contrast with

other magical beings like animals from the Chinese Zodiac as well as characters from Japanese legends and nursery rhymes. *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* draws on both Japanese and European legends, with friendly forest spirits, opponents who resemble *oni* (demons), and dragons, among many others. Through all three games, the five elements of Asian culture (water, wind, earth, metal, and fire) are employed for status effects and elemental attacks, enriching the combat experience while drawing on cosmic beliefs. In this article, I aim to describe the most prominent monsters based on Japanese culture and introduce the reader to some of the historical and social context surrounding their representation.

Elements and Monster-Collecting in *Pokémon*

Pokémon, the blockbuster multimedia phenomenon that now encompasses manga, anime, TV series, animated and live-action films, trading cards, plush toys, and all kinds of character-based goods, began as a role-playing game for the Nintendo Gameboy in 1996, designed by Tajiri Satoshi at the small studio, Game Freak. The player collects creatures called Pokémon (short for “pocket monsters”) and trains them up to fight against increasingly stronger opponents, completing story-based missions along the way.¹ Pokémon are elemental creatures, so those inhabiting creeks may have a water-based attack, while those living in volcanoes may have an attack based on fire. Over time, Pokémon change form and grow into stronger versions of their original selves. The original game had 151 Pokémon to collect, including all forms and some special add-on creatures. Besides completing the main story of each game, a major objective is to complete the collection—or “Pokédex”—by finding all the Pokémon and evolving them into all possible versions. This takes a great deal of time, exploration, and knowledge of the elemental environments, so players pride themselves on completion rates and their knowledge of each Pokémon’s elemental affinities. A brief glance at any website listing Pokémon (for example, Bulbapedia, the go-to reference site for all things connected to *Pokémon* games) will show hundreds of Pokémon along with their elemental and growth statistics, all of which can be memorized for optimal in-game performance.

Pokémon take many different forms, often based on animals—real or mythical—plants, foods, or household items. Their forms and colors often hint at their elemental natures: Pikachu is a bright yellow fuzzy creature with lightning-bolt markings, clearly suggesting a lightning-based elemental attack, while Diglet is a brown mole-like creature who pops up from burrows underground, evoking whack-a-mole games. Diglet is one of the “ground-type” Pokémon whose attacks range from mudslinging to earthquakes and sandstorms. Some Pokémon are based on mythical creatures from Western tradition, such as dragons, or Chinese legend, such as the *kirin* (a winged and hooved creature resembling a giraffe). Many are based on objects, including Klefki (a keyring), Polteageist (a teapot), or Chandelure (a chandelier). Others are more clearly based on Japanese *yōkai*, including Froslax (based on the *yuki-onna* or snow woman), Mawile (*futa-kuchi onna*, or woman with two mouths), and Gastly (*sugenbi*, the floating head of a monk wreathed in flames). Some are obvious in name and appearance: Tengu is based on the *tengu*, a long-nosed humanoid creature who lives in the mountains, while Ninetails is based on the nine-tailed fox. The original Pokédex entry for Ninetales in *Pokémon Red and Blue* reads: “Very smart and very vengeful. Grabbing one of its many tails could result in a 1000-year curse.” *Pokémon Silver* says: “Its nine beautiful tails are filled with a wondrous energy that could keep it alive for 1,000 years.” An ice-based variant, Alolan, is described in *Pokémon Sword*: “A deity resides in the snowy mountains where this Pokémon lives. In ancient times, it was worshiped as that deity’s incarnation.” In these ways the Ninetales Pokémon draws on folk legends and beliefs to entertain players with different variations on a theme. Notably, “pocket monsters” of mainstream or “Yamato Japanese” origin outweigh those of Indigenous derivations, although Shiisa is based on guardian lion-dogs of the same name from Ryūkyū culture (now Okinawa).²

To capture Pokémon from the environment, the player must deploy their own Pokémon to defeat them in battle (see Figure 1). Once captured, however, any Pokémon can become part of the player’s party, to be cared for and trained for use in future combat. A balanced party is key for strategy, as the player needs to use different elemental-based attacks against new Pokémon encountered in the gameworld. Here again, the player’s knowledge of elemental characteristics is key, gained through study, experience, or discussion with



Figure 1. The player's Skiploom encounters a Pikachu in the wilds of *Pokémon Scarlet*.

other players. This player-player relationship is significant in Japanese gaming culture. *Pokémon* games are always sold in two complementary versions (the 1996 release included *Pokémon Red and Blue*). Not all Pokémon are included in each version, so players must gain some of the creatures by swapping with other players. While online connections make this relatively straightforward today, in 1996 this was achieved with a “link cable” to connect two Game Boy devices together. Designer Tajiri Satoshi hoped this would help children make friends as they swapped Pokémon and discussed strategies together (Nakazawa 2019). Indeed, friendship is a core idea in the series, both in the story missions and the Pokémon-collecting objectives. The most recent paired games *Pokémon Scarlet and Violet* (2022) include the mission track “Starfall Street” where the player helps shy student Penny stand up against the school bullies known as Team Star. As missions progress, we find that members of Team Star each have good reasons for dropping out of school and feeling oppressed by the education system in their own ways.

Story missions are balanced by the Pokémon-training element of the games, in which the player must care for and train their Pokémon so they become strong enough to defeat various opponents. Even though Pokémon fight each other to win battles, no Pokémon actually die in these games—they faint, to be revived later by their owners. The feeling of affection between player and their Pokémon has been discussed in scholarship (Koski 2023) and may be seen in the TV anime where main character, Ash is always depicted with trusty Pikachu nearby. The emphasis on friendship in *Pokémon* gameplay may be contrasted with older role-playing games like *Dragon Quest* (Enix, 1986–) or *Final Fantasy* (Square, 1987–), where monsters almost always appear as opponents (Hutchinson 2025). In this way, *Pokémon* has more in common with the Tamagotchi, also released in 1996, in which a player must care for their Tamagotchi and meet its needs for food, rest, and attention, lest it weaken and die. Pokémon must be given care and attention to heal after battle, including administering vitamins and elixirs, or employing tools like a comb, brush, or towel to fluff feathers, smooth fur, and remove dirt. Pokémon also enjoy food treats including candy, and will grow stronger the more times they are included in the player’s party and used in combat. In these ways Pokémon differ from the monsters found in other role-playing games from Japan, providing an excellent example of befriending mechanics.

This focus on friendship between player-character and their Pokémon led cultural critic Nakazawa Shin’ichi (1997) to praise the game for its non-violent stance, in contrast to Western games where violence is often the norm. Nakazawa emphasized the importance of play for children and the ways in which Pokémon encouraged relationship-building, whether by using the Link Cable to swap Pokémon or by playing the trading card game. Helen Bromley (2004) has also demonstrated how children interact with different aspects of *Pokémon* products, creating their own stories around the characters and demonstrating

their knowledge in shared play. Of course, targeting children as a player demographic is a smart marketing move from Game Freak and Nintendo, not only because anyone is able to play the game at any age, but because those children grow up and continue to consume the game titles and merchandise in ensuing years. While the role of *Pokémon* in global culture as an export product has been much discussed, I hope to have shown that *Pokémon* also has significance as a cultural artifact, using befriending mechanics and relationship-building in gameplay and drawing on a rich array of sources to create many Pokémon with Japan-specific origins. Ten years after *Pokémon*, another role-playing game would appear that focused solely on those Japanese origins, acting as an experiential advertisement for Japanese history and culture.

Ancient Monsters and Myths in *Ōkami*

Ōkami (Clover Studio, 2006) is a role-playing game in which you play as a white wolf—an incarnation of the Shinto sun goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami. The game environment employs a variety of traditional architectural motifs and art styles, particularly woodblock prints and ink-brush painting, that together give a sense of Japan in “the past.” A major game mechanic involves wielding a giant calligraphy brush to strike through opponents in battle and draw objects such as the sun in the sky. Designer Kamiya Hideki based the main narrative and characters on the ancient Japanese text *The Kojiki* (*Record of Ancient Matters*) which dates from the eighth century. Other characters and events are based on children’s stories and folklore, so we meet Urashima Tarō who ventured under the sea, Kaguyahime from the Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, and the famous “Eight Dog Warriors” from Kyokutei Bakin’s best-selling book *Hakkenden* of the 1800s. Mia Consalvo (2022) has examined the impact of *Ōkami* on Western players, many of whom were inspired to take up Japanese language learning or read more about Japanese culture for their own pleasure after playing the game. I have also written about the game in terms of a “packaged” product made for export (Hutchinson 2019: 47–69), but here I wish to focus on the monsters in the game and their cultural significance for the player.

As a game based on folklore, monsters and *yōkai* feature heavily in *Ōkami*’s gameplay. Large, fearsome monsters appear as boss fights in the main narrative, most notably the seven-headed serpent Orochi from the *Kojiki*. The first time we see Orochi is in the game’s introduction, told in the style of a shadow-play against a traditional bordered scroll (see Figure 2). It is well worth watching this introductory sequence to see how elements of traditional Japanese artworks are incorporated into the storytelling process.³ Another important boss fight is against Ninetails, a nine-tailed fox who rules over Oni Island. Generally accepted

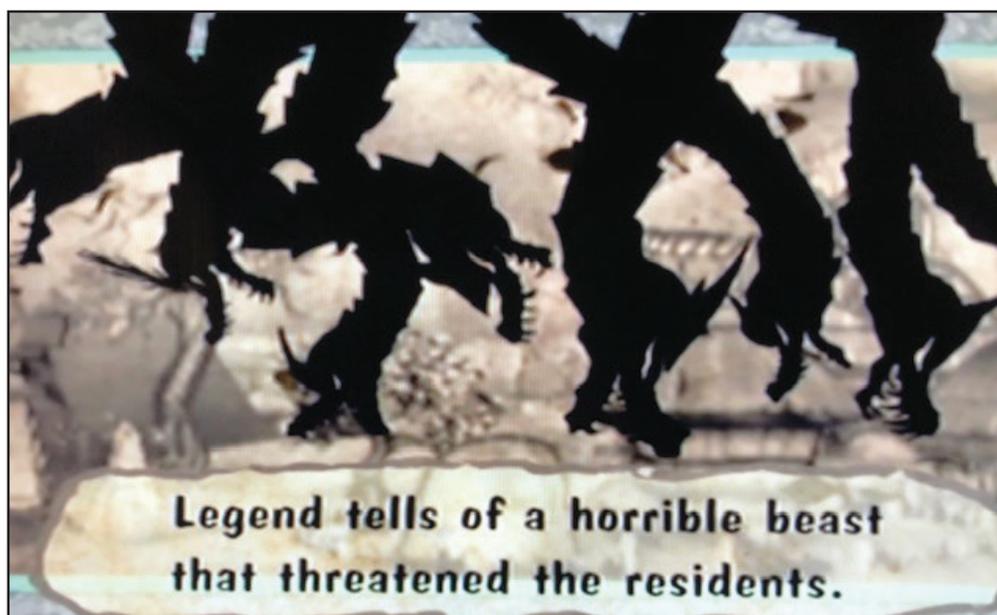


Figure 2. Orochi appears in *Ōkami*’s introductory sequence.

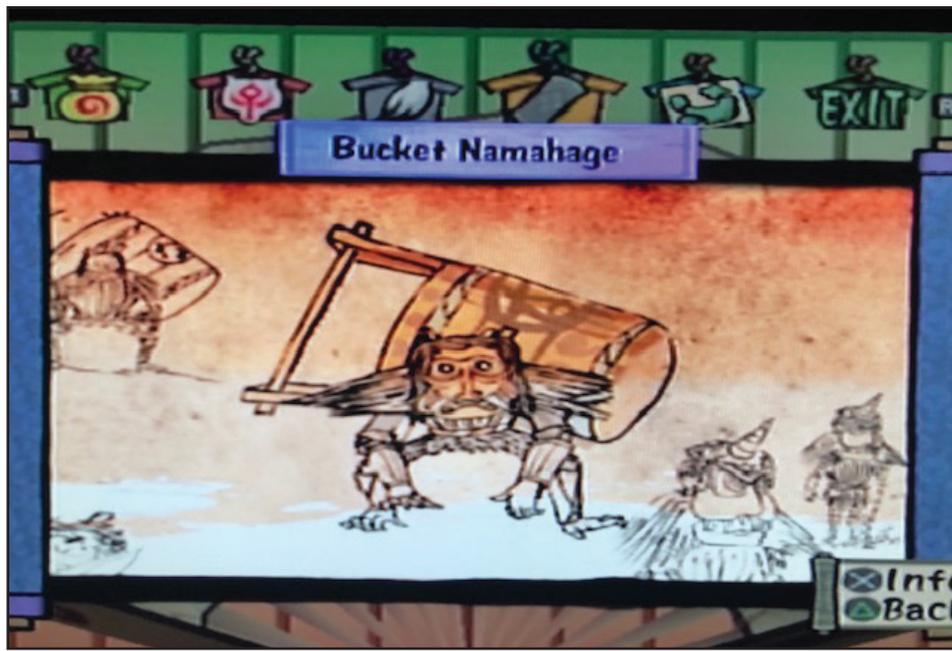


Figure 3. Tool monster based on a traditional wooden bucket.

as *yōkai*, foxes are believed to trick travelers, their presence indicated by *kitsune-bi* (foxfire) in the forest or mountains. Foxes can shapeshift, often into the form of a beautiful woman, and live for many years more than a human being, even attaining immortality. The nine-tailed fox of legend gains an extra tail for each 100 years of its life, increasing in wisdom and power to become a “celestial fox” or *tenko* on reaching 1,000 years. To defeat Ninetails, the player must attack the tails one by one to weaken its power. Ninetails’ appearance is interesting, with each tail resembling a calligraphy brush with a fox-mask on the end. The central tail, decorated with a string of red beads, hides the fox-monster’s true form. When eight tails are defeated, the one-tailed fox transforms into an old, mangy-looking animal with one eye. Once beaten, Ninetails escapes and we encounter it at the end of the game for a final showdown. The prominence of Ninetails in the game shows its importance as an iconic Japanese cultural touchstone, also reflected in the appearance of foxes throughout Japanese media more generally (including Ninetails in *Pokémon*). I will return to foxes below as a compelling example of recurring imagery in Japanese artistic expression.

An interesting aspect of *Ōkami* is the profusion of minor demons and imps that must be fought at every level of the game. Taking a wide variety of forms, such as musical instruments, roof tiles, wheels, mirrors or weapons, these opponents are inspired by the “tool monsters” (*tsukumogami*, see Figure 3) that were humorously depicted with arms, legs, and faces in the *Night Parade of One Hundred Demons* (*Hyakki Yagyō*) scrolls from the Muromachi period (1333–1573), later popularized by Toriyama Sekien (1712–1788) in the Edo period (Foster 2009). *Tsukumogami* reflect the folk belief that tools have their own personalities and must be taken care of properly, lest they turn on their owners. Abandoned tools are most likely to haunt careless homeowners, enacting revenge at night (Komatsu 2017). Tactics for beating these monsters can be tailored to each kind, for example cutting through the strings of *shamisen* monsters (based on a traditional three-stringed lute) or blowing a strong wind against an umbrella monster. The ancient Chinese philosophical system of the “five elements”—based on the balance of earth, water, air, fire, and wood—is commonly used in Japanese role-playing games, so elemental attacks call for tactical responses that balance elements with opposing characteristics. In *Ōkami*, for example, the wind-based “Galestorm” attack is effective against monsters using fire, lightning, or even poison.

All monsters in *Ōkami* are sorted into a bestiary accessible from the main menu, where we can learn more about each monster and its powers. For example, the “clay drummer” is based on *haniwa* figurines that were buried with their lord in lieu of actual servants, in ancient grave rituals. Its bestiary entry reads:



Figure 4. Collectible treasures appear in the inventory.

“Clay figures were created to be buried in mounds in place of the martyr whom they represent. They move now only due to Orochi’s dark power. Destroy them quickly and end their cruel manipulation.” Historical facts are thus merged with elements of the game’s story, enriching the gameplay while still pointing towards the origins of the character design. Similarly, the inventory tells the player information about treasure they have accumulated, such as coral fragments, deer horns or other decorative items (see Figure 4). The care with which these objects are described reflects a cherishing of treasured objects through history, as well as the variety of objects seen as precious—not only gemstones and gold, but objects from nature that were hard to come by in the past.

Where most monsters in *Ōkami* are opponents, several magical creatures and characters help the player on their journey. Our guide through the game is a small green character named Issun, based loosely on the folktale “Issunbōshi” (similar to Tom Thumb). Issun comes from a tribe of tiny people known as the Poncle, possibly based on the Korpokkur in Ainu folklore—their village Ponc’tan may get its name from the Ainu word for “small town,” *pon-kotan*. Other legendary creatures include the twelve animals from the Chinese Zodiac, whom we encounter at regular intervals. Where Issun treats the wolf protagonist in a familiar manner, calling her “Ammy” or “pooch,” zodiac animals treat Amaterasu with respect, indicating the reverence which many Japanese people are taught to show for the Shinto gods.

The narrative of *Ōkami* ends in a snowy setting similar to Hokkaido called “Kamui,” as opposed to the mainland environment named Nippon (a variant of “Nihon” or the present-day name for Japan in Japanese). In Kamui, the monsters are based on Ainu mythology and folklore, reflecting Indigenous beliefs. For example, the bosses in this area, Lechku and Nechku, are a pair of owls based on Ainu gods. The main non-player-character in this part of the story is the warrior Oki, who wears a fox-mask. I have previously critiqued the character design as cultural appropriation, since Ainu people believed that humans could take on aspects of their spirit totem or *kamui* through rituals. By changing a sacred ritual to a mask that can be taken on and off, some of the Ainu belief is lost. However, this character design does represent Japanese Shinto beliefs in the fox god Inari, and cultural practices where fox-masks are worn to Inari Shrines and festivals (Hutchinson 2019: 62–66). The game thus presents a mix of mainstream Japanese and Ainu belief systems, with Japanese designers drawing on Indigenous cultural elements to entertain and educate the audience.⁴

Oni, Forest Children, and Foxes in *The Legend of Zelda*

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (known colloquially as BOTW) is an action-adventure game where protagonist Link awakens from a 100-year sleep to save Princess Zelda and the Kingdom of Hyrule. Exploring the lush, 3D environment, Link encounters many monsters based on Japanese legend as well as Western-style dragons and wild animals. The first opponent is the Bokoblin, a stocky humanoid creature with one horn on its large head, wielding a large wooden club and wearing a loincloth (see Figure 5).⁵ These visual indicators suggest the creature is an *oni*, the legendary Japanese demon which inhabits wild places. Like *oni*, Bokoblin appear in different colors. The first region is inhabited by red Bokoblin, but as the player-character levels up and gains strength, they appear as blue, black or white to indicate different strength levels. In legend, *oni* can sometimes bestow wealth upon the traveler, and defeating a Bokoblin results in item drops such as weapons or gems. The stronger the Bokoblin defeated, the more valuable the gem, ranging from opals and amber up to topaz, sapphires and rubies. While Bokoblins have two eyes, there is also a much larger one-eyed ogre called a Hinox, that could be based on either the Japanese one-eyed *oni* or the European Cyclops.

The friendliest creature in the game is undoubtedly the korok, a small green “forest spirit” who pops out of unlikely places and gives Link a korok seed, which can be collected and traded in later for inventory assets (see Figure 6). Koroks are reminiscent of the *kami* or nature spirits from Japanese Shinto, animism, and folk beliefs, particularly the *kodama* or tree spirits that we also see in anime films such as Miyazaki Hayao’s *Princess Mononoke* (1997). Koroks hold a strong connection to nature and perform an important role as protectors of the forest under the Great Deku Tree. Their hidden or unseen nature is also reflected in the impenetrability of the Lost Woods, in which the Korok Forest is located. Navigating the Lost Woods is difficult and confusing, but the player is rewarded with wooden weapons and armor—a tactical advantage in a game where lightning strikes are common and metal weapons are often unusable.

The game also includes many original monsters. Moblins are much larger and stronger than Bokoblins, with an elongated face, snout, and longer horn. Lizalfos are based on lizards, moving quickly and erratically both on land and in the water. A rock troll called a “Stone Talus” resembles a large pile of rocks with a valuable lump of coal on its back. The monster is defeated by “mining” the coal (hitting it with a strong weapon until it shatters), upon which it collapses and leaves an assortment of treasures behind. Compared to *Ōkami* and *Pokémon*, *BOTW* does not use as many monsters based on *yōkai*, but the wild animals are worth mention: wolves, boar, bulls, bears, deer, goats, birds and so forth can all be shot for meat and cooked over open fires or in a cookpot. Strong links to Japanese culture are evident in the cooking activity, as specific dishes appear based on the combinations of different ingredients: *Onigiri* rice balls, skewered



Figure 5. Bokoblins from *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*.



Figure 6. A korok from *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*.

fish, Japanese-style curry, fried rice, omelet rice, *donburi* rice bowls topped with meat and other items, and so on. Of course, Western dishes such as salmon munière and even a Monster Cake can also be created, but it is notable that rice dishes use the ingredient “Hylian rice,” pointing to the fact that rice is a staple of the Kingdom of Hyrule where the game is based. Notably, monsters used in cooking will produce either barely edible “dubious food” or magical elixirs, setting them apart from animals and positioning monsters in their own special category. Out of all the carnivores in the game, the only animal which will not attack Link is the red fox. Some players will not shoot the fox for game due to this reason, although when shot it will produce meat like any other animal. I believe foxes are singled out due to folk beliefs in their magical nature as manifestations of the fox god Inari, and the nine-tailed fox.

Conclusions

I would like to close with a brief mention of foxes in Japanese media more generally. As we have seen, nine-tailed foxes can take either benevolent or malevolent forms. This dichotomy lies at the heart of many well-known media franchises from Japan, most notably in *Naruto* (1999–2014), Kishimoto Masashi’s tale of a ninja in training whose body is inhabited by a volatile nine-tailed fox. As *Naruto* himself trains up and gains strength and knowledge, he can access and converse with the fox, named Kurama, leading to more revelations, self-knowledge, and mastery. In Takahashi Rumiko’s *Inuyasha* (1996–2008), a fox-spirit named Shippō (derived from *shippo* meaning ‘tail’) is a loyal companion to the two main characters Inuyasha and Kagome. *Fruits Basket* by Takaya Natsuki (1998–2006) features twelve characters with zodiac animals as alter egos, plus one fox-based character.

Given the popularity of *yōkai* in Japanese culture, it is unsurprising that numerous manga and anime series have taken *yōkai* as their theme, and many more could be listed if space allowed. Monsters allow for flights of fantasy and imagination for character designers and players alike. As Zilia Papp (2010), Susan Napier (2005), and Deborah Shamoon (2013) have observed, monsters also function as a conduit to deeper narratives of cultural identity, adolescent catharsis, and self-definition against the Other. The spectacle and visual appeal of monsters and *yōkai* draw and keep the audience’s attention in visual and interactive media.

Of all the fox-based series mentioned here, *Naruto* has been most adapted (or remediated) into videogame form. More than sixty *Naruto* videogames exist, not counting games in which *Naruto* appears as a cameo character, allowing the player to explore Hidden Leaf Village, fight against other ninja and bosses, and come to terms with their own inner fox-demon. It is notable that *Naruto* games span many different game genres, from fighting games to role-playing scenarios, and they can be played on a wide range of platforms, from arcade games to consoles and handheld devices.

I hope to have shown in this brief overview how Japanese monsters and *yōkai* appear in videogames from Japan in a wide range of forms. Whether friend or foe, inner demon or external force, *yōkai* have stimulated the Japanese imagination for many years, and now entertain millions across the globe in a wide range of media contents.

Notes

¹ A good playthrough of *Pokémon Violet* is found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zti5lzHKj4A> (posted by WishingTikal on 21 November 2022) with the first tutorial battle taking place at around the 22-minute mark.

² John Lie (2001) uses the term “Yamato Japan” to denote mainstream and majority Japanese people in contrast to immigrants, Indigenous people, or residents with non-Japanese heritage.

³ A good playthrough of the opening of the game may be found on Youtube, posted by Kleyman on June 8, 2023. All video clips chosen for this article are “no commentary,” so the audio is limited to game sounds only. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frYguVXskNM&list=PLqIWLnL0Ej7tKs6RUkOKR432CCtBy9mbD>

⁴ Such cultural appropriations are also seen in *Pokémon* games (see Hutchinson 2025).

⁵ A useful playthrough of this game is divided into parts, with Part #1 found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwQmL7NVLa8&list=PLIZ8kn0xML26TzCjWsGgKBIWUQdLnL2FL>. The video description contains useful time stamps for actions and events. Posted by heorotlinea, 24 March 2020.

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Teaching Resources

Suggested Courses

Japanese Studies, World Literature, History, Cultural Studies, Art, Media Studies.

Key Concepts

- Japanese monsters and *yōkai*
- Monsters as friend or foe
- Visual and narrative representations
- Interactivity and gameplay
- Consistency across media

Class Activities with *Pokémon*

1. Using the National Pokédex list in the Bulbapedia website, project images of Pokémon on the screen and have the class guess which ones are based on animals, plants, traditional *yōkai* or 'tsukumogami' (tool monsters). Discuss their elemental affinities (water, fire, etc.) and why these are suitable. https://bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net/wiki/List_of_Pokémon_by_National_Pokédex_number
2. Explain more about the fox spirits like "Ninetails" and their role in Japanese legends. <https://mluce.ro/articles/the-yokai-roots-of-pokemon/>

General Discussion Questions

1. How do we encounter monsters differently in a videogame as opposed to a book or film?
2. How does gameplay culture differ in Japan versus North America?
3. What are some recurring Japanese monsters and *yōkai* that we see in Japanese videogames?
4. What are "elemental" attacks and affinities, and how are they used in Japanese games?
5. What kinds of things do we learn about Japanese culture from our encounters with monsters and *yōkai* in games?