

How to... get your head around Pocket Monsters

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HOW TO... get your head around Pocket Monsters

In Japan, *Pocket Monsters* on the Game Boy is breaking all records. And it's coming to the N64 next year. But what actually is it? Our man in Tokyo creates a monster.

by Max Everingham

Created by Nintendo and licensed by Tomy, *Pocket Monsters* (or *Pokemon* as it tends to be known over here) has generated a massive following in Japan. The story begins with two children called 'Red' and 'Green' who grew up together and then sadly grew apart becoming rivals. You take the part of one of these kids – indeed, you have to show your colours from the start and decide between the 'red' or 'green' cartridge when you first buy the game – and the plot unfolds from there.

The idea is to find *Pocket Monsters* and keep detailed records of each one's attributes. You pay to leave them in *Pokemon* hotels, and they eventually develop into fully mature, socially responsible, caring adults. Then they go out and kill everything in sight. Or attack it at the very least. They start by simply striking with the tail but as they get older they can learn other attacks, such as biting. To make the best record book however, you also have to fight the *Pocket Monster* gym leaders (there are eight of them in the *Pokemon* world) at the gym in each town you visit. And that's all the instruction you get; the rest is up to you.

The *Pocket Monsters* are categorised in two main ways: by 'kind', with monsters ranging from Poison-Spine Monster and Double-Shell Monster to Evil Monster; and by 'type', which is more elemental (fire, water, poison, stone, flying, etc.). Then, in strict RPG fashion, their physical attributes are listed, including offensive and defensive ability, level, height, weight and what animal they've metamorphosed from. These characteristics form the basis on which you stage battles.

But the joy of this game, and I believe the principal reason for its extraordinary success, is that you can hook your Game Boy up to a friend's machine (cable required) and swap your monsters in the 'trade centre' or send them into battle against your soon-to-be-ex pal's menagerie. One word of caution however: if you haven't yet earned a high ranking in the game and you swap monsters with a higher-ranking friend, your 'traded' monster may just ignore you!



How to raise a monster

With Pocket Monsters being a Japanese-only release everything is, of course, in foreign. And being essentially an RPG, there's a good deal of text to deal with. Now, I know a little Japanese (but that's enough about Mikii...) but for the purposes of this article, I'm assuming complete ignorance. Which isn't difficult. So basically, the first challenge here is to see if I (and any non-Japanese-fluent N64 Magazine readers wanting to try out the game) can even get the thing to work at all. Here's an illustrated step-by-step guide showing exactly how I got on: [Start here](#) ▽



◁1
Looking good so far.

Ye Gods! Such a big manual for such a little game. Bin this, I reckon...



◁3 Press the start button and...



...you get this warm welcome. Well, let's take a deep breath and go with the default...



◁5 Hurrah! That must have meant 'start a new game'. So here we are, into the first of about a billion text screens.



First off, I'm welcomed by a bloke who looks like a doctor. At least I hope he's welcoming me. But what's this?! I've got a menu, so he obviously needs me to do something. Keep pressing the 'A' button, I reckon.



◁6 Aarrgh! Choosing the default has given me a great big screen full of squiggly things! But stay calm! This is obviously a name-entry screen. But it's all in Katakana, so let's fudge something and move quickly on...



And let the games begin! 7▷

Next come a procession of three kids. No idea what they're saying to me so it's that 'A' button again. Make it stop! Oh oh, another of those menus. I recognise this from last time so I don't think I'll choose the default again, else I'll get that name-entry screen. Go for the next one down...

Yep, that seemed to work. Hey! The next kid is calling me by the name I put in! Neat! (I know this, because I just chose the first character in the menu, nothing else.)

I'm in a room which is obviously my bedroom, since I'm standing in front of my Super Famicom (the first of the many nice touches). There's a computer in here too so let's go over and hit that 'A' button again. Aaaaa! Another menu! I know, I'll select the default with my friend the 'A' button...

Well I could go on but let's just say that, having had the game for a few days now, and with my limited but fairly functional Japanese, Game Boy Pocket Monster has surprised me. On a cosmetic level the graphics are simple but sharp, resembling the Famicom RPGs and none the worse for being in monochrome. The gameplay, once you get the hang of all the menus, is excellent and at any time you have access to progress reports on your character's status and experience, the Pockemons you've trained, the state of play, and the items you've collected. And this is without the added pleasure of pitting your monsters against your friends' creations.

But, and this is a massive, Hindenberg, Titanic sort of 'but', if you haven't got a clue about Japanese the game is going to give you serious problems. While you can bumble along in a haphazard kind of way and still get by, the plethora of menus, text and associated options are going to dramatically affect your appreciation of the game. So really, if you want to savour the pleasures of Pocket Monsters for yourself you're faced with two options: get a book out like Pavlov's guide on 'The joys of trial-and-error for immortals', or learn a bit of Japanese and GET IT ON!

POCKET MONSTER POPULARITY CHARTS

Who's the most popular Pocket Monster? Here're the results of a survey conducted by The 64 Dream, a Japanese monthly N64 magazine.

Pikachu	1089 pts
Myu	423 pts
Lizadon	132 pts
Myutsu	125 pts
Zenigame	113 pts
Hitokage	106 pts
Kamekkusu	104 pts
Fushigidane	90 pts
Raichu	75 pts
Kairyu	69 pts



FEEL THE QUALITY



The little monsters benefit from a licensing drive which makes the Power Rangers marketing look totally daft. Every department store and toy shop has a large section devoted to groaning shelves of Pocket Monster stuff and the products range from the expected to the downright ludicrous. Pencils, puzzles, key rings and plastic dolls are par for the course and unlikely to raise an eyebrow, but then there's the midget replica Game Boy metamorphosed into a projectile-chucking weapon. Tomy are getting a bit carried away methinks.

Other essential items include a Pocket Monster board game, plastic monsters in myriad sizes, RPG-style dice (not furry, alas), packs of stickers and an album to go with it, a card fighting game, pencil-tops, pencil cases, yo-yos, mugs, T-shirts, a monster training guide and oh, look, I've had enough of this. I'm quite sure I haven't seen all the various incarnations of the wee beasties, and you could most likely spend a lifetime counting them all up. Basically, if you can think of sticking Pocket Monsters on something, then the marketing blokeys probably already have.



GO! GO!

Pikachu rules OK

Pikachu is Japan's most popular *Pocket Monster*, so despite the fact that it looks like a rabbit gone wrong, respect is due. Readers of a leading Nintendo magazine over here put him in first place in the *Pokemon* charts with 1089 points, nearly two and a half times more votes than the character in second place (Myu, with 423 points). Almost as popular as Tony Blair then.

And indeed he must be, because our Pikachu, as we like to call him here, is to be the honoured subject of the very first N64 *Pocket Monster* game. With the roughly translated 'babytalk' title of, 'I'm fine,' says Pikachu' the game will be the first in an inevitably long line of *Pokemon* adventure-type jaunts. Already, in response to questions from eager monster fans, Mr Hongo has hinted at further releases –



"Pikachu is one of many *Pocket Monsters*, after all", he says.

Pikachu merchandise is currently the curse of parents everywhere, with little kids constantly haranguing their folks to buy the kit. Tragically, there's even a *Pocket Monster* song being aired on the radio at the moment, featuring a girl singer yelling 'Pikachu' every few bars. Ye gods!

The very latest product though – if you'll forgive the marketing parlance – is an actual-size (I have this on good authority) Pikachu doll which speaks when you place it in the palm of your hand. Or maybe I should say that it speak. The only utterance you're going to get for your money is a perky 'Pikachu!' as its little cheeks flash red. Ahhhh. Worth the money, then, no doubt. But just in case you don't feel quite ready to take the plunge, we're offering one up for grabs to the reader who can suggest the most original new piece of

Pocket Monster merchandising.

So send your suggestions in to the usual address, but no mention of pencil cases or duvet covers, please.

All in all then, Nintendo and Tomy are on to a big winner here. The snowball just keeps on rolling and with the N64 game, it can only get bigger. There have been suggestions that Nintendo turnover in Japan has become reliant on the (admittedly massive) sales of the *Pocket Monster* game, given the dearth of quality N64 software titles. Well, I'm not sure about that but I've been so busy lately that I've hardly even made a dent in *GoldenEye* or *MK64* (I know, I know) and there are at least 15 more new titles to come before Christmas. So many games, so little time.



Combat Stickers

It works like this: on the front of the sticker is a picture of your monster, surrounded by icons and digits (see picture). In the top left is a shield icon, representing defensive ability and a strength number below it. In the top right, with another numeral, is the star-like icon representing your monster's attacking strength and just below that is another icon, this time a 'type' icon, which allows you to double up your fiend's abilities should it be attacked by a monster of the same 'type'. Below the picture is a row of



three icons indicating the monster number, its 'type' (the elemental attributes) and the little guy's name and level. Play proceeds in exactly the same way as it did with *Top Trumps*, which is to say that you and your mate square up to one another and compare numbers, and the victor snaffles their foe's card! In the case pictured for example, our friend Gyarados (the dragon) completely trounces poor little Nidorina. Then there are other ways to play, including simply swapping duplicates that you have in your collection for your mate's (more common amongst the little kids).

You get nine normal stickers and one special 'prism' effort in a pack for ¥100. The prism sticker has a special glitzy effect making it look like that spinning silver ball with mirrors on, that you got down the local disco. Dig it, man. If you're especially fortunate, you may even have chosen a 'lucky person' pack which includes a limited-edition golden sticker. Can it get any better?

PICK A CARD, ANY CARD

Eclipsing the success even of the Game Boy cartridges, the *Pocket Monster* trading cards are the Top Trumps of the late '90s. They look a bit like lottery scratch-cards only they're better value for money. If you ask me. So how do you play, then?

The aim of the game is to reduce your opponent's Hit Point Gauge to zero (see explanatory picture). To do this, you first prepare your monster for combat by scratching the boxes at the top, revealing the fighting data (the same monster can have different abilities on different cards). Then you do a 'janken' (the game we know as 'scissors, paper, stone').

The winner gets first go and chooses one of the squares in the 'battle zone' to scratch off. Each of these squares tells you what your monster is doing that turn (things like 'roaring', 'eating' and sometimes nothing at all) and how many 'hit points' that inflicts on your opponent. You carry on in this manner until one of your gauges is showing nada. Much more fun than it probably sounds.



To the death

No feature on the monsters would be complete without a deathmatch, so we squared up over a strong coffee in a café in Sapporo, chose our weapons and let the fur fly:



'The combatants'



'The dastardly foe'



'Beaten and bloody – the loser's card'



'Ha ha ha! I am Dodorio! I laugh in the face of my enemies'

MONSTERS IN THE U.K.

Game Boy *Pocket Monsters* isn't generally available in the UK. But if you're interested in trying it out for yourself (and be warned: it really is a struggle if your Japanese is in any way rusty) give Project K a call on 0181 508 1328.