Gotta Catch Em' All: The Compelling Act of Creature Collection in Pokemon, Ni No Kuni, Shin Megami Tensei, and World of Warcraft

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ABSTRACT Since the release of the first Pokémon video game(s) in 1996, the need to “catch ‘em all” has captivated players around the world. While the collection of objects, coins, experience, and points has played a significant role in many main stream video games over the years, Pokémon took the concept to a whole new level by enticing players to gather a massive collection of “pocket monsters”, each with their own unique abilities and aesthetics. This paper attempts to answer what makes this form of collection so compelling through an investigation of four different games where the collection of trainable creatures, used to do battle on behalf of the player’s main character, plays a central role: Pokémon X/Y (2013), Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch (2010), Shin Megami Tensei IV (2013), and World of Warcraft: Mists of Pandaria (2012). Four common themes surrounding creature collection are identified: Immortality, exploration, organization, and specialized knowledge. These themes are uncovered through a close reading of the four above mentioned games through the theoretical lenses of Azuma’s (2009) “Database Animals”, Greenberg et al’s (1986) Terror Management Theory, and McIntosh & Schmeichel’s (2004) social psychological perspective on collectors and collecting. The paper concludes with a discussion of McIntosh & Schmeichel’s (2004) eight steps of the collection process, and argues that the medium of the video game allows for the elimination of half of those steps, partially explaining the popularity of creature collection video games in our postmodern world.

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By all accounts, the Shin Megami Tensei games seem to be one of the first implementations of acquiring monsters to aide you in battle. The first of which was Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei on the Famicom in 1987. Flash-forward thirty years and the latest game, Shin Megami Tensei IV: Apocalypse, is its finest iteration of the formula yet. It’s a straight up sequel to its 3DS predecessor, Shin Megami Tensei IV, and while combat is virtually the same, there’s one big difference. Every creature in the game can be copied except for the final boss and human enemies, and there are three types of monster souls that can be equipped: Bullet, Guardian, and Enchant. Bullet is like a magic spell, Guardian summons a creature to power you up, and Enchant boosts your stats passively.