



POKÉMON QUEST – There is a bit of thematic waffling whenever we take a closer look at the lore of *Pokémon*, a fantastical children’s series with a cheery, aspirational vibe. Why would wild Pokémon only attack a trainer’s Pokémon, rather than the trainer themselves? The anime suggested that Pokémon had an innate attachment to humanity, with the Pokédex revealing that wild creatures only attack domesticated Pokémon out of jealousy. That’s why, when the series’ half-witted protagonist Ash threw a rock at a Spearow during his first trip into the wilderness, the creature chose to attack his Pikachu out of blind rage instead. This theme was also explored in *Pokémon Black/White*, in which the antagonists were vilified for wanting to free Pokémon from this potentially abusive bond. It’s a tad unsettling. *Pokémon* had always been about pitting these creatures against each other in combat, but most of the games were content with not confronting the implications of these fights.

Pokémon battles aren’t different from dog fights, really. We’ve been forcing these sketchy practices on them for entertainment’s sake; the lights, crowds and glory associated with battles are well-known, inspiring a nationwide phenomenon as children aspire to become

trainers themselves. Is humanity’s relationship with Pokémon characterized by warmth and understanding, or is it nothing more than just that of master and slave?

It’s perhaps unintentional, but no other games in the series came as close to tackling these ethical quandaries like *Pokémon Quest* did. Operating via a remote drone, our presence on the far-flung island of Tumblecube is unobtrusive. We observe Pokémon in their natural habitat, rather than cramed in tiny balls and released to fight at our behest. These critters aren’t tethered to us; rather, we trail above them as they wander about in a sanctuary mostly free from human interference. Like the concept of island ecology, we study their relationship with the environment to unearth the secrets of this isle. We lug a massive pot to cook on the island, hoping to attract and befriend more Pokémon with scrumptious food. We let them hang out at our camp and watch them skitter about with one another. It’s a Pokémon title that is much more thematically aligned with creator Satoshi Tajiri’s pastoral aspirations of bug-catching than other games in the series; an empathetic game about respecting and caring for Pokémon.

– KHEE HOON CHAN