To Gamble or to Ponder: Contradictory Values in the Pokemon Series

Professional Practice for Game Design

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The *Pokemon* series generally has a contradiction in its values where it both encourages strategic move usage, while also disincentivizing strategic move usage from the player. The mainline *Pokemon* series as a whole needs a set of features to mitigate or replace the randomness found commonly in battles. This includes ways to remove consecutive misses, having secondary effects be built up, and having status conditions continue or activate based on more set numbers. Players are given a wide variety of moves, each with their own utility, power and rules. Moves have types that each have their own matchups, secondary effects with a chance of occurring, and the number of damage it is capable of inflicting. It is unlikely for a group to make an intricate system of type matchups and various other effects to interact with, only to have players roll dice to determine how much this structure comes into play, so one could reasonably assume that *Pokemon* was made to be primarily a strategy game. However, a significant number of moves, especially the most competitively viable ones, are based largely around chance. “Strategy games are engines that allow us to understand them. We play a game, we win or lose, and we make connections… This is the "essential fun" of strategy games” (Keith Burgun, 2014). In other words, in a strategy based game, which is what *Pokemon* was constructed to be, players should be rewarded for making smart decisions and punished for making not as smart ones. Fundamentally, this is why Pokemon fails: it is a strategy game that undermines its implied goal for being a decent strategy game. The end result is that most *Pokemon* games tend to become a casino where you gamble whether a move does what you want it to. This would not necessarily be a problem on its own, though because the game implies to us its value is strategy through its sheer move variety, it contradicts itself.

Missing an inaccurate move in a way that subverts its delta of randomness feels terrible, especially when you want to be rewarded for taking an intelligent risk. An example of this was in a video by Moxie Boosted on YouTube, showing an official competitive match where a Heat-Rotom missed five Will-O-Wisps in a row.
Will-O-Wisp is the optimal move in this situation, weakening pokemons physical attack statistic and doing damage over time —a strategy that should be rewarded. Yet, the random number generator rolled overwhelmingly in favor of the other player, eventually leading to that player's loss. Circumstances like this should not occur, especially in a game that is played competitively as a strategy game. The accuracy system can be unfair in common gameplay as well, such in the case where an anonymous player missed three Aqua Tail uses in a row, despite it having 90% accuracy. Going back to my fundamental idea: does this accuracy system reward players for smart decisions and punish players for stupid ones enough? Would a win feel earned if it was obtained because your opponent happened to miss, say, three consecutive Gunk Shots (which each have an 80% chance to hit)? “Noise injected between a player's choice and the result (here referred to as output randomness) does not belong in a strategy game” (Keith Burgun, 2014). One solution is something like what the popular mobile game “Summoners War” has implemented, where misses are replaced with “glancing hits”. These represent attacks that do not fully hit, and do not activate its secondary effect, but still inflict half of the damage it otherwise would. In this way, the randomness that makes mainline *Pokemon* games fun continues to exist, but it is not as much as an end-all-be-all that chokes out thought from battles.

Another contradiction in implied values is with secondary effects, the additional effects that come with damaging moves. There are a number of secondary effects with their unique sources and rules, such as freezing from the move Ice Beam, flinching from the move Iron Head, or a decrease in the target’s special defense from the move Shadow Ball, and so on. Unfortunately, there are two major problems that make secondary effects often antithetical to strategic thinking. The first is that secondary

effects have an extremely minor chance of activating, and the second is that they are usually battle changers. Freezing, flinching, or decreasing an enemy's special defense are often major disadvantages to the opponent that can single-handedly turn a losing battle into a nearly ensured victory for the non-opposing player. Thus, it feels ridiculous, even unfulfilling, when you lose (or even when you win) because a player's usage of, say, Flamethrower achieved its 10% chance to burn a pokemon who uses physical attacks. An example of this would be by the Pokemon Showdown user "bulu the tabulu", in one particular battle with which they are losing. On turn 24, their Greninja managed to get a flinch on the opposing Greninja, leading to their victory. As an alternative to this system, whether a secondary effect activates could be dependent on what I call the "secondary effect counter system" or SECS. As you use a move it gains secondary effect counters, one for each usage, including for misses or glancing hits. When a move reaches some number of counters, the next move usage will apply its secondary effect. Generally, a moves original chances will be translated to this system; Flamethrower has a 10% chance to burn, so it would now need 10 counters. Iron Head has a 30% chance to flinch, so it would need 3 counters instead (maybe increased to 4 for balance). Under SECS, randomness is taken out of secondary effect activation altogether, making it more into a way to reward players for keeping their pokemon alive for long enough while taking away the possibility that a fight is won because Ice Beam happened to freeze the opposing pokemon by chance. While it may seem as though this would incentivize spamming one move to get its secondary effect, keep in mind that 1) switching pokemon is a powerful counter against this, and 2) move spamming was largely a strategy to begin with. If spamming Ice Beam was an acceptable strategy before, there is no reason why it should not be acceptable here.

The contradiction in *Pokemons* values is apparent in status condition activation. Whether certain status conditions activate or continue is based on luck. This includes infatuation, confusion, sleep, freeze and paralysis —let's call these "luck-based status conditions" (LBSC). This might seem unrelated to moves at first, as LBSCs are not

inherent to them. However, the overwhelmingly predominant way any pokemon gains one of these is through a move, such as paralysis through Thunderbolt, confusion through Outrage, freeze through Blizzard, and so on. Furthermore, the worth of certain moves in a battle is entirely dependent on the LBSC it afflicts because it does nothing else, such as paralysis from Thunderwave, infatuation from Attract, or sleep from Sleep Powder. Exaggerating this is that these all incapacitate the afflicted pokemon, relinquishing agency from the player, therefore removing a possible point of strategic thinking. Thus, why it is so frustrating for players when their game —which implies its value for strategy through its complexity and variety of moves— forces them to lose a battle because their pokemon, say, failed to wake up by pure chance. An example of this would be from the YouTube content creator "Iceberg", where he obtains a paralysis on the opposing Hatterene at the time 4:24. Hatterene became unable to move twice in a row from paralysis, despite it having a one-fourth chance to occur. Ultimately, this was the foot in the door he needed in the early stages of the battle to eke out a win later. What is the takeaway from this example as a player, except that paralysis might work in your favor, which is nothing new, nor deep? "Output randomness does not increase the depth of a game. How could it? There is nothing to explore in a dice-roll. We all know that the odds are 1/6 for any face coming up. There is literally nothing else to know or explore" (Keith Burgun, 2014). The most straightforward solution is to simply set the randomized values to their deltas instead. Sleep causes pokemon to waste 1-3 turns, so we set that number to 2 instead. Being frozen has a 50% chance to cause pokemon to waste a turn, so they will be frozen for only 2 turns, and so on. While removing randomness from LBSCs may appear extreme, keep in mind that other points of randomness remain in Pokemon battles. For the players who enjoy the more random aspects of pokemon battles more so than the strategy portion, they may continue to find enjoyment in glancing hits, and in what pokemon the other player brings.

In conclusion, the mainline *Pokemon* series contradicts its values by encouraging strategic thinking through its variety of moves, yet fails to actually follow through by how battles are largely based around chance. In order to gain worth from moves is in terms of whether they hit, whether that hit applies a secondary effect, and whether the status condition from the secondary effect activates. To combat this, Game Freak and Nintendo should implement three systems to solve this dilemma. First is glancing hits, wherein if a move misses it still inflicts half damage, without applying its secondary effect. Second is the “secondary effect counter system” (SECS), requiring players to tactically consider whether they ought to invest into a moves’ secondary effect activation. Third is to set the randomized numbers for status conditions to their deltas, pushing players to strategize more around when their pokemon are temporarily incapacitated. As an addendum to my solutions, in the event that this change is greatly and widely disliked, as well as to appeal to a general audience, players should be given the option to switch back to the original mechanics. With these solutions, mainline *Pokemon* games will feel more as though players are strategically utilizing the unique moves they are given, without alienating audiences that enjoy some amount of chance.

References

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