

15:00, 26:00, 37:00

Down with the Sickness: Lavender Town Syndrome

JD, I know you're not much of a gamer, but were you ever down with Pokemon? Do you have a favorite Pokemon? Do you believe that Pokemon are edible?

The great question of Pokemon mortality is one with which we all must wrestle.

The Pokemon lobby would have you believe that all pokemon battles end in a knock-out, even when it's a weasel being demolished by the cosmic power of an elder god.

But even if there aren't unmarked mass graves behind every Pokemon stadium, we know that canonically, Pokedeath is pokedeath real.

For one thing, there's ghost type Pokemon.

And for another there is a tradition of including Pokemon graveyards in the games.

On a side note, I think this is a point for the theory that people don't generally eat Pokemon.

There was even a Graveyard in Pokemon Red and Green all the way back, eons ago, in a completely different millenia, 1996.

Red and Green's poke-body emporium was called the Pokemon Tower.

Pokemon Tower is a seven-story graveyard located in Lavender Town.

Pokemon Tower's wild pokemon include the Ghost type Pokemon, some who have been explicitly killed by Team Rocket, and the orphaned offspring of murdered Pokemon.

Your rival is also there grieving the loss of their Raticate which you fucking bodied the last time you ran into them.

It's an oddly dark setting to include in the first entry to the Pokemon video game series, but they were still nailing down the tone.

But it wasn't the question of how high you were ready to stack bodies on your quest to be the very best that caused controversy, it was the soundtrack.

The soundtrack of Lavender town in the Japanese release of the game was said to contain a tone that messed with children's minds.

The song seemed to cause headaches, violent outbursts, and even inspired several children to commit suicide.

With that in mind I'd like to play a little bit for you JD.

I'm pretty sure that since we'll be commenting on the audio playing it here falls under fair use.

But, if my anxiety gets the best of me while I'm editing it, the link to the video is in the sources for this episode.

[\[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-sOadAaGiq4&t=6s\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-sOadAaGiq4&t=6s)

I'm going to tell one version of the story, because I came across way too many variations to cover them all in-depth.

The legend goes that within a few weeks of the game's release in February 1996, children around Japan began to experience headaches, nausea, irritability, and in some cases violent outbursts.

Soon after, a number that varies from dozens, to hundreds, of children who owned the game were driven to commit suicide.

After these tragic deaths, it became clear that there was one thing all the children had in common, that they had all been

playing Pokemon Red or Green, and that they had stopped playing in Lavender Town.

The fact that they had all stopped in the same place led investigators to believe that it had something to do with that area of the game.

It was the fact that many of these children who were affected had been playing the game with headphones, that led to the conclusion that the soundtrack could be to blame.

The theory became that there was a tone present in the track, too high for adults to pick up on, but pitched in such a way that it altered the children's behavior.

The idea was that the cutting edge experiment of making binaural beats to relax-slash-play-games-to had gone horribly wrong.

The story goes that Game Freak quickly recalled the game, changed the soundtrack, and removed the tone from subsequent releases of the game.

The version with the original tone was only ever released in Japan.

The horrible symptoms of the unlucky children who played the first release of the game came to be known as Lavender Town Syndrome.

Lavender Town Syndrome was supposedly the internal Game Freak term used for the symptoms, according to a whistleblower named Satou Harue.

Satou Harue released a disturbing list of names and symptoms to prove that Game Freak knew about the cases and elected to keep it quiet.

Here's some entries from their lists.

April 12 1996 (11). Obstructive sleep apnea, severe migraines, otorrhagia, tinnitus.

May 23 1996 (12). General irritability, insomnia, addiction to videogame, nosebleeds. Developed into violent streaks against others and eventually himself.

April 27 1996 (11). Cluster headaches, irritability. Eventually took mixed painkillers.

March 4 1996 (7). Migraines, sluggish and slow behavior, unresponsiveness. Developed into deafness, and went missing. Body discovered beside road April 20 1996.

As the story spread and technology advanced, a new piece of evidence was added.

Daring online investigators began to open the files of the Lavender Town soundtrack and what they found hidden in its 8-bits was pretty twisted, bro.

They found what appeared to be the image of a ghost hidden in the spectrogram of the track.

Take a look at this:

[\[https://imgur.com/gallery/plgl5zH\]](https://imgur.com/gallery/plgl5zH)

More like a spectregram am I right?

It looks like the in-game ghost of the murdered Pokemon who haunts lavender town.

Pretty spooky, and then it gets spookier, because others were able to find other messages hidden in the spectrogram of the Lavender Town soundtrack.

Like the message spelled out in Unown, a type of Pokemon who look like letters, saying "Leave Now."

This Unown element is as good a point as any for the pivot to debunking and being a wet blanket.

Unown were not introduced into Pokemon until 1999, three years after the Lavender Town Syndrome story took place.

Also, Unown represent latin characters, so why a game exclusively released in Japan would use characters that hadn't been released or potentially even developed yet to spell out a message in English, I have no idea.

But as we continue to debunk the urban legend, we can also take some time to examine the world of sound.

And JD, you're much more knowledgeable than me on this so please stop and correct me if I get anything wrong.

If you search YouTube you can find some videos of someone opening files to prove that some version of the Ghost is in the spectrogram.

First of all, many of them are using a WAV file, this is not the output format of first generation Gameboy audio files, which used the, you guessed it Game Boy Sound System format.

So these videos are not looking at something pulled from the original game or even an emulator.

While WAV files are much more common and accessible than GBS files, this does nothing to remove the likelihood that a WAV file has been edited to include the image in the spectrograph.

On the subject of spectrographs, the image in a spectrograph corresponds to the frequencies in a recording.

If you listened to one of the Lavender Town.wav files with a ghost in it, you would hear sounds that were not included in the original soundtrack.

It would probably sound like shit, and in fact, in some of the videos, it does sound like shit.

Other videos claim to play the track and not include distortion or strange frequencies from including the ghost image, but I think that it's safe to say these are likely edited to play the actual track while showing the altered spectrograph.

I'd like to add a caveat to say that I don't think a lot of the video creators were intentionally creating hoax videos, because the file lavender.wav was an important part of this creepypasta spreading.

But it's important to note that there are variations of the file, not all of them include the letters spelled in Unown which means that there have been alterations to the file, aside from the initial addition of the ghost image.

Now that we know that the lavender.wav file is not the same file from the game, we can take a minute to look at the idea that Lavender Town Syndrome was caused by binaural beats.

J.D. Do you have any experience with binaural beats? Have you tried listening to them?

So, what are binaural beats, other than the galaxy brained version of lofi beats to study/relax to?

A binaural beat is an auditory illusion, where two close but distinct beats are played in separate ears, and the brain imagines a third frequency being played which is the difference between the two tones.

"For example, if a person hears a tone of 405 Hz in one ear and a tone of 415 Hz in the other, they would be hearing a binaural beat with a frequency of 10 Hz."

The claim is that binaural beats can sync brainwave activity to certain frequencies and thus alter mood and behavior.

However, there really isn't any strong evidence that binaural beats have any kind of noticeable impact.

A lot of studies have been inconclusive, the conclusive studies have been small and based on subjective measures, but there's no evidence that it can change your personality or make you dissociate into a violent fugue state.

As far as using it for self-help therapy the general consensus seems to be "sure, it can't really hurt."

There is another instance of moral panics around Binaural Beats, which coincidentally happened around the same time that the Lavender Town Syndrome story dropped, in 2010.

The story started in Oklahoma, where the Mustang School District sent out a letter to parents warning them that their kids may be using "digital drugs."

We love branding, and so from this letter to parents the fear of "digital drugs" started to spread.

The Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs issued a warning to avoid these dangerous MP3s as potential gateway drugs: "if you have a kid wanting to explore this, you probably have a kid that may end up smoking marijuana or looking for bigger things."

The media rumor-mill did its thing and we got journalists writing gems like:

"They believe the repetitive drone-like music will give them a 'high' that takes them out of reality, only legally available and downloadable on the Internet."

Here's a quote about the lack of evidence of binaural beats working:

"I think the fact the major universities have done studies which have been 'inconclusive' is reason enough for us to be worried."

If that doesn't sum up the last 13 years of online discourse I don't know what does.

Anyway, the only thing that binaural beats are a gateway drug into is Brian Eno, talk to your kids before it's too late.

But let's go back to Lavender Town Syndrome, which supposedly only impacted children.

It is true that children can hear higher tones than adults, generally children can hear some sounds above 17 kilohertz, while adults cannot.

So if there were a binaural beat, it would have to be above 17 kilohertz.

But let's keep in mind what a binaural beat is, it's an illusion created by the difference between two frequencies that are close together.

"For a binaural beat to work, the two tones have to have frequencies less than 1000 Hz Trusted Source, and the difference between the two tones can't be more than 30 Hz."

So there's no way there could be a binaural beat at 17 thousand hertz.

As those limitations say, binaural beats are low, and the ability to hear low frequencies does not decline with age.

So, if there was a binaural beat behind Lavender Town Syndrome, and if binaural beats worked, it would have had to impact adults as well as children.

Let's also remember that binaural beats can only really be experienced with headphones, and while this is included in some versions of the Lavender Town Syndrome creepy pasta, it's not always included and there is no way that a 1996 gameboy with a single speaker could have had a binaural effect on anyone.

So we have in the story of Lavender Town Syndrome a combination of a couple of sound facts, that children can hear some tones that adults cannot, and that binaural beats exist.

I personally think there's likely some connection with a growing knowledge of binaural beats in 2010, and the posting of the Lavender Town Syndrome story in 2010.

This concludes my tech segment, as I said before I'm no audio engineer, despite what our listeners probably think from my great editing skills.

Just to check in on how we're doing so far, any thoughts JD? Any glaring errors?

Okay, now that we've gone over the technical issues, let's take a look at the history of the story and how it spread.

The earliest posts relating to Lavender Town Syndrome, as I mentioned briefly, were in 2010.

These posts came from a couple of posts on Pastebin and 4Chan's /paranormal/ board.

It's actually derived from a longer, more convoluted creepypasta about Pokemon Red & Green, broad strokes:

A programmer who worked uncredited on the game inserted some malicious code.

The code causes some creepy glitches, including ones where players were killed by wild Pokemon and some that drove children to commit suicide.

Eventually a detective plays around with the game and meets his deceased wife and son within the game, then he sees all the ghosts of the children who committed suicide.

The detective kills himself, all the corrupted cartridges of the game are destroyed but the evil code lives on.

From this hat on a hat of a creepypasta, future posts chose to focus on the idea that it was Lavender Towns soundtrack that included malicious code.

The purpose of the code changed over time and in retellings.

Sometimes it was placed in there as a mind control experiment, sometimes it was accidental, in one telling it was included only in the Red version of the game in Japan because the director had some childhood trauma related to the color red, so, fuck them kids.

But whatever the motivations were, the need for there to have been a cover-up became present.

Versions of the story began to make the claims that the sound track was changed in international versions, or that the dangerous sounds were only in beta versions of the game.

What was most important is the idea that Game Freak knew and kept the stories under-wraps.

I don't think there was a cover up.

Maybe the American version of the track is different, it's hard for me to tell, but I'm also listening to versions posted to Youtube.

Also, changing soundtracks during localization is not unheard of, it does happen, so even if that aspect were true, it's not proof of a cover up.

What is true is that Junichi Masuda composed a different soundtrack for Lavender Town in Pokemon Gold, Silver and Crystal.

But that wasn't because the original version was dangerous, these were second generation Pokemon games and took place in a future where the giant graveyard was replaced with a radio tower.

Another important part of the cover up aspect is Satou Harue, the supposed whistleblower who bravely came forth and leaked internal documents that proved that there was a cover-up of the deaths.

Harue doesn't seem to exist. They are only mentioned in creepypastas and coverage of the creepypasta. I think they were created and included to add some credibility to the claims of a cover-up.

After all, how else do we find out about cover-ups in real life?

On the subject of cover-ups, the fact that the events took place in Japan played a role in the spread of this story.

I think that it functioned on two levels, on one, it made it harder to confirm claims made in the story, even when there were seemingly concrete events or testimony the claims were based on.

With time it's become clear that Japanese media was mainly amused by the stories of Lavender Town Syndrome. Describing the story as a mystery "from abroad," with one blogger commenting that "It was not to become a hot topic in Japan."

On the other hand, I think that some people are more willing to extend disbelief to a story if it happens in Japan.

I think that this can be explored with a particular historical event and cultural generalizations about Japan.

Firstly, the historical event.

I'm talking about Dennō Senshi Porygon, or Computer Warrior Porygon, which is a banned episode of the original Pokemon Anime and left a pretty big mark on the Pokemon brand at the time.

Let's set the stage, Pokemon is already huge, and there's about 4 million kids around Japan tuned in on Tuesday night for the new episode.

The episode involves Ash and the gang, or Satoshi, Kasumi, and Takeshi as they were originally known.

I really can't get over that, this is jelly donuts all over again.

Anyway, Ash and the gang have to go into a Pokeball transmitter machine to fix it, it's a little cyber adventure, but about 20 minutes in, there's a pokemon battle and Pikachu does its thing to destroy some "vaccine missiles" that are shot at the team.

But, presumably because they're in a computer, it's not the usual Pikachu lightning bolt effect, it's about five seconds of rapidly strobing red and blue lights at a rate of 12 flashes per second.

As you may have guessed, or probably already know, this caused some issues for photosensitive viewers, symptoms ranged from nausea to headaches to seizures.

Japan's Fire-Defense Agency reported that 685 children were transported to hospitals via ambulance. While many of the children had recovered by the time they reached the hospital, more than 100 were admitted to hospitals.

I couldn't find numbers on it, but apparently when news agencies around Japan were covering the incident they played the strobing sequence and this set off a secondary wave of symptoms and hospitalizations.

The incident became known as "Pokemon Shock" in Japan, and led to a 4 month pause on the Pokemon anime.

The episode has never been aired again in any region.

There's also an element of mass panic here, because after days of media coverage and fearful speculation the reported number of affected children became 12,000.

While the number of children who experienced symptoms during the sequence is likely higher than 685, the 12,000 number is probably more influenced by mass panic than experienced symptoms.

The news of the incident was not confined to Japan.

Initial reports talked about the danger of Anime, how it was too fast and risky for our precious American children.

It gradually became a punchline for comedy writers commenting on Japan, such as in the Simpsons episode "Thirty Minutes Over Tokyo," and the South Park episode "Chinpokomon."

So the Lavender Town Syndrome story uses some aspects of an actual event and mass panic involving a Japan-only release of Pokemon content.

But the creepy pasta also plays on our conceptions about Japan.

If only there were an academic term to describe it.

I think that the Lavender Town Syndrome fits within the developing framework of orientalism called "wacky orientalism," which has been specifically applied to western perceptions of Japan.

Perceptions of Japan have tended to be seen through two lenses, traditional orientalism, which views Japan as a country tied deeply to traditional culture, and techno-orientalism, which views Japan as a highly advanced technocracy.

Wacky-orientalism can work in conjunction with both frameworks.

If we're talking about the Shinto Festival of the Steel Phallus' it's Japan being weird and overly traditional,

examining the significance of the festival is secondary to laughing at the parade of penis statues.

If we're talking about robot hotels then it's not the business owner being eccentric, it's Japan being weird and obsessed with technology.

And yes, I know you're thinking it, the tentacle porn, the world of hentai and laws around porn censorship are attributed to some Japanese weirdness around sex.

Wacky orientalism is a way to reduce and position Japanese culture as a strange other.

It takes the narrative and agency from Japanese people and reinforces the idea of a weird nation in opposition to the normalcy of the western nation states.

I don't think that setting the story in Japan and using the framework of wacky orientalism was conscious or malicious, but I don't think it had to be, because by 2010 the framework was already established.

Here's some articles posted in 2010 at the latest:

- 1. 17 Weird & Interesting Photos from Japan,**
- 2. Top 10 Weirdest Japanese Snacks and Drinks,**

3. **47 Unusual Japanese Foods,**
4. **Top 10 weird Japanese drinks that you might (not) want to try**
5. **6 Japanese Subcultures That Are Insane (Even for Japan),**
6. **Ten More Weird and Bizarre Japanese Soft Drinks,**

The website **Japanisweird.com** started in 2008.

There was even, what I always consider to be the finger on the pulse of the culture, a 2010 Quora post **Why does Japan have so many weird memes and fetishes?**

The point is that "Japan weird," and "because Japan" were already hack in 2010.

So, I can't back this up, because I couldn't find the original post about Lavender Town Syndrome, but it happened at most 2 months before the fears about i-dosing started to spread in newspapers and publications.

I think we can say that if the news caught on in July, then kids were talking binaural beats a while before.

There had also already been some discussion online about Lavender Town's soundtrack being creepy.

The creepypasta came at just the right time and pulled from a wide range of inspirations, it also relied on our cultural perceptions to make the story seem more plausible. It hit in a perfect storm of binaural tone fears, the creepiness of the Lavender Town soundtrack, online communities' knowledge of Pokemon shock and a cultural willingness to suspend disbelief "because Japan."

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