

Positions through Contextualising

Week 02 | Iterations and Analyses

Uma B.



Previously on *Positions*
through Contextualising...

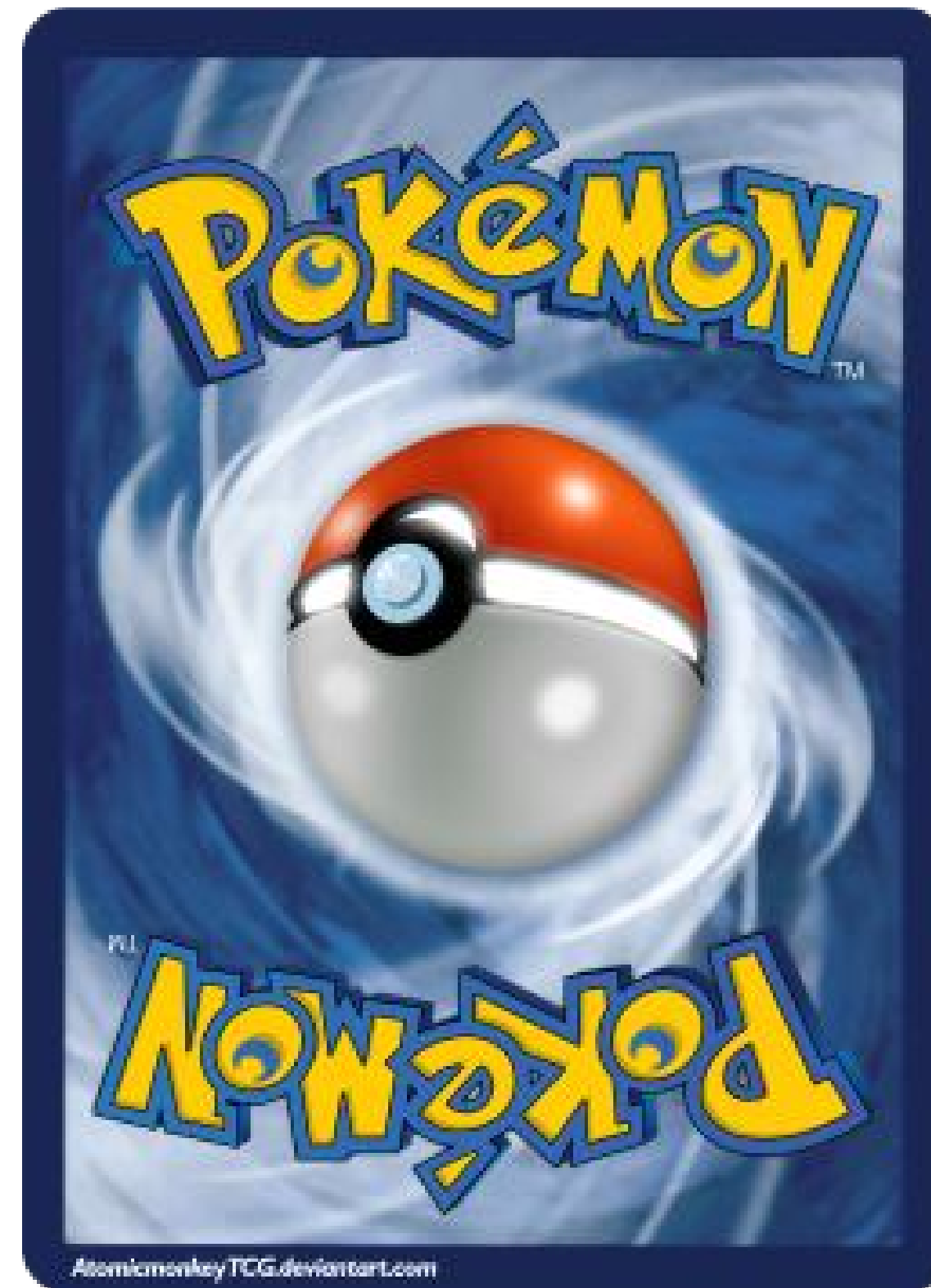
Approach

I continued with the category of 'playing cards': as all kinds of cards have characters or attributes attached to them that make them transactional.

Through Graphic Comm Design, certain symbols are assigned currency and transactional value. **How does form/medium make or break this sense of value?**

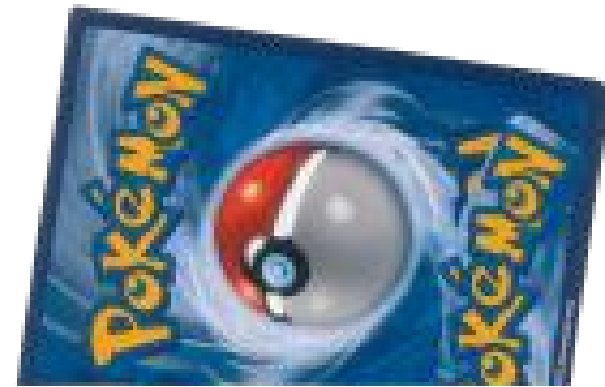
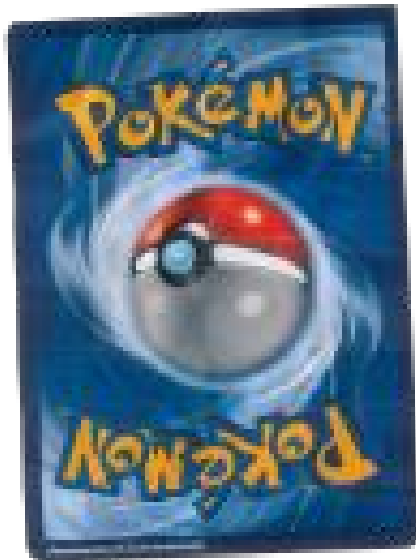
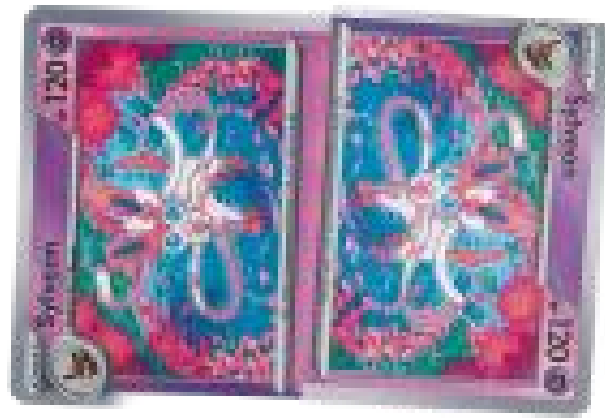
For this assignment, I chose to go ahead with **trading cards**, next on my list - more specifically, the **Pokemon Cards**.

Reference



Growing up, Pokemon Cards were a big big deal to have! And very few of my friends and family had originals, as most of the ones we had were some knockoffs.

Pokemon cards are meant to be traded and played with, but most had a select few and very few to swap them with, so they ended up as collectible first.



From the feedback from last week's crit, key takeaways were to:

- 1. Do Pokemon Cards communicate value?**
- 2. Anchor enquiry on the topic of 'value'**
- 3. Iterate upon material than an idea**



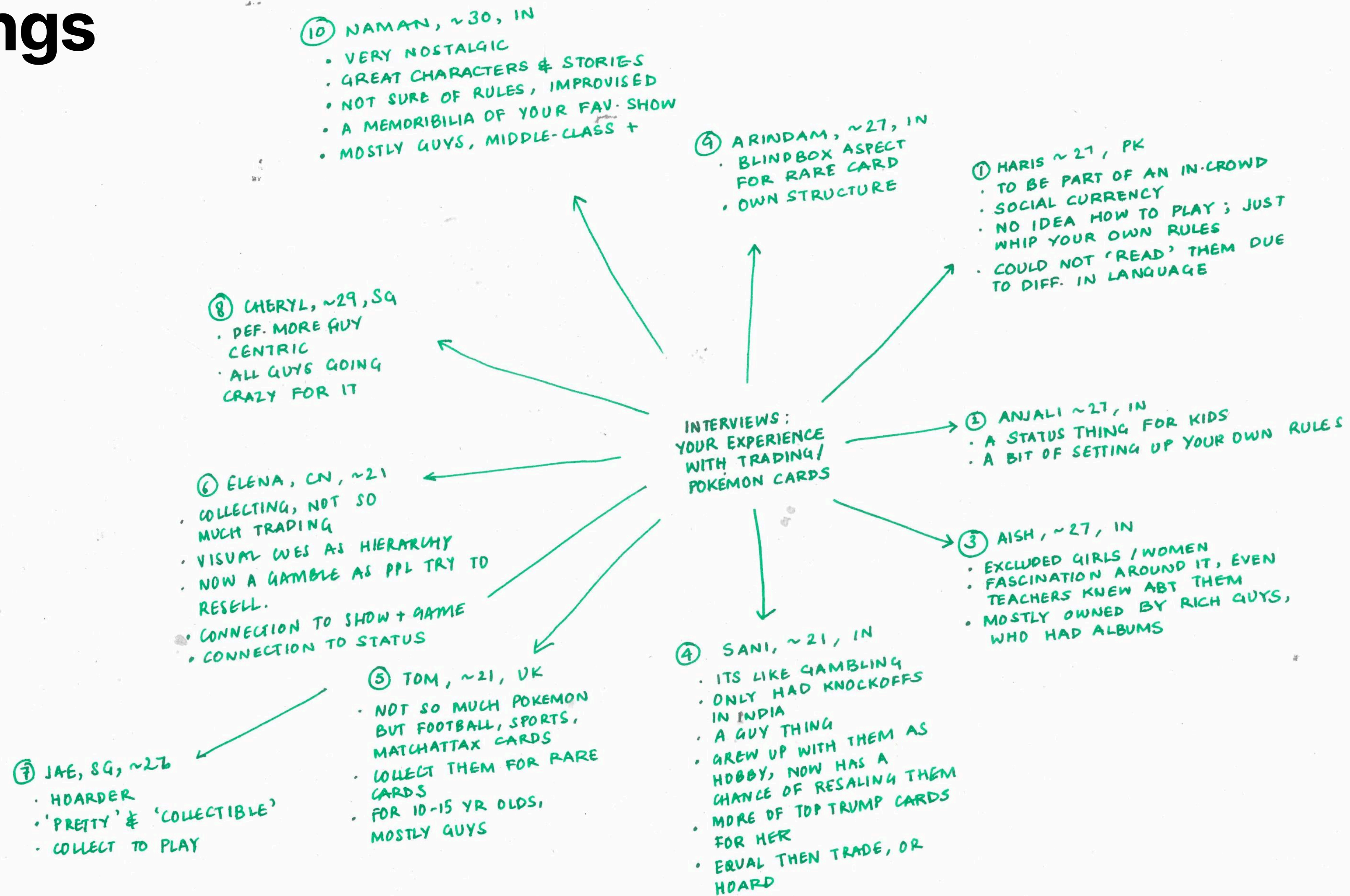
Developments for Positions through Contextualising

Approach

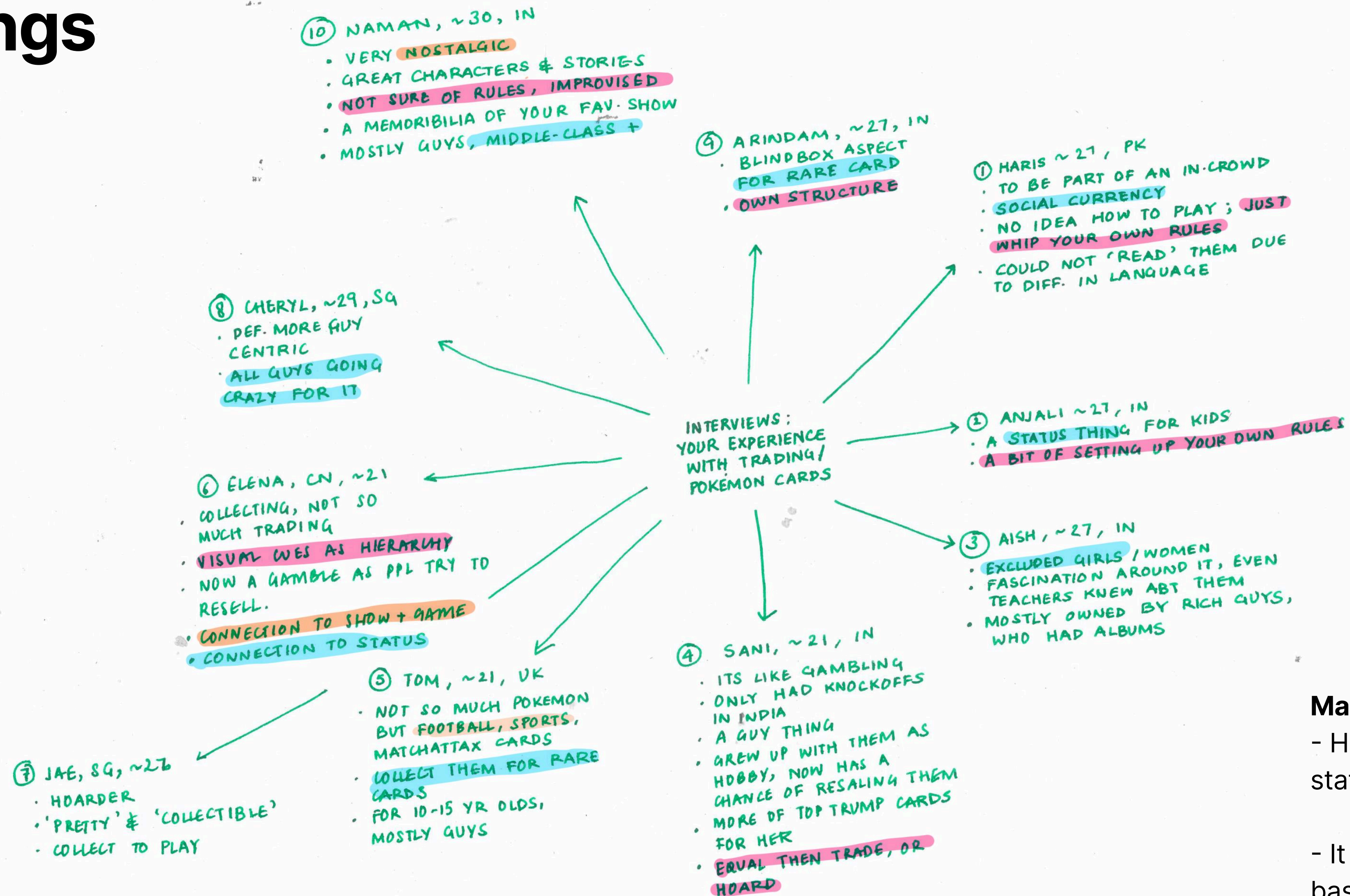
As I explored 'value' as a concept in cards (or 2D graphics, in a broader sense) I continued to research into people's relationship with trading cards.

I interviewed around 10 people, all from different backgrounds geographically but born around the cusp of the millennium, and I was able to gather a general idea as how to people interacted with trading - and Pokemon - cards.

Findings



Findings



- - VALUE AS SOCIAL CURRENCY
 - - SETTING UP YOUR RULES
 - - A CONNECTION TO THE LORE
- * MOSTLY GUY THING! *

Main themes arising were:

- How owning Pokemon cards was a status symbol for young boys
- It was built its own systems of rules based on the visual cues, and had a strong connection to the source material (TV show, PokemonGO)

Question:

A lot of my interviewees talked about how P.Cards were valuable to fitting in with the in-crowd and a way of belonging by engaging with the popular show.

However, few of them were familiar with the actual rules and system of the cards, and used an arbitrary way to transact with the cards.

This indicated that value was placed through **visual vocabulary of the card surface as opposed to playing mechanics when they were circulated.**

How does the design of these cards help to read different kinds of value in them?

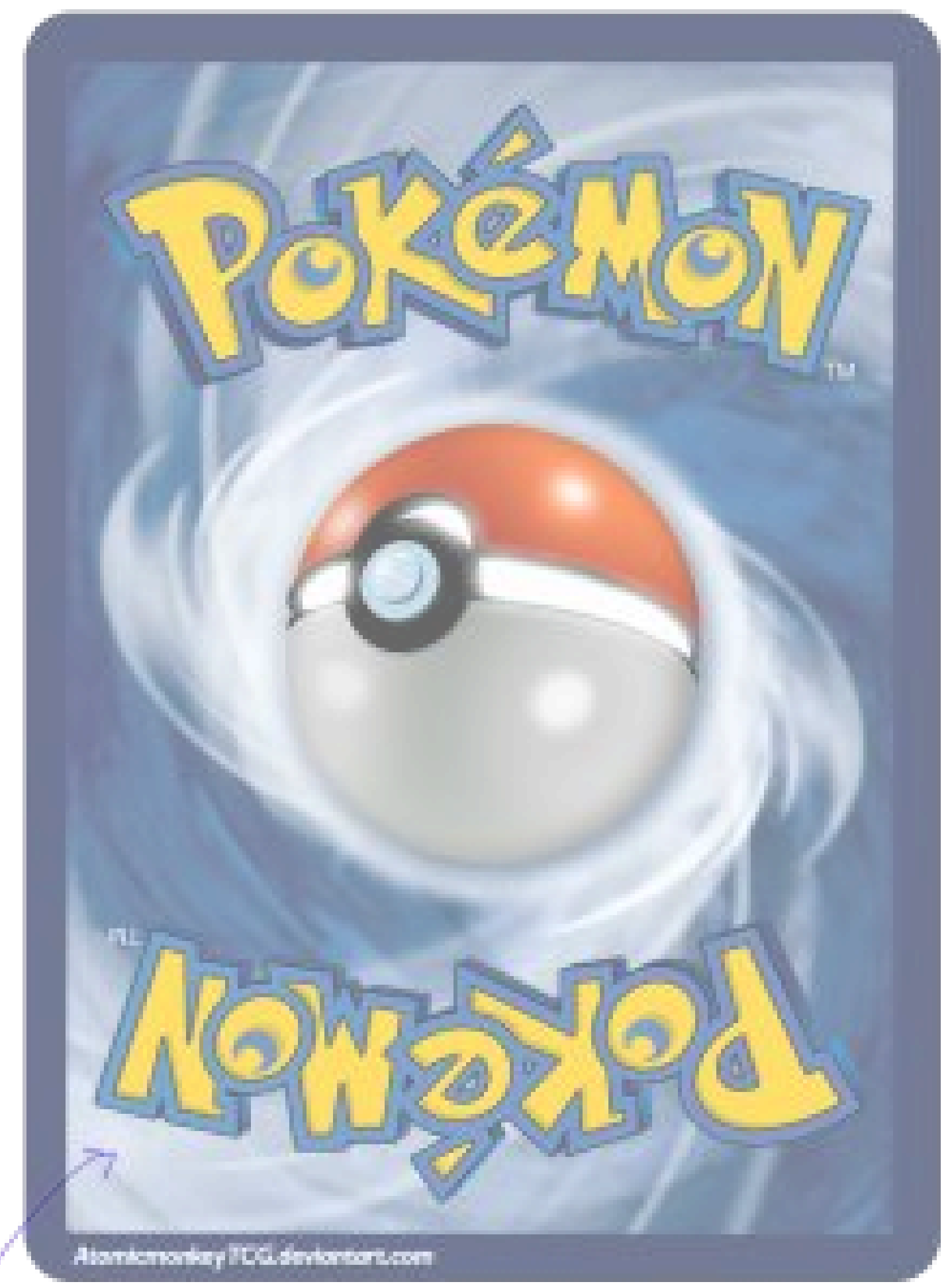
Mapping Context (Through Design and Distribution)

This question led me to go explore Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital, that starts to see value in different forms capital that society operates with.

**“... Bourdieu argues that an individual can apply a cultural or social position strategically to take a new social position and vice versa.”
(Robbins, p.34, 2000)**

Robbins, D. (2000). In: *Bourdieu and Culture*. Sage Publications, pp.34-41.

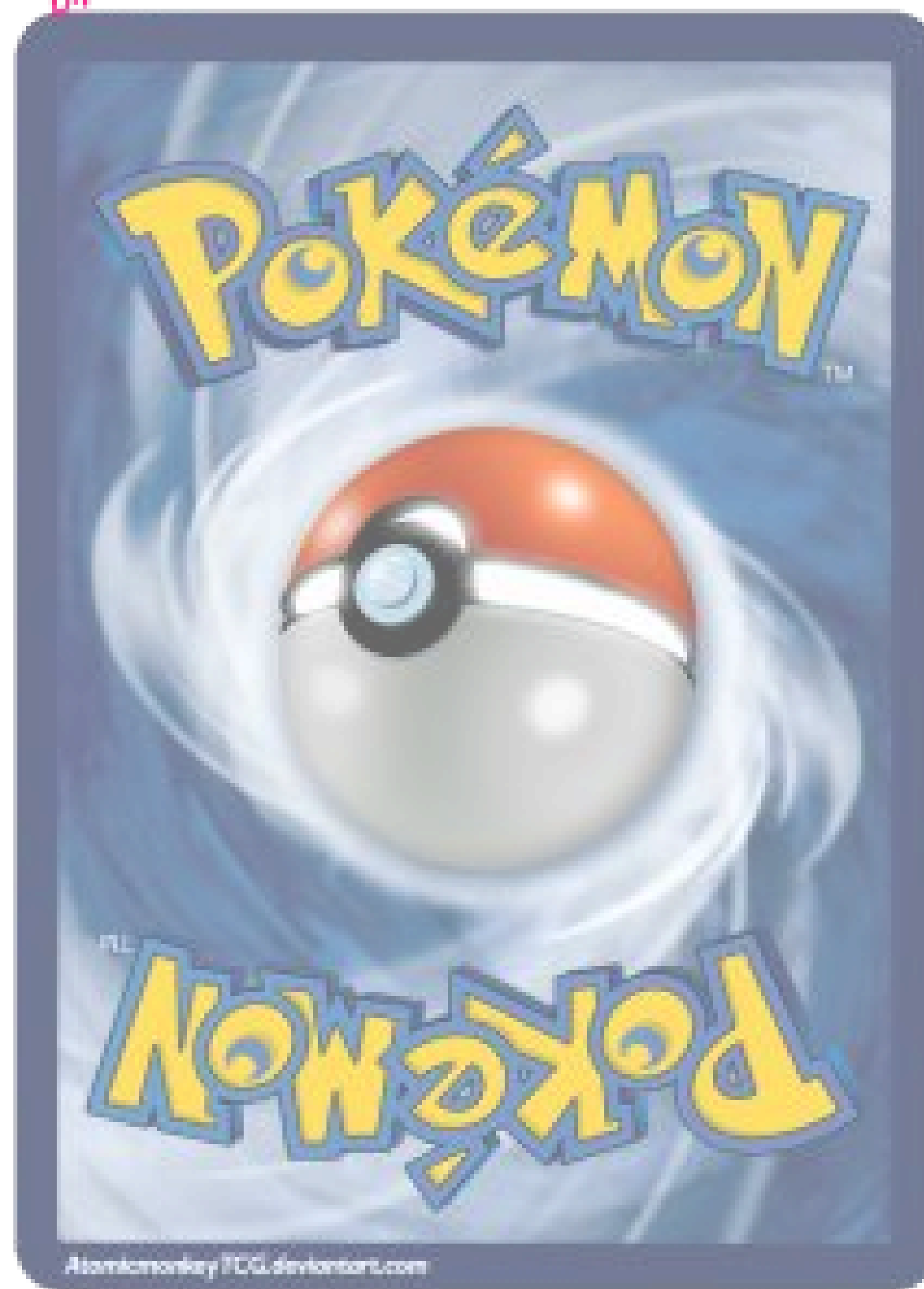
Bourdieu's concept of Forms of Capital creates new forms of capital using economic structures. Cultural capital is the possession of knowledge, skills, tastes, and objects that are recognised as valuable within a particular social group. It comes in three forms, one of them being objectified cultural capital: cultural value that is embodied in physical objects. A Pokémon card: the object itself carries recognisable signs of value (the character, the rarity, the visual design) that can be read by others in the group. The Pokemon cards then activate social capital - which is the value derived from belonging to a group and the networks of recognition that come with it.



Breaking down the elements

TO BE PART OF A LARGER-SCALE DESIGN SET

FOR MORE POWERFUL CARDS,
THE ILLUSTRATION TAKES FULL
ATTN. AND THE COPY
DIMINISHES.



Breaking down the elements

Reference:

@piem786

'Pakiman card' is an ironic exploration of the lives of South-Asian/Pakistani experiences in the UK, especially for those growing up in the early 2000s.

@piem786 points at the kitschy readaption to assimilate in a new society.



Pakiman
CARDS

Using the findings of the interviews, where was value interpreted in their design?



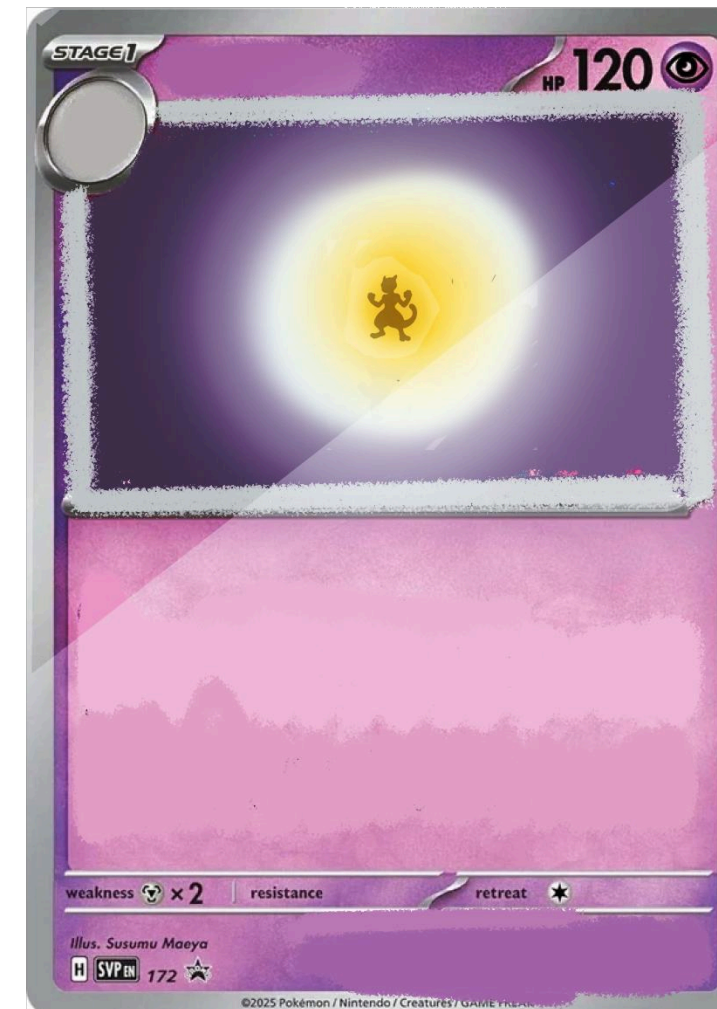
Illustration as the hook; in a boys' league



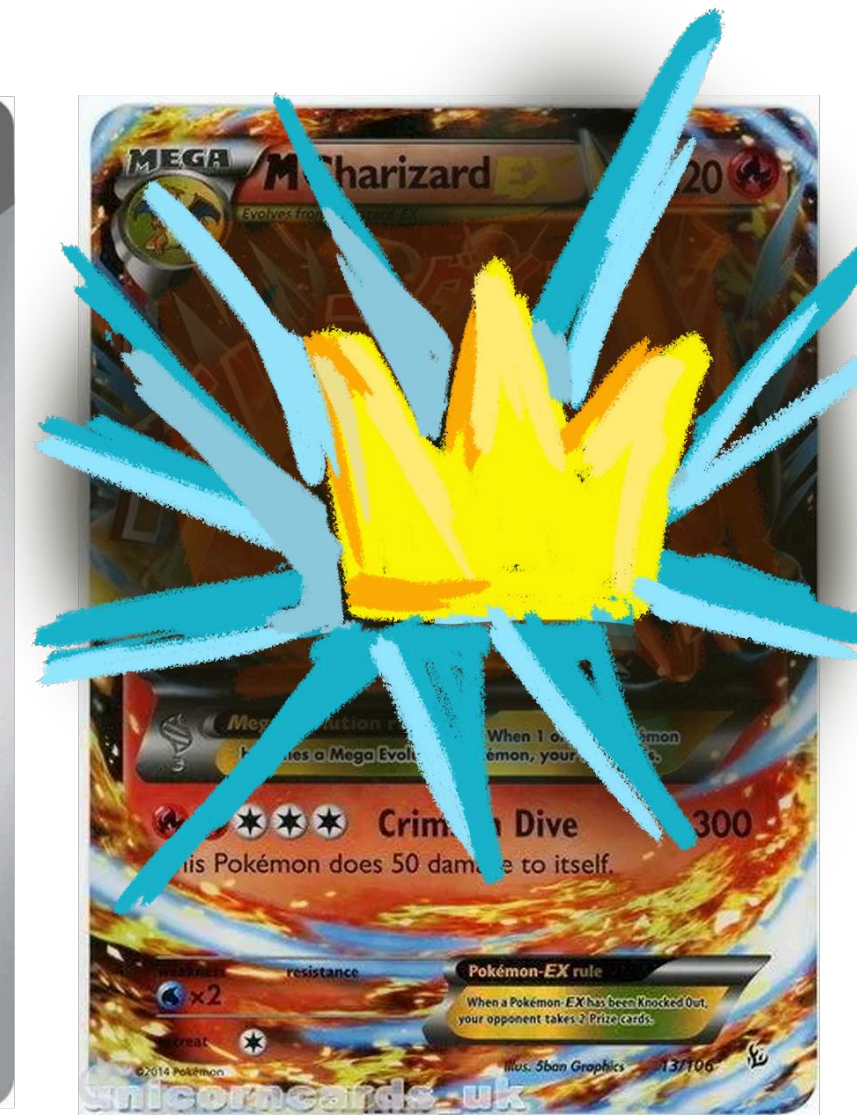
Knock-offs having a depreciative value



Foil and shiny Material as a class signifier



A gamble that can be exciting



A gateway to being a cool kid



Literally monetary value when held for resale

Next Steps:

- I want to find more references that help me discern different kind of values from these cards.
- I intend to make 20 pack set myself, each which extrapolates newer forms of values that are seated in this material.
- Finishing up the writing!

Some (slightly tangential) new questions:

- The redrawing raises new questions for me: *why* is cultural capital embedded in these cards - still, some 20 years onwards?
- Why is nostalgia an acting agent in creating value in objects?
- Is the demographic who derives value from these cards hinting at newer shifts?

Draft Bibliography

“...imagining a currency that reflects economic transactions as well as the social relations it represents, would have to coincide with an economic system that prioritizes social and human values over economic growth.” (Pater, p. 56, 2021)

Pater, R. (2021). *Caps Lock: How Capitalism Took Hold of Graphic Design, and How to Escape It*. Amsterdam: Valiz.

The quote above is a paraphrase of Marx's work by Pater, as he discusses bank notes and their design as one of the formative roles of the design industry as we know it. He argues that designers have historically functioned as scribes of power, producing the visual language that legitimises and reproduces dominant systems without questioning the ideological frameworks they serve and also in establishing a 'currency' that serves to transact. This is critically useful for understanding the playing card system as a designed object, one in which the indices, hierarchy and court cards are design decisions that naturalised a particular order, making it appear self-evident and universal. The card is ultimately assigned a position and a legibility that serves the system's internal logic, and as an 'currency' that can be transacted in card games for something of higher value. What becomes generative for my enquiry is working against this 'scribal' function. In allowing the Jack to transform across materials, forms and meanings, the iterations perform a sort of counter-scribing, using visual language to destabilise the hierarchy.

“Heraldic elements found on national coats of arms are visual representations of myth- for example, dragons are realities in national crests even if we know they don’t exist. In the new definition of national identity, Sealand-style, information takes on the role of the dragon.” (Sealand, p. 48, 2009)

Sealand. (2009). In: *Metahaven: unincorporate identity*. Baden: Lars Müller ; Springer Distributor, pp.6–49.

Metahaven’s observation that heraldic elements function as visual representations of myth, and that information takes on the role of the dragon in constructing national identity is used as critical lens for understanding what the Jack actually is within the deck’s hierarchy. The Pokemon is not a real figure: it is a mythologised one, whose rank and legibility are sustained entirely through visual convention rather than any inherent authority. Metahaven’s project does not simply critique this condition but speculatively redesigns it, producing an alternative visual identity that may operate outside institutional recognition. This is where the connection to my enquiry sharpens: the iterations are similarly speculative, not proposing a correction to the system but imagining what the card might look like when the myth that contains it is rejected. Each iteration becomes a site where the card is made unstable with its scaffolding visible.

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In Defense of the Poor Image

Steyerl, H. (2009) "*In Defense of the Poor Image*," e-flux [Preprint], (10).

Available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image>.

Hito Steyerl talks about how as an image degenerates, it becomes more democratised and accessible as the image is more widely circulated.

A lot of my iterations in this week hinged on the idea of 'corrupting' a pure image, like the form of a mint condition Pokemon card.

Paraphernalia

Connor, S. (2013). *Paraphernalia : the curious lives of magical things*. London: Profile.

This reading talks about the how a card is an 'activated piece of paper'. A paper carries information, a card "announces" it. The card carries a certain authority when its a card.

