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RESISTING FRANCHISE CORPORATE CONTROL: HOW THE INTERNET ENABLES LOCAL PRACTICES IN POKEMON PLAY

Allen Kempton
University of Toronto

Pokémon has always promoted itself as friendly. However, it is strictly regulated by its developing and publishing companies, Game Freak and Nintendo. For players worldwide, this gives the company a negative image, and has led to players creating their own play culture separate to the franchise. This paper comes as part of a study that investigates how we can study contemporary play that thoroughly integrates the Internet and communications technologies into play itself, creating a complex “metaplay” that players engage with everyday. Here, I examined how local Canadian players resisted the controlling nature of the companies to make their play experiences more fulfilling.

Methods and theory

This research follows ethnographic methods in digital game studies (Boellstorff et al, 2012), creating a sort of mini ethnography for adult Pokémon players within the “District”, an anonymized region in Canada. It is located outside of a major city in Canada, featuring a historically important automotive sector and industrial area. Geographically it is primarily suburban, with a small urban component and relatively expansive rural area. Since the original release of *Pokémon* in the 1990s, massive infrastructural development has taken place as well as a significant population boom, increasing approximately 50% in less than 10 years. As a result, this research benefits not only from being contextualized by a rapidly changing and understudied area that moved along with the games.

To analyze the data collected in the interviews, the research uses an analytical framework derived from theories of play, specifically metaplay. Metaplay is a historically nebulous concept, loosely centering on the communicative aspect of play (Bateson, 1956; Sutton-Smith, 1997). This study grounds the term more concretely by defining metaplay more succinctly and ascribing three components that are characteristic of

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communicative aspects of play. These three components are metagaming (Donaldson, 2016), paratexts (Glas, 2010), and gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007). Together, they provide insights into contemporary digital game play practices and how Internet technologies influence them. With this framework, this study provides inroads into localized Canadian suburban play and ways in which readily accessible global information and other players shape their own play habits against a backdrop of a highly proprietary and controlled franchise.

Three ways the players resist corporate control

Taking back play

When it comes to actually playing *Pokémon* games, the company has a strong hold on how the games are played. There is a certain degree of frustration held by players who aspire to play in ranked or qualifying official tournaments, but there are two major problems participants in the study outlined. First was the control of the tournaments, and lack of availability in the Canadian market. Participants indicated that they felt Game Freak did not care enough to broaden the accessibility of tournaments, meaning driving hundreds of kilometres in some cases. With tournaments requiring official sanctioning for people to advance to Regional or World tournaments, there was little opportunity for players from the District. Participants asserted that small local tournaments were mostly non-existent, and that unless there was a significant monetary prize, virtually nobody was interested in attending.

The second problem was the arbitrary changes to the metagame Game Freak made between “Generations” of games. Participants indicated the amount of time and effort required to play competitively in each Generation, even with foreknowledge and datamined information, was extraordinarily high. However, constant changes made it difficult for players to justify the investment, especially considering they had no say in the changes.

As a result, players often turned to fan-made playing platforms as means of finding ways to play competitively and outside of Game Freak’s direct control. *Pokémon Showdown*, the most popular and accepted platform, is the de facto platform for players to test their skills on. These platforms remove accessibility barriers such as time and space, as well as institute community-driven rulesets that strive for consistency, balance, and longevity. Participants in the study refer to this platform and a website called *Smogon University* as a means of getting better at the games, often bringing these global “metagames” into their own individual play.

Controlling Information: how players side-step the industry

Similar to the ways that Game Freak controls ways the games are played, they also control the information available to the player. Before the Internet was readily accessible, players relied on playground rumours for information, or industry published guides exclusively. However, rumours were often wrong, and the guides lacked practical information. The games themselves are full of hidden mechanics and information, which is problematic not only for higher level play, but also casual play, as some functions were simply not described without purchasing an official game guide.

As the Internet grew more accessible worldwide, players began to pool their knowledge online. Free user-generated content increased the accessibility of this information. Datamining lifts the veil on the many hidden mechanics of the game, allowing players to play more efficiently, feeding into the metagaming component. The District historically was predominantly working class, and buying official guides was not on the table for many players. This user-generated content greatly increased accessibility of information for these players, and some participants found ways to participate in the global culture by contributing to these knowledge databanks.

Creating and sustaining communities

With more Internet-based platforms for players to create and host their content, gaming capital, a twist on Bourdieu's cultural capital (Consalvo, 2007), comes into play. Streaming and video creation has become a major factor in contemporary Pokémon play, where well-known players demonstrate their skills (metagame) and pass their knowledge on (Donaldson, 2015). Some participants view streaming as a means of participating and contributing the global play culture, in conjunction with playing in high level tournaments and creating useful informative content available on sites. Some players make or use romhacks to increase the difficulty or keep their play experience fresh, and pass these along to other players.

The corporate side of *Pokémon* uses intellectual property and copyright laws to strike down user-generated content (Postigo, 2008). It can be an uphill battle to maintain one's content, but these actions have furthered soured perceptions players have towards the company itself. Despite these takedowns, players do what they can to keep playing the games in as many ways as they can without being hindered by the company, and promote their play.

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