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Suburban Adults Playing Pokémon: 20 Years Later

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Abstract: The Pokémon franchise is one of the largest in history and subsequently the focus of multiple fields of academic study. In digital gaming, *Pokémon* game titles have also been the subject of much scrutiny. In this research, the mainline *Pokémon* titles (not including spin-offs such as *Pokémon Go!*) provide as case study for understanding the flexibility and changing understandings and engagement of play in contemporary digital game play. This study focuses on a small region outside of a major Canadian city anonymously entitled “The District”, featuring a historical automotive and industrial sector, characterized by primarily suburban, but also rural and urban geographical characteristics. The research investigates historical perceptions of playing Pokémon and exposes some forms of inequality within the District in terms of lingering digital divides, corporate control, and attitudes towards play. This paper investigates how these persistence issues impact adult *Pokémon* play and forms of resistance to these problems.

Introduction

Pokémon has long been the subject of academic study, given a recent boost with the phenomenon of *Pokémon Go!* and the increasing popularity of streaming and online user-generated content. With eight “Generations” of games from the 1990s to 2022 and no signs of slowing down with a ninth Generation in development, *Pokémon* offers many valuable insights into the changing practices of digital game play over the past 25 years, particularly with the rise of commonly accessible Internet, increasing social acceptance of digital gaming, intergenerational gaming, and strides in gaming hardware and equipment. Previous studies have examined differences in perceptions and play of *Pokémon* in Japanese and North American players (Allison, 2003; Tobin, 2004; Allison, 2006; Surman, 2009). This study focuses on a predominantly suburban region of Canada anonymously designated “the District.”

This paper identifies three areas in which inequalities are exposed when it comes to adults playing *Pokémon* in the District. First, issues surrounding affordability and attitudes towards play has historically, and continues to, have an impact on *Pokémon* play experiences, including stigmas of play, particularly involving perceptions of *Pokémon* as a children’s game that adults should not be playing, or negative attitudes towards digital games as “wasted time”. Second, there are lingering and persistent issues when it comes to digital divides, more starkly painted in terms of infrastructural access to play, whether that be public play or being conducive to local group play more generally. Third, the way Game Freak exhibits and exercises their corporate control over the games and way people play has an impact on local level play, by way of pushing players towards alternative means of play online, or limiting local players in terms of accessing official events and tournaments as opposed to players in major urban centers who have more opportunities.

Methodology

This study drew on ethnographic methods to create the research. The research drew on 15 interviews of adult *Pokémon* players in the District, a small region in Canada outside of a major city. The region has undergone much change and development since the first release of *Pokémon Red* and *Blue* in the 1990s, including more than 50% increase in population, substantial infrastructural development, and dwindling focus on the automotive and industrial sectors. Although the District consists predominantly of suburban sprawl, it also features a limited urban area, and fairly expansive rural sections relative to its size.

The District was chosen as the site of research due to the proximity to a major Canadian city, uniqueness of geographical characteristics, and massive changes in the period between *Pokémon*'s debut and the current research. Additional infrastructural support such as widespread broadband, accessible Internet and better public transportation enabled more people to connect and move around, particularly with the large growth in population. As I lived the majority of my life here, I have also witnessed these changes firsthand, and used my experience and knowledge to advertise and contextualize the study. It also helped me form a basis of connection with participants who also grew up or lived most of their lives in the District. These changes and growth impact local and individual play by virtue of digital divides, play space accessibility, and attitudes towards play from a predominantly blue collar working class.

Participants were sought through posters advertised around the District, in parks, bus stops, neighbourhood mailboxes, in relevant shops, and near businesses. After completing a brief screening survey, participants were selected on criteria of longevity of play, knowledge of mainline *Pokémon* titles, self-evaluated knowledge of metagame and engagement of online user-generated content. In the end, 15 people were selected to participate in the research, which was to consist of approximately 1 hour long interviews and a "play session" focus group. Digital game research has a wide variety of numbers of participants in a study (Boellstorff et al, 2012), and for a small scale study such as this I found it acceptable. The participants varied in age, gender, race, occupation, and experience playing *Pokémon*. The fairly rounded out nature of the selected participants would make for qualitative data and focus group interactions. Unfortunately, Covid-19 prevented the focus group play sessions from taking place, participants expressed a strong desire to participate in them simply for the chance to play with other people from their local region.

Affordability and Attitudes Towards Play

The District is historically a predominantly blue collar working class region, and dependent on manufacturing, particularly related to the automotive sector. As a result, participants would talk about how they would be slow to get their own *Pokémon* game, often having to share with siblings, or being a Generation behind the current trend. Certain areas of the District are worse-off economically, and participants who grew up in these areas discussed how they would have to play differently because they did not have the newest hardware or equipment to connect with each other, or having to share the same game because their family could not afford multiple games.

The importance of this for local *Pokémon* play is that it changes the play experience. Participants talked about how they would not be able to talk with their peers as easily about their play, or being able to afford multiple games, or the extra proprietary hardware necessary to connect with other players. For several participants, this meant *Pokémon* became a solitary play experience, without trading or battling with others, even if the game was meant to be, by design philosophy and marketing, a connected, social experience. The predominant play practice was simply sharing the experience together, particularly in a local sense. Previous research in *Pokémon* (Tobin, 2004; Horton, 2012) and more recent research in *Pokémon Go!* demonstrates the value players have in experience sharing in local settings (Doer & Occhi, 2019). The participant enthusiasm for a focus group play session is more indication for this, and several participants suggested they would love the chance to just "hang out to play like the old times."

Stigmas of play also factored in. Participants discussed ways that some parents discouraged playing games because they were seen as a waste of time. This is not unique to the District, as the working class underpinning of the region is a fairly common element influencing perceptions of play more generally. A prevailing stigma of playing *Pokémon* is that of an adult playing what is perceived to be a child's game. A large majority of participants indicated they felt this stigma. In their opinion, this contributed

significantly as to why public play was seen as less socially acceptable, reflecting some previous research in public play (Licoppe & Inada, 2012). Female participants also expressed some degree of discrimination in their youth, as some were not given games because “games were for boys” even if Pokémon had elements of femininity or cuteness (Surman, 2009), though do not feel the same stigma as playing as an adult as male participants felt.

Digital Divides and Infrastructural Issues in the District

In the early days of *Pokémon*, Internet was not common in the District, and gaming hardware of the time was not Internet equipped. As this changed, some of the previously discussed inequalities would factor in, as broadband Internet infrastructure was slow to roll out in some parts, and not everybody could afford the newest handheld console and game that supported WiFi connectivity. This would change the way participants played and perceived *Pokémon*. In the past, there was more reliance on rumours and word of mouth to help players progress. Most participants indicated they never had an industry sanctioned guidebook, as it was too costly for them, so they relied on help from others they were playing with at the time. The rise of the Internet and user-generated content in the form of walkthroughs and specific information through data-mining has demystified the game.

In terms of other infrastructural issues, there is a lack of public play spaces, and a further lack of connectivity with public transportation. Although the small urban section of the District is becoming friendlier to public play thanks to *Pokémon Go!* and game oriented businesses, the suburban sprawl and rural areas certainly suffer lack of play space for gaming. As more local game shops opened, participants still discussed problems with local transportation infrastructure. Creating and maintain a local play culture for the District was difficult when the shops were not centralized in the District, and not exactly in accessible or play friendly areas. As a result, participants indicated players stopped going, instead preferring to play online instead or communicate through platforms such as Discord rather than physically maintain a local play group.

The rural area covers a fairly expansive distance, with virtually non-existent public transportation. For adults who can drive, this can be overcome, but for children this becomes difficult. According to one participant, players adapted to rural infrastructure by playing on the school bus. In the rural area of the District, children would be picked up and dropped off by a bus to and from school, but the journey could take upwards of 30 minutes. This time was used to create a play culture, as Pokémon games were banned at the school, but this was all the time they had to play as a larger group. Players in the District adapted to the problems they were presented with and found ways to make their play enjoyable.

Corporate Control

Participants in the study discussed ways in which actions or paths taken directly by Game Freak as the rights-holding company impacted their play and their perceptions of the games themselves. The participants had varied interests when it came to playing *Pokémon* as an adult and what they wanted out of the game. Overall, Game Freak was viewed with a negative lens by participants for one reason or another, often having to do with the games themselves in terms of storyline, mechanics and general quality of the game.

For those who wanted to play competitively, there were often negative perspectives given about Game Freak and the way they control how the games are played. When discussing the metagame (Donaldson, 2016), or optimal ways of playing, especially in a competitive sense, participants expressed frustration as the metagame would change significantly from Generation to Generation, and for working adults there was not enough time for them to invest into serious play as they never knew how stable the game

would be. Furthermore, prospective competitive players found that there was little opportunity for Canadian players, let alone players from the District, to actually enter into the competitive *Pokémon* scene. Game Freak controls the official tournaments and rankings necessary for players to progress and qualify to play in regional or national tournaments. Participants lamented Game Freak's apparent lack of interest in the Canadian market. Although they acknowledged that the market in Canada is small, some participants went further and discussed just how minimal support for the mainline games was. Some participants drove more than 100 kilometres to participate in official tournaments, which is not a luxury all players can afford to do, and public transportation, if available at all, would make it a several hour journey.

As a result of the corporate nature of *Pokémon*, players find ways to make it work for themselves. Resistance to the industry can be found in participant practices (De Certeau, 2009) and in their play (Grimes & Feenberg, 2009). Although sporadic, local game-shops would host unofficial *Pokémon* tournaments. Other players use fan-made platforms such as *Pokémon Showdown* as a means of competitively playing with others (Assuncao et al, 2017), or played with romhacks such as randomizers, or followed global *Pokémon* community ways of playing such as Nuzlocke Challenges. Players participated in community-based votes and discussions to make their own perceived balanced and fair rules in contrast to the ones set out by Game Freak. By connecting to the global playerbase, the local players of the District were able to make more out of their game and create a better experience for themselves.

Conclusion

To conclude, the mainline *Pokémon* show that there are problems as adults playing in the District, which may be reflected in similar regions, or exacerbated in smaller, less connected and more isolated regions in Canada. Issues relating to digital divides and infrastructural issues create less space for play or incentive to play with other people locally, forcing District players to the Internet instead, which may be less reliable in rural and economically depressed areas. Economic inequalities have an impact for play experiences and practices, some of which may have consequences for socializing practices, particularly among children. Corporate control creates a push-and-pull relationship with the players, negotiating game play changes and an increasing sense of lack of care from Game Freak in terms of game quality and local event hosting. Despite these issues, *Pokémon* players continue to find ways to enjoy and extend their play beyond the game, through different communication and playing platforms, and resisting total corporate control through the use of romhacks for personal play and small scale in-house tournaments without official sanction. To what extent some of the problems raised here are solvable is difficult to say, and advocacy could be made to encourage local play with more spaces to play digital games publicly.

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