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An Ethnographic Exploration of Pokémon GO

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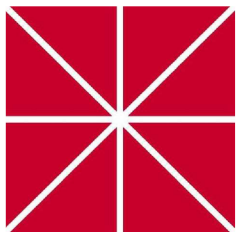
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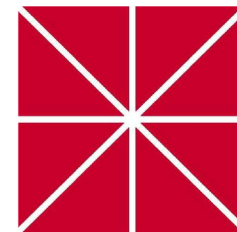
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An Ethnographic Exploration Of Pokémon GO

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Team Affiliations: Building a Sense of Community

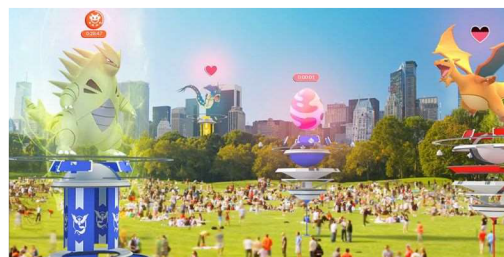
In the game's original set up, when a player gains enough experience points from catching Pokémon and visiting PokéStops to reach level 5, the game presents them with a small scene, an explanation, and an option to select which team they wish to join: Valor, Instinct, or Mystic. Each team comes with its own personal philosophy, set of values, color and leader. Once a team is selected, a player cannot change their affiliation. Teams are how control over different Pokémon Gyms are determined, and as a result has created a sense of both comradery and competition within the game. Team pride has become a prominent factor in whether or not players want to help or team up with other players both in the context of raid battling or simply playing the game in the same vicinity. When players organize meet-ups through outside online databases, there are many pages that are restricted by team membership. This however, is done more in the positive context of wanting to be, 'the best there ever was,' rather than in a negative spirit of exclusion.



Raid Battling: Working Together to Achieve a Common Goal

First introduced in June 2017, raid battling changed the dynamic of how Pokémon GO worked and functioned as a social game. The game itself has no multiplayer interface and no in-game function that promotes communication between players. If players want to organize to meet up with other Pokémon GO players, this is done through outside online social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter. This has been seen as very out of the norm for a Pokémon game considering how over the last 20 years of game development, there has been a noticeable emphasis placed on multiplayer gaming, battling, and trading – the last two, which are known universally as the two most commonly done activities in the handheld videogames, have yet to make an appearance in Pokémon GO. In their place however, is raid battling, which requires two to twenty players to congregate to a specific location within a limited time frame to work together in order to achieve the common goal of battling, defeating, and catching a rare Pokémon. Raid battling fosters communication between players because there is only so much a single player can accomplish on their own through solo play. The tag line of Pokémon is, 'Gotta catch 'em all,' (in relation to how the goal of the game is to catch every species of Pokémon) but this is physically impossible within the game unless a player is willing to rely and depend on fellow players.

This is where the game thrives because Pokémon GO is the only social media platform that doesn't exist purely online. There are online aspects to the game, but because the app itself requires physical exploration, players experience the real world while having the buffer of their phone screens to keep them not only protected from perceived uncomfortable social situations, but also familiarly grounded within our age of technological advances. People gravitate to their phones as a social crutch and Pokémon GO is a first positive step towards learning how to integrate human interaction with technology.



Pokémon GO as a Social Phenomenon

When the app was originally released in the summer of 2016, the world went through a period of time where Pokémon was everywhere in the media. It was mentioned daily in news reports and it quickly became one of the most downloaded mobile apps of all time. The game was even used as a promotional deal for many stores and businesses across the world including its extremely popular partnerships with multibillion dollar companies including McDonald's, Starbucks, and Sprint. For about a four-month period, it seemed as though every single person in the world was walking around, looking down at their phones catching Pokémon. One of the more well-known examples of this was a viral video released showing crowds of people running across traffic-ridden streets in New York City frantically trying to catch a rare Pokémon that had appeared in Central Park.

What makes the game incredible isn't what people thought was a brand new technological innovation. The combination of augmented reality (AR) with global positioning systems (GPS) wasn't a brand-new idea, so there has been a lot of speculation as to what it was exactly that makes this particular app so popular. The main reason that AR and GPS work so well in this particular case is because it also has the added component of childhood nostalgia. The app reached unpredicted levels of success because it not only allowed adults to finally live out their childhood dreams, but it also engages young new fans and wide audiences with its easy to understand user interface. It's a game that's simple to use, with easily distinguishable and beloved characters that welcomes everyone into the secret world of Pokémon which, with the app, reveals that these creatures have been hiding among us this whole time.



Benefits To Playing

One of the most positive aspects of playing Pokémon GO are the gained health benefits. Players have listed Pokémon GO as a reason for them increasing the amount of time they go out, walk around, and overall get more exercise. One of the features of the game is hatching Pokémon eggs that reveal new and rare Pokémon which can only be done by walking either two, five, or ten kilometers. The game is also able to determine when players are moving too quickly so players can't cheat the system by having the app open while in a vehicle. The only way to progress in the game is to physically move around an area.

The game encourages exploration of new areas because certain species can only be found in specific locations. Water-type Pokémon are likely to be found near bodies of water, like beaches or lakes, while steel and electric-type Pokémon appear more often in cities and large urban areas. Species of Pokémon that are common in one city may not be common in others and some Pokémon are limited exclusively to certain countries.

Another benefit players have experienced is meeting new people and gaining friends through the game. "I've never played a game that's brought me together with strangers in such a positive way," one player writes on an online forum. "My favorite part about the game is that I've actually been able to meet new people through playing...it may seem weird, but I know that I'm not the only one of my friends who have met some really cool people while playing."

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