Chapter 18

Spatial Immersion and Human Interaction: Comparing Cross-Generational Experiences of Pokémon GO Play

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how Pokémon GO play may integrate players’ gaming experiences and physical environments to facilitate spatial-human immersions in psychologically meaningful ways. Two age groups that represent generational players were further compared. A survey of 1031 players found that co-presence was positively associated with game enjoyment and game involvement, and nostalgia was positively associated with game enjoyment. The mediation effect of nostalgia on game involvement through game enjoyment was significant and game involvement completely mediated the relationship between game enjoyment and place attachment. In the 35 years and older age group, the direct effect of nostalgia on game involvement and the indirect effect of nostalgia on game involvement through game enjoyment were both significant. Theoretical implications on linking spatial relationships and the process of movement in the immersive AR environment and connecting the media experiences from one’s formative youth period to the world of technological advances are elaborated.

INTRODUCTION

Pokémon GO is a popular mobile game that applies augmented reality (AR) and geolocation technologies to integrate the physical universe into its virtual world. The game uses a global positioning system (GPS) to situate virtual creatures called “Pokémon” overlaid on top of the players’ physical surroundings. The player takes on the role of a trainer in order to capture Pokémon. Using GPS while moving around in the real world, players are notified via their smartphones when Pokémon are nearby. The design of the game not only immerses players into actual geographical places but transforms real-world places into
“PokéStops” and “Gyms,” the specially marked virtual spots located throughout the physical world at landmarks and local businesses.

Although location-based AR games entered the market in 2003 in Japan, this game genre did not draw worldwide attention until the release of Pokémon GO. In fact, GPS, AR, and mobile games had all been on the market for several years. The success of Pokémon GO may not be due only to the integration of technological advances but rather may have been constructed by its appeal to the fans who grew up collecting the cards and building “Pokedexes” on Game Boys during their childhoods in the 1990s. Today’s millennials who once dreamed of catching Pokémon in real life now account for the majority of the Pokémon GO players (Cummings, 2016). Keogh (2017), particularly, attributes this phenomenon to the importance of nostalgia. Nostalgia, as the specific form of passion derived from past moments of significance in one’s life course, is one component in the generational experience that is relative to media (Bolin, 2016). While nostalgia may explain the motivation for the millennials to play Pokémon GO, the relationship between the remembrances of media content connected to one’s earlier life phases and the enjoyment of the media experience in one’s present time through the accessibility of technologies has remained largely unanswered.

From a technical perspective, recent developments in the contemporary media environment have enabled and made possible mapping spatial distribution and how different spatial patterns relate to one another. While social media interfaces have increasingly been employed for individuals to facilitate interpersonal communication goals, current geolocation technologies and the characteristics of AR games allow the connection between players, spaces, and locations, facilitating a sense of physical coexistence between people. Co-presence—the sense of being there together with others (Harms & Biocca, 2004)—allows for an increased awareness of the everyday lives and activities of distant others through the mediated interactions that present themselves within the ubiquitous media environment, enabling deeper emotional aspects of relationships to be developed. Thus co-presence that includes one’s movement may serve as a function of spatial configuration that connects the physical and virtual spaces with the social occupation of space. However, social and personal variables can also mediate a perception of crowdedness (Stokols, Rall, Pinner, & Schopler, 1973) by reflecting one’s spatial needs. This suggests that an investigation of an environment in order to integrate one’s surroundings may develop spatial–human interaction in psychologically meaningful ways.

Given that spatiality and sociality can provide individuals with contexts in which they can understand media (Berland, 2009), the interpretation of Pokémon GO may become inseparable from spatial-human interactions. Klimmt, Hartmann, and Frey (2007) have suggested that the enjoyment of players’ causal effects on the gaming context can motivate them to interact with the environment. Pokémon GO play that is mediated by geolocation and AR technologies may not only simply be considered as a media experience, but a necessary condition defined by spatial relationships and the process of movement. However, while technologies affect and mediate one’s perception of the environment, nostalgia, a longing for the past (Batcho, 2013), seems to play a contradictory position by connecting the media experiences from one’s formative youth period to the world of technological advances. Therefore, this study sets out to explore the generation-based socialization that may contribute to the enjoyment of Pokémon GO play and how the gaming experiences in a fictional world may elicit players’ affections toward their real-world surroundings. Two age groups are compared in this chapter to understand how generations and technologies are intertwined in the process of media enjoyment and spatial–human relationships.