The Familiar Places We Dream About: Pokémon GO *and Nostalgia during a Global Pandemic*

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Introduction

The release of *Pokémon GO* in 2016 was a critical moment in the development of mobile Augmented Reality (AR) games. Building on a pop culture franchise dear to many, it represented "a perfect storm of nostalgia, branding, design concepts, pre-existing data, and established technologies" (Keogh, 2016). Pokémon (the abbreviated version of Poketto Monsutā or 'Pocket Monsters' in Japan) first appeared in video games for the original Nintendo Game Boy in 1996. The Japanese brand has since expanded into a global phenomenon encompassing video games, trading cards, comics, animated television series, live-action film, prolific merchandising, and even a theme park. As an iconic example of popular culture as transmedia, Pokémon is also a wellspring of nostalgia for people around the world. Many contemporary adults grew up with Pokémon and carry fond memories of the characters. Playing *Pokémon GO* is therefore associated with "nostalgic reverie" (Bonus et al., 2018) and people were immediately motivated to participate based on childhood nostalgia (Zsila et al., 2018; Harborth & Pape, 2019; Vaterlaus et al., 2019). Players, scholars, and commentators alike tend to agree that "one of the key success factors of Pokémon GO is its success in tapping into the childhood memories of a large number of young adults" (Tang 2017). The game has indeed been successful; rapid uptake following its release inspired huge public gatherings and mass enthusiasm described as "Pokémania" at the time (Isaac, 2016). Within two days the app had overtaken Tinder in the US (Price, 2016) and conversation was running hot on social media as "231 million people engaged in 1.1 billion interactions that mentioned Pokemon Go on Facebook for the month of July" (Johnson, 2016). While this initial 'mania' eased and media attention has shifted elsewhere, *Pokémon GO* continues to be a popular and lucrative game for Niantic, making around $US900 million in 2019 (Statt 2020).

This article examines the emerging impact of COVID-19 on the developers and players of *Pokémon Go* through the lens of nostalgia. First addressing the game as a nostalgic text that works to remediate personal and collective memories, we then examine how gameplay has changed in response to players' restricted movement and isolation during the global pandemic of 2020. More specifically, we unpack how the game has pivoted in response to social distancing and stay-at-home orders, which disrupt the very essence of the game and complicate its nostalgic function. One might expect a game dependent upon mobility and socialising to be thoroughly stymied by a pandemic that requires everyone to stay inside and avoid others. In fact, Niantic saw an immediate increase in revenue from *Pokémon GO* as lockdowns were imposed (Minotti 2020). We explore why this might be and unpack what this case suggests about the role of digital games in mediating trauma during stressful periods in history.

Mobility, Sociality and Building from *Ingress*

Pokémon GO is widely considered the first highly successful AR game, but it was not the first foray in AR from Niantic, the game's developers. Four years earlier, while Niantic was still owned by Google, they released *Ingress* which prototyped many of the features that would eventually be core to the success of *Pokémon GO*. *Ingress* featured competition between two globe-spanning teams whose gameplay was, vitally, mapped on to real world locations using AR, which essentially used GPS coordinates to combine physical and digital elements in a persistent, combined and connected game world. AR allowed game features, such as portals, to be established in physical locations which would become part of the game itself as the GPS coordinates of these features created dual digital and physical sites. In *Ingress*, playing with others in teams was critical to success in the game, leading to players continually navigating and balancing the twin needs of sociality and privacy in a game premised on sharing one's location in the real world in order to play (Blasiola et al., 2016). Indeed, augmented reality and locative media games utilise the affordances of locative media to add layers of meaning to existing physical locations, but in doing so they may also invite players to visit, experience and appreciate existing locations in new ways, not just as gameplay, but potentially in ways which lead to new appreciation and engagement with existing physical sites. The portal sites in *Ingress* were all suggested by users, and Niantic specifically encouraged them to recommend portal locations that had narrative value, which explicitly included heritage, historical, and significant architectural sites (Stark, 2016). By the time Niantic was spun off from Google in 2015, the game company had developed one of the most detailed global maps filled with user-generated locations of significance. In establishing themselves as an independent company separate from Google, Niantic's initial two partners were Nintendo and The Pokémon Company, two businesses that have deeply, and increasingly, capitalised on nostalgia over time (Goggin, 2017).

At the launch of *Pokémon GO* in 2016, it was immediately apparent that location and distance were core parts of the mobile game experience. Players traverse different spaces and places to find new Pokémon and attempt to capture them. By default, the experience of capturing a Pokémon in AR meant that players would see the Pokémon through their mobile device's screen as situated in the material world, made visible by the device's front-facing camera. To achieve this, players must visit either Pokémon Gyms or Pokéstops, both of which provide the players with items such as various types of balls for capturing Pokémon, as well as different healing potions and, importantly, Pokémon Eggs. Eggs hatch after players traverse a certain distance (2, 5 or 10km) while playing the game, with different eggs offering different types of Pokémon. After gaining a certain level of experience, players can then battle to claim specific Pokémon Gyms for their team. The location of Pokémon Gyms or Pokéstops was initially determined using the same map data that *Ingress* users generated in placing portals in their game. Thus, location data, movement through space, and traversing considerable distances, were key elements of successful gameplay to the extent that there were a series of running jokes on social media about stereotypically unfit gamers suddenly getting huge amounts of exercise in pursuit of catching every last Pokémon possible.

Despite the lack of official social features at launch, situating *Pokémon GO* as an AR game played in the material world meant that social interaction was very much part of the game experience for many players, whether in shared traversing of new locations is search of new Pokémon, playing with friends, or meeting new players who were also keeping one eye on the material world and one eye on their mobile device. Indeed, one study which conducted in-depth interviews with *Pokémon GO* players found that 90% played the game with family and existing friends in some capacity, while 86%

also indicated they used the game as an icebreaker at some point, initiating conversations with other players on the basis of their shared gameplay experiences (Vella et al., 2019).

As Apperley and Moore (2019) argue, the camera embedded in *Pokémon Go*, and photographic potential of capturing Pokémon in the physical world, added important dimensions of sociality and shareability as well. In social terms, capturing Pokémon in unexpected physical locations—at times with knowing, and sometimes unknowing, other participants—added creative, remixable and humorous levels to the game. The fact that every photo was, by default, saved to the mobile device's gallery meant these photos were easily shared on other platforms, resulting in Pokémon popping up in a huge range of different places visible across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, especially following the game's release in 2016. Moreover, in 2019 Niantic added the enhanced 'AR Snapshot' mode which allowed players to retrieve any Pokémon from their collection and photograph them in real world settings, greatly enhancing the photographic potential of *Pokémon Go*, whilst also, quite strategically, increasing the likelihood of players sharing their Pokémon photos on other social media platforms (Frank, 2019).

Living the Dream: Pokémon and Nostalgia

AR technologies intensify players' sense of nostalgia by blurring the boundaries between the Pokémon world and the physical world, facilitating a deeper sense of connection with a much loved fictional universe. "I was so thrilled that I literally cried when I caught my first Pokemon in real life," explains one player in his thirties, "It was a dream come true. I've been a big fan of Pokemon since I was seven" (cited in Knott 2019). References to dream fulfilment are common in discussions of what the game means to players. The game is "a childhood dream come true" (McPhee 2016) which allows players to "reconnect with the good ole days" and "[relive] my childhood dream of being a Pokémon trainer" (cited in Vaterlaus, Frantz & Robecker 2018, 600). Niantic have continued to improve the quality of their AR over the years, introducing "reality blending" effects that enable increasingly realistic interactions with creatures during the game (Takahashi 2020). As one Reddit user posted in the *Pokémon GO* forum, "AR is the reason I started my childhood dream... to catch them all!" (manicmaniac11 2020). They offer this commentary on a screenshot showing the dragonfly Pokémon 'Yanma' apparently resting on the player's outstretched hand as they stand in their garden. "I wanna play Pokémon go with you now" replies another player, while others respond praising the picture and the quality of the AR. "This is the best!" they note, "Your pokemon looks happy :)" AR is thus repeatedly credited with bringing the dreams of childhood alive in ways that are personally and communally meaningful for players.

Nostalgia is an especially powerful element of *Pokémon GO* because the experience is simultaneously personal and collective. As Janelle L. Wilson points out, "nostalgia is both a cultural phenomenon and a personally subjective experience," it can be evoked publicly or privately (2005 30). *Pokémon GO* is popular because it synthesises individual and collective experiences of nostalgia; it is felt internally and performed with others. In an online post titled "Childhood dreams…" another Reddit user (goosewhaletruck 2016) describes a public encounter with two strangers who were also playing the game; "I walked away with the biggest smile on my face, feeling like I was living my childhood dream of walking around with Ash and Brock and Misty... I'm 27." Another player replied to the post with a similar anecdote. Sharing the world of *Pokémon GO* with others in real-time, in real spaces, allows for a sense of immediate collective fantasy built on common memories and

experiences, even between strangers. Brendan Keogh (2016) notes that *"the very fact it requires visible bodies on the streets renders its ubiquity into something uniquely remarkable. Unlike a hugely popular book or film or traditional videogame, the success of Pokémon Go can be seen all around us."* Niantic cultivated this visible sociality by facilitating group events and encouraging ongoing interactions between players. People then exchange stories about these encounters online, building the mythology of the game as an alternate social universe overlaying the present.

Responding to the Pandemic

The experiences outlined above are intimately linked with physical movement, proximity to others, and the exploration of outdoor spaces. Inevitably, the Coronavirus pandemic has had a huge impact on players. First reported in China in late December 2019, the virus spread quickly and was detected in 18 countries by the end of January (World Health Organisation 2020). By late July over 14 million people had contracted the illness worldwide (Johns Hopkins University 2020). Around the globe, public spaces and interactions have been redefined by fear of contagion, transforming the contexts in which people move and socialise. Along with widespread medical, social, and economic disruptions, the situation poses a challenge to players and developers of games like *Pokémon GO*. Louise Shorthouse (2020) points out that, "If any game category was at risk from the COVID-19 pandemic, it was the location-based AR genre." Government edicts to stay indoors and self-isolate to avoid catching or spreading the virus would seem to negate the very premise of location-based gaming. Indeed, "it's no longer safe to play these games as originally intended" (Perez 2020). Not only do players risk catching the virus, but they also risk being disciplined for breaking local laws. "The restrictions for leaving your home are well known," stated Deputy Police Commissioner Rick Nugent of the Victoria police after two players were fined, "I can say it does not include playing Pokémon" (Rose 2020). Accordingly, one might expect play duration and revenue to decrease dramatically as players go into lockdown and turn to other forms of entertainment. Instead, the opposite has occurred: "there was a 69% jump spending in the week ending March 16, around the time nations began introducing lockdowns and vulnerable citizens in the U.S. were first asked to self-isolate" (Chandler 2020). Tracing what underpins this boost is useful on several fronts, providing insight into the role of nostalgic games and popular culture in navigating troubled times.

Responding swiftly to the pandemic, Niantic implemented changes in *Pokémon Go* to adjust the level of mobility required and limit the necessity of physical interaction or proximity between players. Monthly community events, festivals, and raids that encouraged players to gather together in specific locations were cancelled in early March, while in-game features were added to facilitate play from home (Weinberger 2020). Focus shifted from physical events to virtual gatherings, while additional features were added to ensure desirable items and characters would be available wherever the player was isolating. Developers updated the official blog to explain these changes on a regular basis, emphasising their "continued efforts to prioritize Pokémon GO experiences that can be enjoyed in individual settings and from home" (Niantic 2020a). Notably, this transition from Pokémon GO to "Pokémon StayTheHellAtHome" (Kumparak 2020) has been accompanied by an increasing emphasis upon nostalgia within the game. For example, the entire month of May 2020 was dedicated to a "Throwback Challenge" focused on memories. In the official announcement in April, nostalgia was clearly the lens through which players were being encouraged to reengage with the game:

Do you ever stop and think about how quickly time flies? It feels like it was just yesterday that some of us were faced with the choice between Bulbasaur, Charmander, and Squirtle right before starting our journey through the Kanto region. Now, over 20 years later, some of us are still exploring the world of Pokémon [...] Each week will feature different tasks themed around different regions of the Pokémon world, inspired by the adventures that some might remember from previous Pokémon games. (Niantic 2020b)

Nostalgia is built into the challenge at a gameplay level, but players were also explicitly encouraged to see it as a personal memory prompt: "Let's look back at the adventures in Pokémon Red and Pokémon Blue together! [T]here's much to reminisce about from past adventures through Kanto!" (Niantic 2020b). This strategy appears effective, as some players use the lockdown as an opportunity to re-live a time before adult concerns took priority. *Pokémon Go* subreddit moderator 'HQna' (cited in Maher 2020) notes that "Many of us grew up playing the main series games—inside, on our handhelds. [...] And to me, the situation right now just makes it even more nostalgic. And I appreciate that."

There is now an additional layer of nostalgia in operation, however, as players and developers farewell pre-pandemic iterations of *Pokémon GO* itself. Niantic's formal announcement on the changes concludes with the melancholy note that "We look forward to the day when we can return to the familiar places we dream about and once again safely play together with family and friends" (Niantic 2020c). Not only is the original version of *Pokémon GO* now a fond memory, but the outside world itself has been lost, transformed into mundane yet inaccessible spaces we can only "dream about" inhabiting comfortably. Decoupling players from physical exploration and interaction, at least temporarily, has been a matter of necessity to ensure player safety and the game's survival. The persistent emphasis upon memory that underpins these developments, however, speaks to the game's wider function as a nostalgic text. Where *Pokémon GO* once layered the physical world with nostalgia, it is now presented as a nostalgic portal through which to revisit once contagion-free environs; "Instead of discouraging virtual movement inside the game, as Niantic has in the past, players will be able to virtually visit and share memories about their favorite real-world places" (Perez 2020). During quarantine, the material landscape outside the home is only accessible for play via virtual technologies, so the game provides a well-crafted way of accessing meaningful public spaces safely. The desire for this experience is reflected in the game's dramatic revenue increase during the pandemic.

A Time for Dreaming

Scholarly analyses of mobile games often focus on how they transform perceptions of physical space, layering the material landscape with additional meaning, movement, and data. Gazing through the lens of nostalgia, however, allows us to further consider how *Pokémon GO* interacts with perceptions of time. As noted above, playing *Pokémon GO* is often described as a dream come true. This has temporal implications in the context of nostalgia. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym highlights the relationship between dreaming and time:

At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a longing for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. (2001, xv)

Just as play can subvert the logic of structured spaces, dreams can transgress the linear passage of time.

> A few minutes' dreaming can give the impression of covering great stretches of time. In other instances, dream time becomes so condensed and compressed that the logic of succession seems to be suspended; the present and the past get inverted, or smashed together, as if there had been no intervening passage of time. (Hoffman 88)

Perhaps significantly, the concept of dreaming was a core component of Nintendo's first attempt at Pokémon AR. Released in 2012 for the Nintendo 3DS, the lesser known *Pokémon Dream Radar* uses the device's camera and motion controls to make floating clouds appear around the home when viewed through the screen. Pokémon are trapped in some of these clouds and players can walk around finding and capturing them. The mechanics of this game resemble *Pokémon GO* in several respects; however the alternate dimension seen through the viewer is described as the 'Interdream Zone.' Players must collect Dream Orbs (the game's currency) by breaking up the dream clouds for Professor Burnet, a Pokémon scholar who is researching the Interdream Zone. *Pokémon GO* essentially extends the Interdream Zone across the entire world. Only instead of analysing this alternate dimension from an outsider's perspective, as a research assistant, players of *Pokémon GO* are invited to see themselves within it. "The nostalgic," Boym argues, "desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition" (xv). Embracing the liminal temporality of the *Pokémon GO* 'dream' allows players to find themselves anew in the game's collective mythology.

According to Bruno Lovric, the game "has provided players with moments of transcendence by connecting their childhood personas with their adult selves" (cited in Knott 2019). In doing so it provides a link between past and present that temporarily sidesteps the aging process and the passage of time. The original meaning of nostalgia is drawn from "the Greek *nostos*, to return home, and *algia*, a painful condition – thus, a painful yearning to return home" (Davis 1977, 1). As the average age of gamers increases, there has been growing enthusiasm for classic games that rekindle memories of the past (Sloan 2014). This yearning might be understood as a form of 'homesickness' for a childhood that can never be revisited. Video games are uniquely positioned in this regard because, unlike other forms of popular culture, they offer a simulation that *can* be re-entered.

> What is interesting about nostalgia in video gaming is that re-released games do, in a sense, afford players the possibility to return to an exact same "home," a virtual environment that was present when they originally played a particular game and persists in an unchanged state. (Heineman)

While *Pokémon GO* draws on elements of an existing franchise, the game itself is a new release. As Wulf et al. (2018) point out, this means it is not 'retro' in the sense of historical; players are revisiting the fictional Pokémon world and their youthful desire to participate in it, rather than actually replaying an older game. In that sense it represents homecoming to a place and time that never actually existed. This is entirely in keeping with nostalgia as a sensation. As Carson McCullers (1940) puts it, "we are homesick most for the places we have never known." The nostalgia evoked by *Pokémon GO* is arguably not a longing for the past, but for something parallel with, or overlaying, the present; an experience that subverts the linear passage of time and provides new ways of parsing the world. In the context of frightening real-life events, such as quarantine and a global

pandemic, it follows that the game offers a unique form of collective respite for individuals isolating within their homes.

Mediating trauma: A nostalgic community

In the early days of *Pokémon GO* fever, critics expressed some concern regarding its widespread popularity. Sherry Turkle (2016) was worried that AR experiences such as *Pokémon GO* might trigger a more widespread retreat from the physical world:

> Reality is fragile and complex. It demands a lot and we are fatigued. Addressing real problems begins by seeing them clearly. If we are not vigilant, seeing the world through a lens — albeit not darkly — can be a first step toward accepting a dreamscape as sufficient unto the day.

Using AR technologies, *Pokémon GO* allows the filter of nostalgia to blur not only the past, but the present and future. For Turkle, transforming reality into such a "dreamscape" suggests a retreat from the necessary realities of existence. On the other hand, Leigh Alexander (2016) argued that this "Pokétopian fantasy" was "a pure, almost nostalgically utopian vision of technology and play at a time when the world seems to need it more than ever." As a form of "mass self-soothing" the game offered therapeutic benefits to players well before the pandemic began (ibid). These benefits only become more attractive in times of crisis.

Aside from *Pokémon GO*, the overall video game market has grown significantly since the pandemic took hold (Knowles 2020). As Alanna Okun (2020) points out, this is not necessarily surprising; "In a time that makes truly no sense, the surge in gaming does. Of course we want escapism. Of course we want to be soothed. Of course we want to feel like the right combination of buttons and strategies will result in victory." Going beyond a simple notion of 'escaping' the real, this form of entertainment is providing an anchor of stability.

> Playing video games has taken on a new and quiet urgency for me in this indoor time, the same way brushing my teeth or going outside to take a walk has — something I used to take for granted as part of the fabric of my day but that now feels somewhat integral to my sanity, my rhythm, my continued grip on reality. (Okun 2020)

Just as nostalgia taps into "the slower rhythms of our dreams" (Boym 2001 xv) gaming worlds offer players an alternative tempo, a way of stepping outside the present. In a time of uncertainty, they can also provide a semblance of routine, productivity, and purpose (Rousseau 2020). The experience "has evolved far beyond just an entertaining pastime," explains games analyst Mat Piscatella, "people are using video games right now to find connection, to feel part of communities, and to find comfort" (cited in Desatoff 2020).

The online community surrounding *Pokémon GO* has played a significant role in its success during the pandemic. As Lincoln Geraghty (2020) points out, during times of stress "popular culture becomes the glue with which people join together." When they cannot meet physically, players continue to gather on platforms such as Reddit, YouTube, and Twitter:

> Thanks to the global pandemic social media has become an increasingly important platform for sharing tips and exchanging stories about playing the game differently: inside and without the usual social grouping. Popular Pokémon Go YouTubers who have helped to promote the

game through their channels since launch have become de facto community leaders around whom players can gather and maintain social contact. (Geraghty 2020)

Media fandoms have a long history of cohering as supportive communities whose members help one another in a wide range of ways, including navigating trauma (Obst et al., 2002). In his canonical work on media fandom, *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins argued that the participatory culture that is inherent to media fandom is not just a force of creativity and remix, but is also a force which binds a "a new culture and a new community" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 46). While not all platforms used by fans necessarily create communities (Bury, 2016), fan communities have often formed around shared artistic and media appreciation, with many fandoms across both physical spaces and digital platforms becoming core means of support and community for their members (Pearson, 2010).

As Geraghty (2020) notes, for *Pokémon GO* players, community is often evident in the modelling provided by leaders in the fandom. When Nicholas Oyzon, who runs the *Pokémon GO*-focused YouTube channel Trainer Tips (which has almost a million subscribers) posted his relief that Niantic had postponed a face to face *Pokémon GO* community day, his video quickly shifted gear to talk about his own experiences and concerns about COVID-19, and to remind the community of players to exercise caution during the pandemic, with the video also pointing to resources to support the mental health of players (Oyzon, 2020). Popular Australian YouTuber ZoëTwoDots (cited in Maher 2020) sees the game as providing an essential source of community and comfort during a traumatic time:

> I think especially for younger players, who may not have the full context of why their world is changing so drastically right now, the game is a great distraction from that anxiety […] They can watch YouTube videos and see others are playing at home, too […] They can join Twitch streams and talk directly with us and other community members to help reduce that feeling of isolation. And when being in the same home day after day can get monotonous, I hope *Pokémon Go* and the *Pokémon Go* community are able to provide a positive, fun, creative, and safe outlet for them.

While this is but one example, various fan communities offering advice and support during the pandemic is of considerable importance to members of those communities. When fan experiences are mirrored by changes in the object of their fandom, in this case *Pokémon GO*, then the sense of importance and community is likely amplified. Thus, Niantic's shifts to allow players to meaningfully continue playing *Pokémon GO* through various changes in the game itself not only show the company trying to keep their revenue stream alive during the pandemic (although this should not be forgotten) but also, vitally, show a level of care and responsiveness to players that would undoubtably reinforce their sense of the *Pokémon GO* community as one where their personal safety, wellbeing and mental health clearly matters.

Conclusion

As Hjorth and Richardson (2017, 5) argue, locative media games such as *Pokemon Go* "are manifestly ambient as they become embedded in our daily routines, pedestrian movement, and interaction with familiar strangers populating our neighbourhoods and urban spaces." When the Coronavirus pandemic interrupted those rhythms of ambient gameplay, the affective value of games and gaming during lockdown was called into question. Yet, as we have shown, the importance of such games and

their associated communities has not receded but increased since the virus began to spread. The nostalgic function of *Pokémon GO* has made it particularly valuable to players dealing with ongoing anxiety, stress, and physical isolation. Boym notes that "Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals" (2001 xiv). During a period of global disruption, the value of both nostalgia and digital games is brought into stark relief. By reacting quickly and incorporating immediate public health concerns into gameplay, Niantic has demonstrated the flexibility of mobile games as popular texts. Enmeshed in a network of social media, online communities, and enthusiastic fans, *Pokémon GO* is not 'just' a game but an evolving mode of experiencing and constructing the world. Where it once focused on layering the present with childhood nostalgia, the game now provides a portal through which to remember and revisit neighbourhoods lost to the pandemic. The dreamlike time-shifting facilitated by these nostalgic gameplay experiences offers a space of reassurance currently unavailable in other areas of life. It has been argued that "We turn to games when real life fails us - not merely in touristic fashion but closer to the case of emigrants, fleeing a home that has no place for them" (Guan 2017). The nostalgic game, however, promises a form of homecoming that aims to satiate our deepest needs for comfort, stability, and a genial welcome.

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