Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: Gotta catch them all? Augmented reality gaming apps

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Gotta catch them all? Augmented reality gaming apps

This past summer marked the release of a record breaking mobile app, an app that had more downloads during its first week of release on the Apple App store than any other app before it (Vanian, 2016). With 7.2 million downloads in its first week, Pokémon Go became an overnight sensation (Mac, 2016) and has continued to grow since the initial release. News about this app was hard to avoid during the summer months, especially in the United States where it was reported that one in ten American was using Pokémon Go (Mac, 2016). The download numbers have continued to grow to an impressive 500 million as of September 2016 and the app continues to increase its worldwide audience and is currently available in 100 countries (Skipper, 2016). What is this app that has captured such large international audiences? Why has it become so popular? And most importantly, what does it have to do with libraries?

Pokémon Go [1] is an augmented reality game that combines the popularity of the Pokémon franchise with technology that imbeds the virtual into the physical. While it is not the first mobile game to employ augmented reality, it is the first to gain massive popularity at such a fast pace. It is unique in that it combines technology and social interaction and exists in both a virtual and physical world. The game play and technology alone would not be enough for this app to gain such a large audience, but, combining an augmented reality game with the popularity and nostalgia of Pokémon along with a community element provided the perfect pairing for success. Robbins points out that it is “rare that a game can be described as a true phenomenon, one that fundamentally changes the way we socialize and use technology” (Robbins, 2016).
The basic premise of the game Pokémon Go is for a player to collect virtual characters that virtually appear in real-world locations. The virtual characters to be caught are called Pokémon, or "pocket monsters". The Pokémon franchise began in 1996 in Japan [2] with a video game where the object was to find, train and fight with these gathered fictional species. Players were encouraged with the tagline “Gotta catch them all”. The game expanded into trading cards, movies and a cartoon. With $45 billion in lifetime sales, (Mac, 2016) Pokémon products have retained relevancy, especially among its Millennial fan base whose early childhood was dominated by the need to catch all of these little monsters in a variety of formats. Pokémon Go presented Pokémon fans with the opportunity to find and capturing their favorite Pokémon in real life locations and situations and the response was impressive. The appeal of the game however has not been limited to those already familiar with the Pokémon franchise. While it can be assumed it was the Pokémon fans who created the initial spark, their enthusiasm brought attention to the game and inspired others to see what everyone was talking about. Pokémon Go does not track user data but a survey conducted by SurveyMonkey Intelligence reported that 46% of the users were ages 18-29, 22% were ages 13-17 and 25% of 20-30 year made up the playing populations (Mac, 2016b).

While game participants wander around in real life looking for virtual Pokémon on an interface layered over Google Maps, they must also gather items from Poké Stops to help them on their Pokémon journey; Poké Balls (the ball shaped vessels used to capture the monsters), potions to heal the monsters after they battle each other in a Pokémon Gyms, and other useful items. Based on the original narrative of capturing, training and fighting Pokémon, Pokémon Go provides players with the experience of being Pokémon trainers in the sense that they must train, or power-up their Pokémon with items or activities. Once a player reaches level five, they must
choose one of three teams (Red- Valor, Blue- Mystic, Yellow-Instinct) and then they can begin to battle in the Poké Gyms. The Poké Stops and Pokémon Gyms are actual physical places that appear on the virtual maps and players must walk close enough to them in order to activate them. These Poké Stops and Pokémon Gyms helped solidify a relationship between libraries and the game.

Pokémon Go was developed by Niantic Labs, a gaming division of Google, founded by John Hanke who had previously launched Google Earth. When Google restructured and did not have a home for this division it allowed Hanke to seek outside investors which opened the door for a partnership with Nintendo for Pokémon Go. Google still retains a 30% ownership of Niantic (Mac, 2016). A previous project of Niantic is an augmented reality game called Ingress, released in 2013 (Mac, 2016). Ingress is a story-driven, augmented reality scavenger hunt that requires players to walk around in the real world and engage with virtual portals in a competition between two teams. A 2015 article on the game reports downloads of over 8 million and over 3 million portals worldwide (Beltzung, 2015). Ingress remains a popular location based game. A feature of Ingress, while no longer available, was the ability to submit suggestions for creation of portals. The criteria for a portal included a location with a cool story, a cool piece of art, a hidden gem, a hyper-local spot, public places of worship and public libraries [3]. Pokémon Go’s Poké Stops and Pokémon Gyms are these Ingress portals (Frank, 2016).

Thanks to the Ingress criteria for a portal, many public libraries found themselves to be important elements of Pokémon Go, as Poké Stops and Poké Gyms. Librarians, especially youth and teen librarians were quick to embrace the library’s physical role in the game. Within a week of the release of Pokémon Go, librarians were already sharing their initiatives on a Facebook Page for Library Marketing and Outreach Instruction [4]. Shortly after the initial sharing of ideas
and information, an entire Facebook page dedicated to Pokémon Go in Libraries was created and now has almost 1000 members [5]. The hashtag, #Pokestop was agreed upon as a community of librarians playing and promoting Pokémon started and grew. The Pokémon Go in Libraries page provides the opportunity to share creative content such as signs used to advertise the library as a Poké Stop or crafts for special Pokémon events. Questions are posed and answered, news and updates on the app are posted and librarians share inspiring stories of successful Pokémon Go themed library programs. This community has helped librarians learn more about the game, share their experience playing the game and, most importantly discuss how to use the game to provide outreach and entice patrons. The fact that libraries are Pokéstops and Poké Gyms, combined with the summer release date meant that potential users were flocking to the library, and librarians quickly leveraged this into opportunities for engagement.

These examples of engagement have been documented in local news stories as well as on blogs and in professional journals. Spina (2016) provides information on what librarians need to know about Pokémon Go. The article includes suggestions on using the game to promote collections and events along with specific examples of how libraries in the United States were getting involved. Kohn (2016) provides an overview of Pokémon Go initiatives and events in Illinois libraries. These ranged from a white board for patrons to write what Pokémon they had seen or caught in the library to 3D printing of Pokémon. An item in the game called a lure turns a Poké Stop into a special stop that has more Pokémon around it by luring them to the area for a specific amount of time. Several libraries were setting these lures around the time of their events in order to draw Pokémon Go users into the area. A teen librarian who blogs on tumblr as galaxybookjacket provides a nice description of the game and detailed descriptions of how a library could use Pokémon Go in the library [6] and also conducted a webinar on the topic [7].
The Association for Library Service for Children has multiple blog entries on Pokémon, including a nice explanation as to why Pokémon Go and libraries are the “perfect partnership” [8].

The potential for creative leverage of the app’s popularity has even inspired a game of book hunting where members of a Facebook group hide a book and provide hints on how to find them “in the wild” (Ghoshal, 2016). In all of the news stories, blog posts, Facebook posts and information sharing about libraries and Pokémon, there is only one example of a library not appreciating their status as a Poké Stop. The Provo library in Utah requested that their four Poké Stop’s be removed due to noise levels, energy consumption and other reasons detailed in their blog post [9].

It seems this is the only major example of a negative reaction to Pokémon Go in the library community. However, there are many examples of the cons to a game that asks players to navigate to unknown areas while staring down at their phones. Within a week of the app’s release there were several reports of accidents, crime, and carelessness related to the playing of Pokémon Go (Carpenter, 2016). Pediatricians have even weighed in on the tangible risks or playing the game (Raj, 2016). The risk seems to be part of the appeal. Tait explains that “Pokémon Go isn’t successful just because it is psychologically appealing; nor do people play it only because they know it’s potentially dangerous. It’s a success because it is a unique combination of the two” (Tait, 2016).

Poké Stops in cemeteries and historical sites and memorials have led to disruption and inappropriate behavior by the players. These have been addressed by the removal of Poké Stops and the addition of safety reminders to the game’s interface. Despite the negative press, specifically in the first weeks of the release, the game has also been lauded for motivating people
to get up and out and walking around places they would not normally visit. The fact that the
game must be played in physical space presents opportunities for face-to-face meetings that
would not usually occur. This phenomenon is a win for libraries who can use the game to take
advantage of the potential for engagement with patrons and potential patrons.

Using games to entice patrons into a library is not a new phenomenon. Literature on the
topic ranges from historical overviews to descriptions of gaming program. Nicholson (2016)
points out that games were a part of library services since the nineteenth century through chess
clubs. His article that looks at the past 150 years of libraries using games, toys and puzzles
describes how libraries have developed circulating collections of toys and games throughout the
twentieth century. Nicholson describes how libraries continue to use games and other forms of
play to serve patrons, facilitate engagement and introduce patrons to library resources and
services. Well before Pokémon Go and the ubiquity of mobile apps Nicholson (2008) looked at
the state of gaming in school libraries and found active and successful initiatives. Powell (2013)
highlights programs at a south Florida library which encouraged play through a video game and
a strategy game and encourages librarians to embrace different types of games.

By embracing Pokémon Go, libraries and librarians are continuing the discussion and
exploration of games and gaming and libraries. The popularity of the app exposes the technology
of augmented reality to a large audience and begins the discussion in the library community of
what comes after Pokemon Go. Goerner presents Pokémon Go as just the beginning of the
potential for augmented reality in libraries and education. He points out augmented reality “can
immerse users into the experience in a way that makes learning more meaningful” (Goerner,
2016). Pokémon Go is an excellent example of looking at this potential to make learning fun as
it “has already shown how emerging tech creates opportunities to connect with and educate users in unexpected ways” (Spina, 2016, p.13).

There are already signs that Pokémon Go's popularity has waned. Students returned to school in September and the sun started setting sooner, giving less time for exploring, collecting and fighting. Niantic has been providing incentives and bonuses to increase play and new Pokémon are expected to arrive soon, but that is no guarantee that the game will enjoy it’s previous popularity. It can be certain though that there will be a gaming app that captures the public’s attention and librarians should be ready to create and collaborate around it just as they did with Pokémon Go. Robbins predicts that “full realized mobile gaming that works with location services and augmented reality will soon become the norm, and games will become more of a catalyst for socialization even as they offer fewer tools for interacting directly with other players in the virtual space of the game itself”. Libraries are perfectly posed to provide the spaces for that direct interaction as evidenced by the programs and activities embracing Pokémon Go. The experience with Pokémon Go has been a valuable lesson in the importance of being adaptable and flexible and aware of the mobile gaming trends that may provide potential for patron engagement.
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