

The digital “lure”: Small businesses and *Pokémon GO*

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Abstract

Most of the discussion about *Pokémon GO* has focused on the end-user and the playful nature of the game. Experts have mentioned the game’s commercialism, but they have done so mostly by talking about the data collection practices of the app developers. This commentary piece takes a different approach by examining how businesses have used *Pokémon GO*’s “lures” to attract foot traffic. The main goal of the article is to show how the ludic, digital wayfaring of location-based games can be used by individual places to attract players. While the focus is on business owners, I will also address how game mechanics could also be used to encourage prosocial behaviors such as voting (in noncompulsory voting countries).

Keywords

advertising, locative media, mobile gaming, *Pokémon*, smartphones

When *Pokémon GO* burst onto the scene in the summer of 2016, streets were filled with people walking around and looking at their phones. Rather than examine the ludic consequences of the popularization of *Pokémon GO*, this commentary goes in a different direction: a discussion of how the hybridity of augmented-reality gaming has specific affordances that can be commercially appealing to small businesses. Particularly, I will focus on how what Adriana de Souza e Silva (2006) calls “hybrid spaces”—spaces in which the digital and physical merge through locative media—provide opportunities for businesses to use the digital, location-based objects of *Pokémon GO* to sell physical goods.

Much of the discussion about the commercialization of *Pokémon GO* has been fairly typical, focusing on the massive amount of data the application collects about users

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(Hafner, 2016). None of these criticisms are new; many location-based applications have been criticized for commodifying location information (Frith, 2015), and data have almost always been currency for social media sites (van Dijck, 2013). As a *Wall Street Journal* article in 2010 showed (Thurm & Kane, 2010), advertising delivered with location information can be worth three times as much to app developers as non-location-based advertising. What is more unique about *Pokémon GO*, however, is how small businesses can strategically use the application to “lure” customers.

The link between small businesses and location-based mobile media is not new. Many locations feature stickers telling people to “check-in on Foursquare!” or “review us on Yelp/TripAdvisor.” Humphreys and Wilken (2015) conducted an illuminating study on how small businesses took advantage of the location-based social network Foursquare to attract customers. In essence, many small businesses have recognized the importance of raising their visibility in hybrid spaces, and research has shown that increased visibility on location-based services like Yelp significantly drives foot traffic (Luca, 2011). Research has also shown that mobile gaming influences where people choose to go (Licoppe & Inada, 2006), which also has significant commercial potential. For example, Foursquare awarded mayorships and badges, and qualitative work with Foursquare users showed people chose to frequent locations based on gameplay (Frith, 2013).

Pokémon GO, while sharing similarities with earlier games, has introduced new gameplay elements that influence behavior in public spaces. But the gameplay is determined by more than the game developers; individual places can work to influence the Pokémon “board” by increasing the number of Pokémon. Once the number of Pokémon increases, then potentially so does foot traffic from players, enacting a hybrid space in which experience of the physical world is shaped in part through digital information (de Souza e Silva, 2006). Once foot traffic increases, then so do sales. In this way, *Pokémon GO* shows augmented reality’s potential to influence brick-and-mortar commerce.

To illustrate this phenomenon, I want to draw from two examples of business owners I interviewed in Denton, Texas at the height of the *Pokémon GO* craze in summer 2016. One person owns a small business that employed someone who was an avid player of the location-based game *Ingress*. As many have recognized, *Pokémon GO* was basically built on top of *Ingress* (McFerran, 2016). Consequently, because of the employee’s *Ingress* experience, the small business location immediately became a Pokémon gym upon the game’s release. The foot traffic at the business increased immediately as players wandered in because of the gym. The business owner did not do anything specific to increase business, but he had the good luck of being a prime *Ingress* point before *Pokémon GO* ever came out.

Other small businesses, including another business owner I interviewed, acted more intentionally to take advantage of the augmented-reality gameplay dynamics of *Pokémon GO*. Two of the unique aspects of Pokémon’s gameplay are Pokéstops and the ability to purchase and set “lures.” Pokéstops are select places, often businesses or historical markers, at which players can go to collect items such as Pokéballs. Most importantly for my discussion, people at Pokéstops can also sometimes pay to set “lures” or collect lures and set them for 30-minute periods. During those periods, the Pokéstop spawns an increased number of Pokémon.

Lures and Pokéstops are a key part of *Pokémon GO*'s gameplay, but they also represent one of the most developed examples yet of the commercial potential of augmented reality. One of the business owners I interviewed paid to set lures at the height of the Pokémon craze; for a few dollars, he could attract people collecting Pokémon. If even a few of those people buy anything, the investment pays off exponentially (Chen, 2016). The business also advertised its Pokéstop status with murals painted on its windows. While businesses can pay to set lures, they could not pay to become Pokéstops. The location of Pokéstops was initially set by the developers. However, Niantic, the makers of *Pokémon GO*, was inundated by requests for new Pokéstops (often from businesses) and claimed to be developing “sponsored” locations to let businesses pay to attract customers (Evangelho, 2016).

The idea of businesses setting lures to attract customers may seem rather mundane; after all, businesses advertise in many ways, and location-based advertising goes back at least to the early 2000s (Kolmel & Alexakis, 2002). However, the lures in this instance are prime examples of the merging of the physical and digital in hybrid spaces (de Souza e Silva, 2006). People walk into physical stores in search of digital objects and affect material things. The pursuit of the digital can result in the increased sale of the physical, enacting a new form of commercialized hybridity. Of course, the point of the game is not *primarily* to get people to go to stores and consume physical goods (Niantic would likely prefer people consume digital goods through the game). But *Pokémon GO* shows how the strategic placement of a digital object (the lure) can impact the physical world, in this case through the increased foot traffic in commercial spaces.

In addition, the same elements discussed here in terms of small businesses can be used to encourage other behaviors. At the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, for example, the museum curators realized the museum grounds featured Pokéstops and began highlighting that fact to increase foot traffic to exhibits (DeBerry, 2016). Therefore, future uses could expand upon the nudging potential of augmented-reality gaming. What would it be like to set lures at voting locations on election days? At street corners during moments of social protest? At animal shelters on pet adoption days? What is clear is that *Pokémon GO* shows how digital gaming can encourage behaviors in the physical world. I focused on foot traffic at stores, but the same point could be applied more broadly to almost any social context.

Finally, I want to end this commentary by pointing out the irony of *Pokémon GO*. For much of the last decade, brick-and-mortar stores have competed with digital retailers. The digital has challenged the physical as the preferred point of sale when it comes to book stores, comic book shops, clothing retailers, and so on. *Pokémon GO* upends that relationship; it lets physical stores use the digital to attract people to the physical store. I expect that, even if *Pokémon GO* is a passing fad, we will see increasingly interesting ways brick-and-mortar sites use the affordances of hybrid spaces to attract people.

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Author biography

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