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shapes identity

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EXPLORING HOW PLAYING POKÉMON SHAPES IDENTITY

Danielle Herro, Juan Li, and Allyson Davis

Abstract: *This qualitative case study describes how playing Pokémon affected the lives of two adults who self-identify as life-long Pokémon players. Our research provides an understanding of how Pokémon influenced their self-concept and identity and offers insight into why they continue playing. Data collection included questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, follow-up questions and artifacts. Using a priori codes we identified four main themes: early support, socialization, media production and competition and then crystallized the themes to develop case narratives telling our participants' stories. The case demonstrates that while the players share many commonalities in their early gaming habits, they also had some marked differences in how Pokémon shaped their self-concept and identity in regards to socialization practices and different types of status within the game community, which impacts the reasons they continue to play. Results from this study extend prior research on the value of playing games towards shaping identity.*

Keywords: Pokémon gameplay, identity and games, case study, games and socialization

> *'This past summer, when the popularity of Pokémon Go was at its height, I happened to be in Charlotte for an anime convention when a Pokémon Go meet-up was scheduled to happen. It was one of the most amazing things I've ever been to. Literally hundreds of people filled the park, singing the Pokémon theme song, chanting their team names, and alerting other players whenever a rare Pokémon was in the area.'*
> *~ Ellen, President of the Pokémon Fan Club at a public university*

Introduction

The widely popular game Pokémon that was created in 1995 by Satoshi Tajiri, was originally developed as a video game for Game Boy and then extended to trading cards, television shows, movies, comic books and toys. The role-playing game (RPG) introduces fictional characters, called Pokémon, to be caught and trained by Pokémon Trainers (players) who battle one another. It ranks near the top of best-selling game franchises having released seven generations and 20 films. In 2016, Niantic developed and published a mobile augmented reality adventure game, Pokémon Go, for iOS and Android devices. In Pokémon Go, players interact in the real world with fewer NPC (non-playing characters). Instead of battling Pokémon to weaken them, gain experience, and level up, players evolve by simply catching more Pokémon by flicking a 'Pokeball' to receive 'Candy' related to their evolutionary chain. Both versions of the game have appealed to players of all ages and Pokémon crazes, like Pokémon Go, have existed since the game's infancy serving to extend the game play by creating a demand for vast assortments of collectables and media.

Horton (2012) referred to the cultural phenomenon as 'Pokémania', and then detailed four ways in which researchers approach studying pop culture around the game: 'as suites of representation, as behavioural or physiological stimuli, as props for consumer agency, or as indicators of broader and

social-historical trends' (p. 6). He called for more in-depth studies to better understand how it shapes identity. Other researchers have explored Pokémon from the lens of literacy and language acquisition (Alvermann, Xu, & Carpenter, 2003; Godwin-Jones, 2016; Vasquez, 2003), popular culture and spatial practices (Horton, 2012), augmented reality (Dorward, Mittermeier, Sandbrook, & Spooner, 2017) and agency (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003). Some scholars have proposed theoretical frameworks supporting the correlation of gaming and identity and socialization, and a number of studies discuss Pokémon's pedagogical implications. However, few empirical studies explore players' perspectives – particularly players' perceptions of how the game shapes them – in depth.

We position our case of two adults intensely engaged in Pokémon play for much of their lives in the existing literature exploring identity, socialization and production practices in Pokémon and similar games. We rely on our case to explore how and why our participants shape their identity and day-to-day practices through the game. In this way, we hope to add to the literature on identity and gameplay by extending current research to adults who persist in this type of gameplay from childhood.

Theoretical perspectives on identity

Because researchers have approached identity through a variety of perspectives, it is difficult to offer a single, straightforward definition. At a basic level, some psychologists believe 'self' to be a broad term that has little meaning without reflexive consciousness, 'self-concept' to involve your ideas about yourself based on your interactions with others, and 'identity' to be placed on you by others that describes *who you are*, but not necessarily *what kind of person you are* (Baumeister, 1999).

Rogers (1962) perspective on identity focused on individuals' quality of interpersonal relationships and personal growth. He argued that individuals' identities are more likely to develop positively if they are encountering warm, genuine, understanding and accepting attitudes from others. Erikson defined identity as 'a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity' (1968, p. 19). He described identity in terms of a series of individual choices resulting from interactions between sociocultural environments and individual development (as cited in Waterman, 1988). For Erikson, the sense of sameness and continuity was a continuous progression of individual growth in response to social actualities, rather than being persistently stable.

In contrast to the perspectives regarding how individuals form their identities, social identity theorists consider identity formation within wider social contexts. German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1955) made a distinction between two types of social groups: Gemeinschaft (translated as community) and Gesellschaft (translated as society). Community, exemplified by family or neighborhood, refers to a family-like mutual bond or togetherness, in which individual's intrinsic wills are self-fulfilling. Society, demonstrated by the city or the nation, is considered collectively as the social groups that serve as a means to realize individuals' instrumental goals or endpoints. Penuel and Wertsch (1995) integrated Erikson's work with Vygotsky's (1981) perspective when examining the role of mental function on identity, arguing that human development must be examined using a sociocultural perspective to understand identity formation. They pointed towards Vygotsky's (1981) view that human development is socio-culturally situated and is mediated by tools and signs, or languages. By examining the differences of developmental and sociocultural perspectives, Penuel and Wertsch suggested integrating the two processes into a mediated-action approach to understand identity formation, arguing that 'identity is about realizing and transforming one's purposes, using signs to accomplish meaningful action' (p. 91).

Another significant view of identity formation is that of symbolic interactionists (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), with perspectives that originate from sociology and emphasize the role of social interaction on identity. Goffman (1959) applied a dramaturgical approach, viewing human social interactions in terms of theater imageries to portray the psychology of individuals and the process of human social interaction. He argued that human interactions are dramatic performances shaped by their immediate environment and audience in order to present desired effects of the individual. Blumer (1969) proposed that human beings take actions based on meanings interpreted, and the interpretation of meaning always comes from social interaction. According to symbolic interactionists, identity refers to the various meanings attached to oneself by both the self and others (Stryker, 1980), also suggesting that a sense of identity is formed by cultural and social contexts. Many theorists support this view believing that self-concept is a part of a larger means to negotiate identities through social interactions and situations (Gecas, 1982).

Social identity theory posits that people have two sources of identity: their individual identity and their social identity, which is shaped by memberships in valued groups. (Tajfel, 1982). The theory describes three mental processes that individuals go through when forming an identity including categorizations (identify the group), social identification (adopt the identity), and social comparison (comparing the group to others to maintain self-esteem). These social groups share common characteristics, social experiences, and behaviors (Korostelina, 2007), and affiliation with social groups can lead to a heightened sense of self-esteem (Simsek, 2013) aided by friendships with other people or players (Kaye, 2014). The theory suggests that individuals' affiliations – or the social categories, that one belongs to define who they are, and this definition is based on the defining characteristics that a particular affiliation deems important.

With the rise of the information industry, one of the leading postmodernity theorists Zygmunt Bauman (2013) employed the term 'liquid modernity' to describe the constant mobility of the modern society. He argued that the nature of liquid modernity makes the construction of a stable and enduring self-identity impossible. Instead of achieving a persistent and deep meaning of self-identity, humans pursue diverse, momentary identities. His perspective of the movement of people, relationships, and information has been widely applied to current research on identity formation by popular media and consumer culture. This theory, in particular, might align to the roles and relationships formed in, and the information gleaned, from mobility-based games such as Pokémon Go.

As noted above, people may have a range of affiliations, but each person shapes their self-concept based on their commitment to the group. To that end, we position our work with the understanding that Pokémon affiliations may include members involved in Pokémon fandom or gamers that play Pokémon card or digital games or both; in all cases these participants are members of social groups that may shape their identity. In contrast to Erikson's early work wherein the social, cultural, and environmental are embedded in one's personality, or Roger's (1962) view of interpersonal relationships on the self, we take a less individualistic view of identity. In our research, our perspective is similar to social and symbolic interactionists (Gecas, 1982; Stryker, 1980), who view self-concept as a part of identity that is formed and supported in social contexts, or affiliations, that are continually evolving (Tajfel, 1982).

Identity and games

Identity theories have inspired a number of scholars in game studies (e.g. Gee, 2003; Malaby, 2009; Shaffer, 2006) to explore the process of game play as a cultural experience in which players endeavor to achieve both self-understanding and social recognition by engaging with game-based activities (Bassiouni & Hackley, 2016). For example, Gee (1999) described identity as multiple and situated 'ways of being,' corresponding to players' particular social situations. His later work argued that players form identities and take on roles in games, which allow them to hone skills and persist much like how roles and identities function in the real world (Gee, 2007).

In a recent book, Gee (2017) discusses affinity spaces as 'becoming the prime places where people engage in 21st century teaching, learning, doing and being' (p. 117). First, he distinguishes between activity-based and relational identities, saying that the former is freely chosen (i.e. being a gardener or a runner) and the latter is imposed (i.e. Latino, male or female, teen or elderly). Gee points out that relational identities are often conflicted and are sometimes conflated with ways to celebrate diversity in schools. To celebrate diversity, he believes we should celebrate identities people *actively* identify with. He further proposes that schools should nurture activity-based identities and suggests that educators have something to learn about how to organize learning around passions by drawing on students' interests. Gee provides a rich example of a young woman who plays The Sims and forms a strong identity around the game (in affinity spaces) mastering important skills   such as making custom characters, writing compelling narratives, accessing tutorials to hone skills, recruiting readers, responding to fans and connecting them to the community. Gee does not propose that games, per se, be brought into schools. Instead, he believes that schools could improve teaching and learning by drawing on the principles of game play.

To that end, researchers have explored how digital media production can promote interest-based learning and take on "meaningful creative roles, and connect to their social and cultural contexts" in urban afterschool and in-school contexts (Davis, Ambrose & Mania, 2017, p. 43). After interviewing 43 students and 6 teachers in 9 different urban settings affiliated with a public high school, the researchers found that the afterschool programs, (compared to in-school) offered students' greater opportunities for identity expression, because the in-school experiences were often constrained by limiting technology access and limited freedom to explore interests and express identities, which in turn limit students' sense of agency and learning (Davis et al., 2017). Most students in Davis et al.'s study who were using technology for media production believed they could not explore their interests or show their true identity through their creations. This in sharp contrast to most gameplay where players choose to participate because of their interest often producing media around the game that allows them to express themselves in different and ostensibly appealing ways.

Recent research (Bassiouni & Hackley, 2016) investigated how children's experiences as *consumers* of video games shape their sense of identity. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 22 children between 6-12 years old, parents and game company executives in the United Kingdom and found that video games mediate children's identity strategies in response to their peer groups and family members by providing a shared cultural and social space. They stressed that consumption of video games now serves as important currency to negotiate children's social activities with peers. This supported earlier research positing that video games promote children's social communication and identity experimentation (Hegarty, 2004). In games such as Pokémon or Pokémon Go, players are continually involved in shared cultural or social spaces when playing together, with friends and family, online or outdoors in community environments.

Juul (2010) argues that players' identities are highly affected by their attitudes towards gaming and whether they are willing to identify themselves as 'gamers.' Identity formation is also connected to the frequency of game play. With literature pointing to frequent gamers enjoying multiple genres (e.g. role-playing games, first-person shooters, massively multiplayer online games, board, card and puzzle games). This often results in players being exposed to a variety of roles within games, which in turn shape their identity (Ream, Elliot & Dunlap, 2013).

DeVane (2014) conducted a 3-year qualitative study on the experiences an 8-year-old boy in a game-based learning community, CivWorld, over a 6-month period to trace the trajectory of his participation and his identity formations. He found that as the boy moved from a peripheral participant to a more active participant, he not only became a game expert, but a recognized figure in the club as well. The author concluded that a 'nexus of identification,' which consists of social practice, cultural and historical conditions, and the social context of the club developed the boy's identification. Games like Pokémon and Pokémon Go encourage contexts where players move from peripheral participation to more active membership with recognized expertise in which identities can be developed. In the Pokémon card game battling wild Pokémon incentivizes players to become more active and increase their expertise. Likewise, Pokémon Go encourages expertise that is recognized by awarding game currencies and experience points.

Research supporting the benefits of Pokémon play

The benefits of playing Pokémon have been documented in a number of studies. For example, Vasquez (2003) identified 8 learning principles from observing his nephew's engagement with participating in Pokémon clubs and designing the cards by himself. These principles included: 1) Active, Critical Learning Principle; 2) Design Principle; 3) Semiotic Principle; 4) Committed Learning Principle and Practice Principle; 5) Situated Meaning Principle; 6) Intertextual Principle; 7) Intuitive Knowledge Principle and Affinity Group Principle; and 8) Insider Principle. He argued that popular culture texts such as Pokémon cards and games play a facilitative role in children's literacy learning in the new millennium. Similarly, Alvermann, Xu and Carpenter (2003) also noted the learning potential of Pokémon texts on children's everyday literacy. They observed collaborative work between a teacher and her students creating a unit by using Pokémon texts. Students demonstrated improved literacy and math skills in various classroom activities, such as creating game instructions and sorting out Pokémon cards. In addition to playing a facilitative role in cognition, Pokémon games might also benefit the conservation movement. Dorward et al., (2016) argued that working to find, capture, and collect virtual animals outdoors could encourage Pokémon Go players to authentically engage with nature, which in turn could enhance their awareness of conservation.

An analysis of Pokémon play (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003) used pedagogical theories such as social learning theory (Vygotsky, 1981) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to show how learning happens when participating in Pokémon activities. They detailed the interactive relationship between structure (consumers) and agency (producers) when analyzing reasons for the success of Pokémon, proposing that the extensive spaces in Pokémon enable more active participation and exploration than the passive consumption offered in other media products. They believed that this not only generates cognitive benefits, but also social and interpersonal skills, suggesting that Pokémon fosters scaffolding, apprenticeship and communities of practice.

Ito (2008) explained that the success of Pokémon is partly due to its appeal to both boys and girls through the coexistence of fierce fighting between the characters and the nurturing of the characters

between the fights Pokémon cuts across age groups, genders, and cultures, it provides players with various subjects and performance purposes using a variety of media as demonstrated by Willett (2004) who showcased multiple identities of Pokémon fans through an analysis of three stories written by children that involve Pokémon. Willett adopted Jenkin's (1992) ideas that fans are readers not only making meanings from the media texts, but also actively rewriting the stories and establishing their social relationships. The author saw the children who wrote Pokémon -based stories as consumers, interpreters, producers and good students. He analyzed how the roles were shaped by both classroom environment and Pokémon fan culture finding that the three children created different stories that corresponded to their personal experiences and expectations.

Similarly an ethnographic study (Tobin & Henward, 2011) examined production and consumption in children's media culture, and the results indicate that popular media like Pokémon generates creative re-mixes and production by young people. The authors proposed several definitional problems to rethink including structure and agency, education and learning, and childhood and youth. Like Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2004), they began replacing terms, such as 'consumer' with 'participant', 'media consumption' with 'production', and 'fans' with 'affinity groups', to describe the active participation and socialization in popular children's media. We draw on this research as we theorize the connections between agency and production during Pokémon game play, within Pokémon fan culture, and in forming identities within affinity groups.

Bainbridge (2014) analyzed 13 Pokémon films and suggested that unlike Hello Kitty, Pokémon characters are more than just commercial licenses; instead, the intertexts of Pokémon reflect several important social issues, such as the environmental protection dilemma in Japan. He described how Pokémon articulates debates between environmentalism, materialism, and biodiversity through its characters and encourages reflections on the relationship between people and nature. Similar to Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2004), Bainbridge proposes this 'multiplatform media franchise' could be labeled as a 'cultural practice' (p. 410) involving more active than passive consumption - in essence a social learning community. This work is aligned with social identity theory in which players form their identity based on the practices they adopt with others in the community and social comparisons they make between groups (Tajfel, 1982).

Another empirical study (Griffiths, Eastin, & Cicchirillo, 2016) concluded that learning opportunities and competitive events provided by video games could transcend players' reactions into fan behavior, helping form their personalities. The research offers an understanding of how children's identification with gaming characters influences their development. Likewise, Quinn (2016) discussed how new identities offered in Pokémon Go influence the dynamics of communities, suggesting that competition in video games generates team identity and affects individuals' attitudes and behaviors. In general, the research on how identities are generated during competitive game play within communities shaped our thoughts when analyzing our cases of Pokémon play detailed below, as they involve both fandom and competition.

Method

The purpose of this qualitative case study (Stake, 1995) is to understand how playing Pokémon affected the lives of two adults who self-identify as Pokémon players. We wanted to better understand players' beliefs about how Pokémon influenced their identity and why they continue to play. Yin

(2003) suggests case study design is appropriate when the focus on the research is to answer 'how' and 'why' questions, when you cannot manipulate the behavior of those in the study, and when you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the study. Stake (1995) reminds us that case studies emphasize interpretation, allowing us to maximize what we can learn. Additionally, in-depth exploration of the participants in the case allows us to provide a detailed examination and analysis of the phenomena under study. In these ways, case study is appropriate for our research, which asks 'how' and 'why' questions, privileges contextual conditions, emphasizes interpretation, and purposefully selects somewhat unique instances to discuss in detail.

Our overarching research question is, 'How has playing Pokémon influenced your self-concept and identity?' Within that question we wanted to better understand:
  (1) Why did you begin, and why do you continue to play Pokémon?
  (2) In what ways does playing Pokémon influence your socialization or social practices?
  (3) In what ways does playing Pokémon encourage your media production?

Participants

Two twenty-something adults Ellen (pseudonym) and Ryan (real name), self-described as being heavily involved with Pokémon gameplay, beginning in childhood and extending through adulthood, volunteered to participate in the study. They were recruited because of their visible interest in the game and because they were the only long-term players identified from an initial survey we conducted with a larger group of Pokémon players. They were somewhat unusual in their game play habits as they focused almost solely on *one* particular game, Pokémon, from early childhood through early adulthood (Ream, Elliot & Dunlap, 2013). Ellen was the president of a Pokémon Fan Club at large, public university in the southeastern United States, and Ryan has an international presence within the card game community. Because of his status as a professional Pokémon player, also known as a 'Pokémon Master,' Ryan agreed his identity would be difficult to conceal and was comfortable with allowing his real name to be used.

Data sources

Data collection included questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, follow-up questions, email exchanges, and analysis of participant-created artifacts (digital media, sketches etc.). All data sources assisted in developing the narrative of our case and telling our participants' stories. Below, we briefly describe each.

Questionnaires. Each participant completed a digital questionnaire consisting of demographic information, experiences playing Pokémon, other video and card game playing habits, perceived importance of playing Pokémon, social practices around the game, related media production, and future plans.

Semi-structured interviews. Participants met with two members of the research team for in-depth interviews that were audiotaped and transcribed. Interviews asked pointed and open-ended questions, were conversational in nature, and lasted approximately one hour.

Follow-up questions. After the questionnaires and interviews, an initial round of analysis determined further questions to clarify statements. Additional questions were formulated, sent digitally and completed by participants.

Email exchanges. Throughout the study, researchers communicated with participants asking broad and clarifying questions and eliciting artifacts.

Artifacts. Participants were asked questions regarding their media production habits involving Pokémon or other games, and were then asked to share related artifacts related to game play. Artifacts were used as secondary data sources and assisted in creating the narrative of the case.

We analyzed the data with a particular focus on understanding how and why our participants engage with Pokémon play. We began with open coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of their perceived gaming practices that influenced their identity. Using descriptive indicators of early support, socialization, media production, and competition from a priori codes aligned to our research questions (see Table 1) we then used axial coding to help crystallize the themes and develop case narratives telling our participants' stories. To ensure reliability, our research team arrived at consensus regarding our coding schemes and analysis, and the case narratives were sent to our participants for member checks.

Findings: The case

Ellen
At the time of our interviews Ellen was a college senior majoring in marketing, with a minor in Japanese. She mentioned that watching Pokémon movies inspired her minor in Japanese and she perceives herself as an amateur producer of anime and fanfiction. Her parents are doctors and she has a sister who is eleven years older; she described her upbringing as 'normal' mentioning that she played a host of video and card games growing up including Sonic the Hedgehog (Naka, Ohshima, & Yasuhara, 1991), Kirby (Sakurai & Iwata, 1992) and Mario Bros. (Miyamoto & Yokoi, 1983). She typically played games within the same genre as Pokémon, enjoying role-playing and strategy games. She owned a Nintendo 64, Gameboy, GameCube and a PS2. Her life-long love of Pokémon was apparent as she discussed first playing with her father as a way to keep her occupied, and eventually owning 19 of the 26 games in the main series and playing a large number of the spin-off titles across genres. She acknowledged:

> *I probably got into it because of the cartoon, but it quickly became 'my thing' and I had tons of plush toys. The strategy aspect, which essentially boils down to a more complicated version of rock-paper-scissors, is enjoyable to me because it has some depth without being overly complicated.*

Ellen plays persistently despite describing the game as 'insultingly easy, with a boring story and horribly obnoxious characters. She played more than 10 hours a week as a child - at times even with her grandfather, and she now plays at least three hours weekly. She commented, 'basically, if a game had Pokémon in it, I needed to play it.' She reflected on an early memory of how others perceived her when she transferred to a new school in second grade and classmates made her Pokémon goodbye cards, noting they were well aware of her obsession with the game. Ellen also discussed how the collection and collectable aspect of Pokémon is important to her, mentioning she caught all but three or four of the 800+ monsters.

Socialization. Ellen describes herself as somewhat shy, with just a few good friends. Pokémon, however, influences both her status and socialization as evidenced by her regular involvement gaming with others, cosplay, online presence to share Pokémon-related fanfiction, and status as President of the university's fan club. After a local shop closed where she played the card game version, she went to

other nearby towns for their Pokémon events. She belongs to several Facebook groups that actively trade Pokémon cards. Ellen personally maintains a Pokémon Facebook page, with this posted commitment: 'We strive at all times and in all things to adhere to the Spirit of Pokémon by encouraging inclusivity, friendly competition, good sportsmanship, fun, fairness, honesty, respect, and learning.' She frequently updates it with game-related events for the community. Oftentimes she travels three hours or more to attend anime andgaming meetups or conventions. She became a huge fan and avid player of Pokémon Go when it was released. Yet, she does not view herself as a competitive saying that she found the online competitive community somewhat toxic.

Media production. Ellen believed that Pokémon introduced her to the larger worlds of video games, anime, and Japanese culture, which all became an important part of her life. She associates her love for drawing with early Pokémon play; in 5th grade she drew her own Pokémon monsters and has since created several hundred (see Figure 1). She draws far less today, but continues to enjoy it 'whenever inspiration strikes.' Over the years Ellen attended anime/video game conventions wearing costumes she made based on characters from different series, mostly from Pokémon (see Figure 2). She is currently working on a cosplay of her favorite human character from Pokémon. She also writes and shares fanfiction online, and recently she began writing a multi-chapter Pokémon fiction involving an undereducated workforce where government incentives are offered to encourage youth to obtain higher education before journeying.
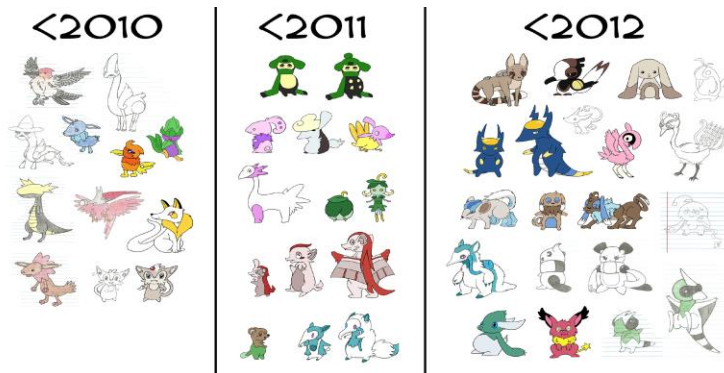

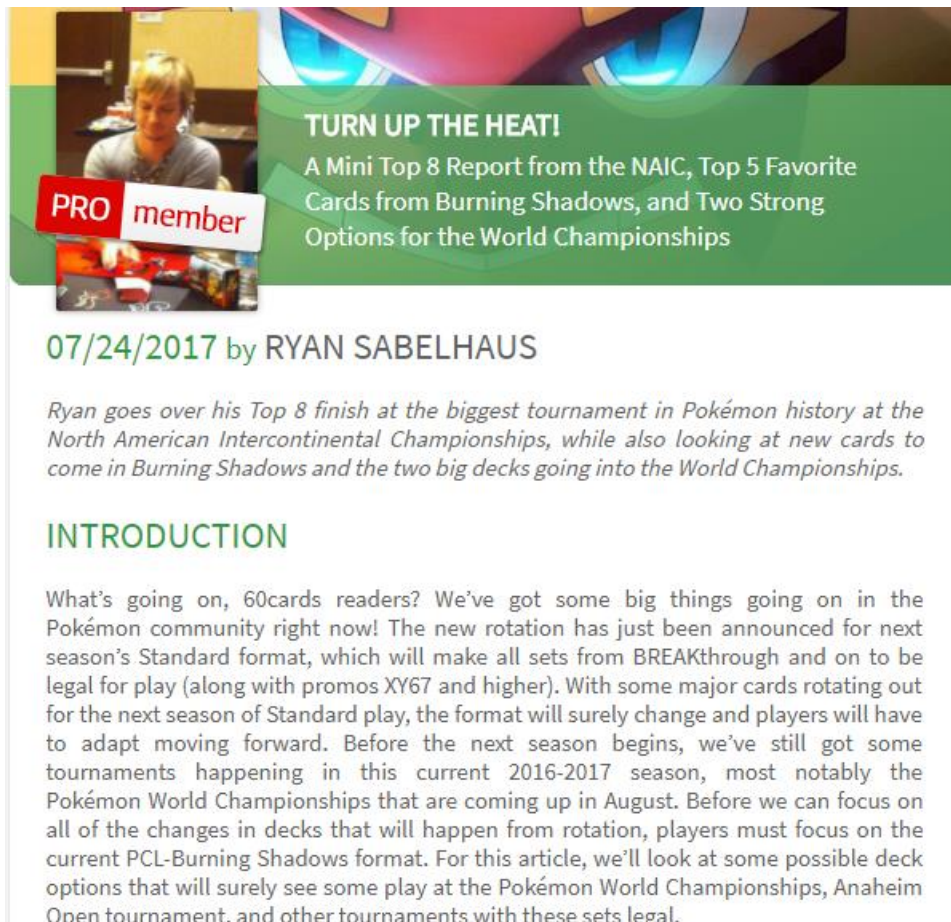Figure 1: Screenshot of Ellen's character sketches.

Figure 2: One of Ellen's handmade cosplay costumes

Ryan

Ryan works as a child support negotiator with the Department of Social Services. In college he double-majored in Psychology and Pre-Med at the University of South Carolina. Both his parents are teachers and he has one slightly older brother, Kyle. When Ryan was five years old, his parents introduced the boys to Pokémon. He commented,

> *They wanted to keep up the theme of intellectually-based [sic] games, so they decided to take us to a store at the mall and we played our first tournament there. My dad made the decks. We had no clue what we were doing. We just started playing and got first and second in that tournament.*

After winning, they began playing hours each day and attending tournaments. He continued to play Pokémon and other strategy games, but admitted he was seldom interested in playing any other online games with the exception of Hearthstone (Hearthstone, 2014), which he recently began playing. At 17, Ryan won $5,000 at a regional championship where 300 people played in the 'Masters' age division; this marked a turning point in his life. He began receiving attention within the Pokémon card-playing community. The win prompted him to start writing strategy articles and playing competitively. Ryan's daily Pokémon practice increased as he become more competitive as a professional Pokémon player, and his winnings ultimately paid for his college tuition. At the time of our interview he was sponsored by Alter Reality Games and CCG Castle and was writing for 60cards.net (see Figure 3 & 4).

Figure 3: Screenshot of Ryan's post on 60cards.net

DECKS FROM MEXICO CITY REGIONALS

Ryan takes a look at his performance in Mexico City Regionals with his Vespiquen/Zoroark deck, along with some analysis of 3 other top contenders at Mexico City (Zoroark/Drampa, Garbodor/Espeon, and Gallade/Octillery).

19. 06. 2017 by RYAN SABELHAUS

INTRODUCTION

How's everybody doing today? In the little bit of time since my last article, there have been some pretty exciting Regional Championships and the metagame is starting to form leading up to the North American InterContinental's. Decks have become top contenders and have solidified their dominance with some strong finishes, which mainly can be attributed to the rise of Zoroark BREAK/Drampa-GX. Daniel Altavilla has been dominating Regional Championships with the same 60-card list and has showed the true power of this new archetype in the game. Other decks have just started to come out and prove themselves, such as Metagross-GX and Vikavolt/Tapu Bulu-GX. Both of these options have had very strong showings in the past two Regional Championships that occurred in Wisconsin and Mexico City. Some strong choices in the Standard format have also started to decrease in play, such as the card with the biggest target on its head… Garbodor GUR. Garbodor is still a very strong card and has proved itself immensely in the last few tournaments, but the destruction that happened at Seattle Regionals with nearly 75% of the top 32 decks being Garbodor-based has come to an end. Now tournaments are starting to show normal amounts of Garbodor decks performing well, which could be due to players learning how to build decks that aren't truly reliant on Item cards.

Figure 4: Screenshot of Ryan's post on 60cards.net

Socialization. Through high school Ryan played Pokémon for at least 12 hours weekly suggesting that he would play whenever his friends were willing. He described it as a game that gave him some status within his friendship group and eventually internationally, as he excelled at it. Ryan also credits Pokémon for making him more social, saying 'I used to be very bad at talking to people and would get flustered easily', and 'it (referring to Pokémon) helped me form my social interactions and to even become better at embarrassing myself.' Attending Pokémon tournaments honed his ability to converse easily and make friends and he clearly views the tournaments as friendly and accepting. He said players have hours to talk and get to know each other while attempting to advance in the tournament; through these interactions Ryan learned how to make friends quickly and is now a self-described extrovert who plays with friends all over the United States that he met through Pokémon. He communicates frequently with them through Xbox or social media and even plans yearly visits to Michigan to see a close friend he made while playing Pokémon. He also mentioned friends in Florida, Virginia, and Britain that he made through his gameplay. At one point in our interview, Ryan stated, 'It seems weird to say, but I think almost every single friendship that I have right now is based off of Pokémon.' He also cites playing Pokémon as bringing his family closer together saying that they traveled together numerous times, learned the game together and bonded for years while playing. He admitted that he is 'emotionally invested in seeing my brother and I do well at tournaments.'

Competition. Ryan credits playing Pokémon for increasing his competitive drive, citing this as both positive and negative. He talked about how he initially attended tournaments for fun, but once he began winning he became increasingly competitive, thriving on winning. He articulated how his competitive nature continues to drive his intense gameplay practice and need to succeed, and he believes the competitiveness that developed while playing Pokémon carried over academically helping him get straight A's in high school. He also maintained a high college GPA and received two degrees. He pointed to how preparing for a competition taught him the value of practice, and equated this to what he needed to do when studying in high school and college. While it has affected his academics positively, he doesn't like to lose games and claims he can become 'way too heated,' at times yelling at others who he believes are not working with him to successfully compete. Competing as a professional Pokémon player has also afforded Ryan many opportunities to travel: he has competed in large tournaments in California, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Washington DC, and Texas, and internationally in Canada, Mexico, and Australia. He said, 'Traveling to these exotic places with my friends and family has certainly made me a more thankful person. I don't take many things for granted and constantly feel happy to live such a privileged life.'

Although he credits his competitive nature developed through Pokémon play to his academic success and ability to persist with a double-major, Ryan does not see how Pokémon has shaped his current career as a social worker other than to motivate him to find something more fulfilling. With the exception of his blog and writing for 60cards.net, he does not attribute the game to influencing his media production. That said, he was quick to point out that blogging about the game has made him a much better writer.

Discussion

Similar to other invested game players, Ryan and Ellen spend a significant amount of time playing for enjoyment or to hone their skills (Gee, 2007). Both began playing with family and friends and saw these groups as primary supports to continue playing. As noted by other researchers, the extensive spaces around Pokémon (e.g. fandoms, meet-ups, online groups, competitions) enabled active, social participation for Ellen and Ryan in communities of practice where scaffolding and apprenticeship either support their creations or improve their skills (Bainbridge, 2014; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2004). Yet, as evidenced by the case descriptions, Ellen and Ryan are not typical of most Pokémon players. While they both play a few other games, Pokémon is the through-line that directs their gaming habits; their persistence and sustained play of *one* particular game or genre from early childhood through early adulthood is unusual (Ream, Elliot & Dunlap, 2013).

Ellen and Ryan share a number of commonalities with one another but also have some marked differences in regards to how Pokémon shaped their self-concept and identity. For both, their identity as a Pokémon player was, and continues to be, shaped by the cultural and social practices encouraged by the game, but in different ways. Their affiliation with social groups around the game began in early childhood but impacted Ellen and Ryan differently throughout their teen and young adult years. The sense of agency and attitude they developed towards the game, which to some degree formed their self-concept, corresponded to their own social situations (Gee, 1999). In fact, they both described the game in a manner that aligned with their own situation and identity. Ellen suggested it was a more complex version of 'rock-paper-scissors' and enjoyed the collectible aspect and storylines around the game as well as creating costumes and attending anime conventions – she enjoyed being a fan. She

did not, however, enjoy the competitive nature she saw in the online community. Ryan saw Pokémon as a competitive strategy game and enjoyed the fandom that the game brought him. He viewed the online community as supportive and family-like. These findings are similar to research that theorizes games can foster multiple identities (Willett, 2004) as players rewrite stories and establish social relationships (Jenkins, 1992) shaped by both their environments and fan culture.

Deconstructing the case from the lens of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982) further illuminates the mental processes Ellen and Ryan initially used to form their identity as Pokémon players. The processes began similarly, with them identifying, or categorizing the actual card game and ensuing play with family and friends as their game play 'group'. Both Ellen and Ryan received early support from their families through exposure, financial support, logistical support, and encouragement to participate in game play. Ellen remembers being exposed to Pokémon at a very young age and recalled how her family financially supported her collection of the trading cards. While Ellen purports that she typically played the card game by herself, she does mention playing with her grandfather, indicating there was extended familial support for her game play. In Ryan's case, the importance of early support is very clear. His father physically took both Ryan and his brother to a local tournament for their first gameplay experience and supplied the decks of cards for them. Ryan's family provided financial support through the purchase of numerous card decks, as well as logistical support (e.g. transportation and tournament fees). His parents also encouraged game play as an intellectual pursuit. This encouragement began when Ryan was five years old and continued into adulthood. In fact, recently, Ryan's parents have become Pokémon Go enthusiasts; Ryan reported that they played Pokémon Go every day since the release of the mobile game.

By their teen years Ellen and Ryan began adopting identities around the game that looked very different from each other, and these identities were strengthened based on their comparisons to other groups (Tajfel, 1982). Ellen and Ryan appeared to further develop their identity within two types of social groups comprising their community and society. In turn, their intrinsic (community) and instrumental (society) affiliations assisted them in forming identities with different goals (Tönnies, 1955). For example, they both enjoy a digital presence, but in different ways. Ellen, who often adopts a pseudonym, is comfortable with her covert identity in writing and media production spaces, she often adopts a pseudonym. In contrast, Ryan thrives on his open identity, and his livelihood depends on it.

For Ellen, her adopted identity around the game was that of producer and fan. The communities around the game that supported the collection of fan objects, and the sharing of artwork and fanfiction fostered a sense of belongingness as the communities provided feedback, socialized with her on some level, or enjoyed her creative work. Her identity as a leader was evidenced by the membership numbers in the Pokémon Fan club, the events she hosted on campus and the organization of club trips to both nearby and distant gaming events. For Ryan, participation with the Pokémon community fed his competitive drive and fostered a sense of self-worth that he equated with an ability to support himself through education, travel and maintaining long-distance friendships. His adopted identity around the game was that of expert and champion (indeed, his community bestowed on him the title of Pokémon Master). He saw himself as a leader who could masterfully win gaming tournaments and provide a large community with advice on strategy when discussing his technique online to his fanbase.

In regards to socialization, Pokémon game play and involvement in the community around the game again served to bolster Ellen and Ryan's identity formation and sense of self in different, individually satisfying ways. Ellen was content to have just a few friends and was comfortable with her status as a

fan club president, event organizer, and online artist or writer. Her participation in large conventions or gatherings where she wore her self-designed costumes or took the role of spectator versus competitor aligned with her discomfort for competition (she referred to it as 'toxic') and admitted shyness. The game did not make her an extrovert, but it did provide socialization she was fulfilled by. On the contrary, Ryan believed that Pokémon made him more social, increasingly comfortable with self-deprecating humor, and more relaxed in large groups. The status he received from winning game tournaments, and in some respects larger 'purses' of money increased his sense of self-worth and his belief he could succeed in life. He began seeing himself as more social and as possessing expertise that others valued in the larger gaming community. For both players, the affinity groups they began affiliating with lead to a heightened sense of self-esteem (Simsek, 2013) and were bolstered by his increased friendships with other players (Kaye, 2014), but again in dissimilar ways.

Both players remained primarily interested in playing a single game from childhood well into their adult lives, and we note that the motivation from their teen gaming habits have not significantly changed. Ellen is motivated far more by playing and participating in media production around the game and sees the game as a creative outlet and a source of stress relief or escape from daily activities. Competition continues to drive Ryan to play well into adulthood, continuing to fulfill him while, admittedly, causing some stress. Recently, he won a regional championship and traveled to Australia to compete.

Conclusion

We conclude by discussing some important implications for educators that our research suggests, and then acknowledge limitations to this work and next steps for researchers.

Appropriation of cultural practices: recognizing student interests
First, schools might recognize and nurture skills honed in affinity spaces that draw on students' interests to increase engagement and learning (Gee, 2017). A first step in affecting change would be to change how tools and spaces are appropriated by drawing on research from mobile learning, which suggests that structures, agency and practices should acknowledge cultural practices outside of school and shift curricular functions (Pachler, Bachmair, & Cook, 2009). In this case, educators might analyze how games and their related affinity spaces promote meaning-making and learning and then connect them to curricula. This would allow students to feel that their everyday expertise is relevant, providing them with a sense of agency (Kress & Pachler, 2007).

For students to develop a sense of agency in school they must be allowed to explore their interests and show their authentic self, which means that school sites must work to remove barriers and understand students' personal interests – perhaps starting with students' interests and connecting them to problem solving with games and media production, versus tightly structured curricula or standards (Herro, Lin & Fowler, 2017; Davis, Ambrose & Mania, 2017). Educators might host discussions and survey students during school and afterschool programs. They might also game with them, and support making and production-centered activities (makerspaces in particular allow educators to see student interests). When possible, educators could integrate students' interests and creative work with everyday classroom practices and curricular goals. For example, based on their interests, student groups could create a game (there are numerous fee or inexpensive game-design websites and tools) aimed at detailing problems in an ecosystem and proposing solutions (e.g. the decline of the sea turtle population, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, or the impact of rapid development in cities) allowing

them to conduct research, write narratives, design characters, create artwork and promote the game online via video. This would entail changing both the structure of schooling to allow for more interest-driven, open-ended and collaborative problem solving, and rethinking resources to include gaming, making and production devices and spaces; it would also serve to bridge in-and-out of school youth practices (Ito et al., 2013).

Encourage personal development and extend 'familial support'

There is much to be gleaned from the impact of Pokémon play towards Ellen's ability to create media, write fanfiction and organize and lead events, and Ryan's leadership abilities to manage his fandom via social media, offer strategies for competition and respond to fans. Games such as Pokémon, brought into classrooms, may offer students opportunities to make meaning from texts, rewrite stories and establish social relationships (Willett, 2004). Similar to the implications above, educators might align the ever-present push from industry to hone both multiliteracies and strong leadership practices with game-based learning. In this manner, games and their associated affinity spaces can serve to promote learning while encouraging personal development and celebrating identities, which may increase self-esteem (Sismsek, 2013) and ultimately aid in leadership preparation for the future.

As noted above, Ellen and Ryan began their gameplay in elementary school. Both had familial and peer support to nurture their interests and passions and to assist them in fully developing an identity within a shared cultural and social space (Bassiouini & Hackley, 2016), which continues to serve them well. Many young people do not receive this same level of support and shared acknowledgement to foster their personal interests and academic pursuits, connecting home, peers and school (Ito, et al., 2013). Considering that activity-based identities can recognize and celebrate youths sense of 'true' identity, assisting them in feeling socially and culturally understood (Gee, 2017) schools might support similar measures to cultivate these identities. Educators could serve in similar roles to those provided by family members by offering increased opportunities whether in- or after-school, that are organized around their passions. This might include organizing social activities with peers, including games and media production in mentoring programs, or arranging logistics for students to attend events related to their interests (e.g. meet-ups, conferences, media festivals, comic-con or gaming events). This type of broad 'family support' may positively impact identify formation (Hegarty, 2004) motivate students to consider careers (Herro, Lin & Fowler, 2017) and help them to form a healthy self-esteem (Simsek, 2013).

Limitations and future research

We note several limitations of this research. First, the small sample size and participant pool limits the generalizability of the findings, although our intent was not to generalize but instead to provide a rich contextualized understanding of human experience (Stake, 1995). Both participants had familial support and were college educated which may have increased opportunities to explore their passions; this may not be the norm for all players. To a large extent the data relied on self-reporting and reflects what participants choose to share. Finally, we acknowledge the possibility of confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998) as interest in this study originated from our existing beliefs about game play and affinity groups, which may have influenced how we theorized our work.

This study lays the groundwork for future research exploring identity in games with more diverse populations of game players across genres. It raises the question, 'How can educators leverage positive identities formed in and around game-play to promote learning?' Future research may also seek to understand educators' perspectives of game play and production towards skill development, curricular

connections and career trajectories. In this way, researchers can better understand and help educators facilitate sustainable approaches leveraging game play, media production, and supportive communities in school.

Our work also extends prior research on the value of games and media to shape identity in impactful ways, answering the call for more in-depth research (Horton, 2012). By talking directly to participants heavily invested in Pokémon play we have a deeper understanding of how and why their experiences positively and profoundly shape identity and self concept, albeit differently, through increased socialization, closer family relationships, status within the game community, creative media production for Ellen, and in Ryan's case, financial opportunities. Furthermore, initial familial support to play Pokémon encouraged game play that persisted for decades, helping us understand the role and value of early family support in gameplay and the potential implications for educators. Finally, this case allow us to see how a game such as Pokémon can shape a player's sense of agency, and thus their lives, in ways that serve the player and the broader community.

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Table 1

Excerpt from data table with codes, sources and examples.

	Code/Data Source	Examples
Ellen	Early Support ~Questionnaire	My parents tell me when I was little I would watch Pokémon until they would turn the TV off, and then I would draw what I had seen. It got into it because of the cartoon, but it quickly became my thing. I had tons of plush toys and other things like that growing up. I played 10 hours a week or more growing up.
	Early Support ~Interview	I think I got introduced to the show when I was really young (2nd grade). My mom said I made her learn the name of every Pokémon on the show. I had a friend, a neighbor in Virginia who was really big on Pokémon,
	Socialization ~Interview	When the popularity of Pokémon Go was at its height, I happened to be in Charlotte for an anime convention when a Pokémon Go meet-up was scheduled to happen. It was one of the most amazing things I've ever been to. Literally hundreds of people filled the park, singing the Pokémon theme song, chanting their team names, and alerting other players whenever a rare Pokémon was in the area.
	Socialization	I think the most important thing to any friendship is sharing common values and interests. I firmly believe that online friendships and relationships can be

	~Follow-up questions	just as meaningful and important as those formed in the real world. (When discussing why she continues to play)
	Competition ~Questionnaire	I'm also quite competitive, but I don't do well in the competitive Pokémon scene because I only want to use Pokémon whose designs I like even if they aren't the strongest. I briefly tried to enter the online competitive community in the past, but I found it somewhat toxic.
	Media Production ~Interview	I write some fan-fiction. I got a decent-drawer filled with drawings of Pokémon that I tried to create. I have a whole folder on my computer; it has like 100 pictures of like, cool, fake Pokémon designs.
	Media Production ~ Artifacts	*images from Ellen's collection of drawings; samples of fanfiction
Ryan	Early Support ~Interview	The first time I actually started playing I was 5 years old and my brother was 6 or 7 or something like that and my dad wanted to get us out of the house. Went to our Wizards of the Coast store at the mall and we played our first tournament there. My dad made the decks.
	Early Support ~Interview	(On his brother Kyle) I think he's the only reason I actually kept playing. I played for a while and then I quit. He wanted me to get out of the house and start playing more so we started going to more tournaments.
	Early Support ~Questionnaire	My family is definitely closer because of Pokémon. We learned the game together and bonded for years while playing. We've traveled together numerous times because of it, along with becoming emotionally invested in seeing my brother and I do well at tournaments. My family wouldn't be nearly as close as they are without Pokémon.
	Socialization ~Interview	I'm a lot more social [sic] because of Pokémon.
	Socialization ~Interview	Because when you go to tournaments you're hanging out with a lot of people, you're getting to know a lot of people. You sit down across from somebody and play a best two out of three with them for an hour so you kind of get to know them pretty well. You get pretty good at making friends, so that's definitely a positive.
	Socialization ~Interview	Because I started playing the game, I started making friends with everyone and I started playing Pokémon with everybody and it kind of formed my social interactions with people and it helped me become a lot more friendly.
	Socialization ~Questionnaire	It's seems weird to say, but I think almost every single friendship that I have right now is based off of Pokémon.
	Socialization ~Questionnaire	I used to be very bad at talking to people and would get flustered easily. I'm much better now, thanks to the constant interaction with meeting new people that happens at Pokémon tournaments.
	Competition ~Interview	I used to go to all the tournaments just for fun. And I used to go with my friends and go with my brother and we would just play.
	Competition ~Interview	I think I was competitive because I started playing Pokémon and then it went into my school. Which is a good thing because it helped me do really good in school.
	Media Production ~Artifacts from 60cards.net	Ryan believed Pokémon shaped little of his media production, however he wrote for online forums. *images from his online forums and websites