Cities appropriate Pokémon GO: remix models for local needs

Benjamin Stokes
American University
4400 Massachusetts Ave NW,
Washington, DC 20016, USA
bstokes@american.edu

A new role for local government is emerging to appropriate and remix games for city streets. In contrast to earlier experiments by artists with pervasive and location-based play, the possibility for remix depends on mainstream prominence of a game first – such as the watershed rise of *Pokémon GO* (Niantic, Inc. 2016). This study investigates how several major cities in the United States created entirely new activities for players to embed the game in city-specific events, beginning in 2017. Some were large – with 30,000 players on a single day within a larger city event for 100,000 attendees that emphasizes bicycling and walking on streets closed to cars. Other events by cities were deliberately smaller in order to retain control over the focus on local history.

Increasingly, as more cities consider tapping into location-based games that have large audiences, research is needed to identify the range of possible tactics available to city leaders. This study investigates the contrasting tactics of two American cities to embed thousands of players in "open streets" events, including by creating custom activities and meta games – including path-based scavenger hunts, raffles, and fan-based participatory street art sessions. However, appropriation does not have unlimited power, and this study investigates the limits of what each city could do, especially given their diverging goals.

For this study, a series of interviews were conducted over a six-month period in 2017-2018 with city staff in both locations and with their collaborators within Niantic, Inc. (the company behind Pokémon GO). During the culminating event for each city, the research team conducted participant observation coupled with tracking of player discourse across message boards, local social media channels, and live chat on Discord servers. Transcripts were coded for both city tactics and outcomes for players and city goals (ranging from spending on the local economy, to elevating neighborhood history, to shifts in attitudes about visiting unfamiliar neighborhoods). For this paper, impact was traced on city goals using mixed methods, including in terms of revenue to local businesses, shifting the balance of residents to visitors, and bridging player communities with civic associations in the city.

This study particularly aligns with the DiGRA theme of the "emerging ludo mix." Media mix was itself pioneered in many ways by Pokémon (Ito 2008), but the location-based game of Pokémon GO complicates the ecosystem. Certainly the game extends the media mix to more sites of consumption, and sustains intertextual referencing across different systems of scarcity. However, the reliance on geo-coded landmarks for play brings the game squarely into a new set of negotiations for public space; historically the rights

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scarce physical locations was primarily managed and negotiated at the local level with the supervision of government and civic associations. How does this affect the ludo mix?

For cities, the story is only half new: games have long been used locally to bring neighborhoods together, from professional sports stadiums to the bowling leagues celebrated by sociologists quite outside game studies like Robert Putnam (2000). With mobile media, games can blend physical and digital experiences, with growing implications for place-making (Stokes, Baumann, and Bar 2018) and neighborhood engagement events. At first glance, elected city officials have little control over such games, since they are local in experience – but typically managed globally from company headquarters. The question of city agency and local governance only emerges with large-scale games; the findings of this study show how cities can assert agency (including through partnership) and have implications for the ambitions of cities to shape play in public spaces for a digital age, especially since cities are unlikely to design their own games at scale.

Goals of equity are also distinct and important to cities in ways that are rarely central to the global companies that typically drive the ludo mix. On its own, Pokémon GO raised serious questions of privilege and race in accessing and playing the game, and may have even aggravated inequality (Salen Tekinbaş 2017). This study shows some ways that city-level organizing can address those concerns. In one of the two cities, community leaders sought to add content to the game about marginalized neighborhoods on the north side, and local organizers leaders invested considerably to maximize inclusivity. At the same time, both cases are relatively top-down efforts driven by city officials, and critical reflection is necessary for how appropriation can still reinforce existing city power structures that prioritize some groups but not others.

This study identifies early tradeoffs in city tactics, especially in terms of sharing power to negotiate the content layer with the game company and with local residents. Borrowing from models of the appropriation of technology (Bar, Weber, and Pisani 2016), this study shows in a basic way that the framing of the remix may have as much influence on the satisfaction of city government as any choice for how to specifically position the game within city events. Similar to findings in research on community-based participatory design (DiSalvo, Clement, and Pipek 2013), the findings from this study take the form of design principles based not just on technology affordances (Evans et al. 2016) but on frames that align with community and organization-level tactics to empower the group.

Unlike laboratory games with narrow outcomes, games for cities are complex and have multiple intersecting outcomes at all times. Tracing that complexity requires a wide set of data as well as a broad interest in the multiple outcomes that interest cities in their public engagement activities. The results of this study show how different the outcomes can be for even two cities with a single game, and how the results vary depending on how cities select tactics to optimize for outcomes that are of local need and interest. The results advance our understanding of the value of commercial game platforms for city goals of cohesion and place-making in particular, and simultaneously improve our understanding of the emerging ludo mix of games in modern cities.

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