

# Metaplay: Play Practices, Communication, and Interaction in *Pokémon* from 1998-2020

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## INTRODUCTION

Digital gaming is not at a metaphorical crossroad; it is on a freeway being fed by multiple arteries, an amalgamated and multi-faceted activity fully absorbing multiple disciplines, approaches, and perspectives. Players are subtly cognizant playing a game is no longer simply about play, but an entire metaplay. Digital game play can include everything around it, traditional and social media, user-generated content, hacking, advertising and reviews, debates on design and artistic direction, how players should or should not interpret the game, interactions and opinions, the list goes on. Game scholarship demands a broader view for effective methodologies and comprehensive studies. I posit that the currently underutilized theoretical framework of metaplay is an effective means of understanding and analyzing contemporary digital game play, game cultures, and specific game play practices.

My doctoral dissertation, aptly titled for the theme of this conference, *Crossroads in Digital Gaming: Metaplay, Communication, Interaction* (Kempton 2023), directly addresses the crossroads of contemporary digital game play. The research is a qualitative study conducted in a predominantly suburban and rural region of Canada, anonymized as “the District” and focuses on adult players of the main series of *Pokémon* (Game Freak) games. Given its longevity and vastness as a franchise and game series, *Pokémon* provides an excellent case study of a game and players that evolve and change through time and space. The research highlights the crossroads-nature of play through the development and deployment of information communication technologies and accessible Internet in local contexts, improvements in gaming hardware, growth of knowledge and expertise, and the change in play cultures with the shift from local to online play.

Metaplay as I frame it in my dissertation takes a holistic approach that connects different components of play to paint a bigger picture. Actions and concepts that seem small and on a micro scale can be seen to be deeply connected to macro scale issues. Interactions between players and perspectives of games have the potential to reveal intricate understandings. Metaplay is communicative in nature, where meaning-making and interaction and understanding between players is a core component (Bateson 1956; Reifel & Yeatman 1993). In this research, I argue that it is further defined by three components, similar to Robert Fagen’s (1981) aggregate

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definition of play. These components are metagame/metagaming (Donaldson 2015), which focuses on deliberate forms of play, often seeking optimized practices and strategies. Paratexts (Consalvo 2007) involves any auxiliary media or aspect of a game or play of a game, including both user-generated and industry-made content. Capital (Bourdieu 1990), including Consalvo's (2007) gaming capital, focuses on players and the way they engage both one another and the games through capital they earn and wield. Taken together, these contribute to and shape the overall metaplay of a game, functioning in a reciprocal and cyclical manner, meaning to truly grasp one aspect of it requires understanding all of them.

This formulation of metaplay, while bringing and binding pieces of play together, presents a counter to previous attempts at describing this network of play, such as Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) and Boluk and LeMieux's (2017) definitions of "metagame" which loosely encompass "anything and everything in and around games." These definitions are ultimately too vague to be useful rather than being a comprehensive way to concretely examine the multilayered links between gaming phenomena. Donaldson's definition of metagaming builds more succinctly and follows player vernacular, rather than imposing an academic definition onto an existing game culture idea. The overall metaplay of a game is built by a complex network of connections, interactions, and engagements by game players, non-game players, and the industry, working in tandem with each other in reciprocal relationships. Non-game players are included not necessarily because they may become game players, but because they may also engage and share paratexts surrounding a game that is shared on traditional, new, and social medias, and that engagement can lead to discussions and issues of capital for those who do or do not play the game. Players who have the game, know the intricacies of the technicalities, or can play skillfully, among other various aspects (including total play time, speedrunning records, content-creator, etc), earn capital that can be used in order to influence both the creation of paratexts (webcomics of unusual or skillful plays, guides, art, memes, videos) and the metagame (optimal tactics and strategies, specific ways of playing, deliberate play). Paratexts often have significant contributions to the development of the metagame, as they demonstrate particular strategies or uncover technical information that is beneficial to a particular way of playing. They can also provide different interpretations of play or inspirations for particular and peculiar play practices, individual or culturally linked. However, most players are not creators, and players who help establish metagames provide inspiration for creators.

The research demonstrates the reciprocal nature of the components of metaplay within *Pokémon* to create a broader picture of what *Pokémon* play looks like and what it has meant to local players since 1998. Research participants describe their experiences and development of play practices and perceptions of the games over time, particularly with the advent of readily accessible Internet. Local play and locally development rules and metagame strategies were discarded for rules made by a global playerbase, where "thousands of contributions to a better idea" of play are made and "fair rules" (yet unofficially sanctioned by game developers and publishers) are devised. Folklore and playground myths about the games became instantly dispelled as players hacked and demystified the code. Players who create paratexts, guides, streams, and reveal the technical secrets of the game earn capital and authority, as that information is used by competitive players to create optimal builds and teams for tournaments.

The research also highlights digital divides and issues of accessibility. Digital literacy and the ability to engage with the online global playerbase is almost a necessity to fully get into *Pokémon* today. Rural players with unreliable Internet and young players who are limited by parents are less able fully embrace all what *Pokémon* has to offer, particularly as newer games integrate more online features. Participants identified particular aspects of the games that would be virtually impossible without online access or the ability to consult the broader *Pokémon* community for technical information and navigating that information. Without being specific, these examples are often applicable to other games and game cultures. Metaplay has the potential to provide insights into contemporary digital game play more generally and connect it to broader culture through our everyday engagement with communication technologies and play.

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