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Pokemon Odyssey: The role of journey in new technology game playing

Abstract

New Technologies have provided us with the opportunity to consider the role of the journey in fantasy contexts in ways that go beyond traditional notions of passage and journey. This paper, which is part of a larger study, draws on sociological, mythological and fantasy literature about the role journey plays in real contexts and fantasy worlds in order to make sense of the idea of a journey in game-playing situations. This investigation examines how one enthusiastic young player of the technology-based Pokemon fantasy game relates to the journey process and in particular the manner in which maps as artefacts are used to successfully complete the journey.

The word odyssey, derived from the Greek word *Oduesseia* (the story of Odysseus) has come to mean a suite of adventurous journeys during which the traveller encounters many changes in fortune. Such is the experience of young game players as they journey into the virtual world of Pokemon. The journey in both the literal and metaphorical sense has always been an integral component of human existence. The physical world as we know it would not exist without the great journeys of exploration and migration that have occurred over time. While not everyone aspires to travel in the literal sense all of us embark on our own internal journeys as we move through the different periods of our lives. The purposes of the journeys we undertake vary dramatically from person to person and place to place.

The Traveller Experiencing the Journey

The sociological literature provides a focus on the real world traveller, the mythological literature relates to character or hero figures within the written genre and fantasy literature explores the role of the relationships between real worlds and secondary worlds. Sociological theories explore the notion of journeys, particularly as it relates to tourism. One aspect of these theories which is of specific interest to this study is the process of and the motivation for the tourist moving into new environments. Cohen (1984), when considering the relationship between tourists and locals, focused on three dimensions: interactions, perceptions and attitudes. Each of these is based in a belief that the nature of modern life is not providing the fulfilment that people desire. These dimensions relate to the tourist as: 1) a passive onlooker,

seeing tourism as a form of escape; 2) one motivated and positive in their search for authenticity and sacredness as a form of compensation for the modern life they have to deal with (MacCannell, 1996); and 3) one who is engaged in a positive search a sacred meaning and centre not found in everyday life (Turner, 1995). Turner (1995) maintained that the journey enabled the traveller, on their return to their normal settings, to be more accepting of the structures and regulations under which they must live. He sees the journey process as having three main phases: 1) separation which releases travellers from their ordinary obligations and gives them the spatial and social freedom to exist in a space where they are not governed by their normal constraints; 2) liminality, the crossing of the threshold into the liminal zone where they are able to exist in a way not possible within their normal lives; and 3) reintegration where they return better able to accept the constraints of their normal lives.

The Reader as the Traveller

Within myth the journey is considered a powerful motif for the personal growth of the hero figure. In his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* Campbell (1988) suggested (in a similar vein to Turner) that there are three important aspects of the physical journey undertaken: 1) the departure where the hero crosses the threshold into the zone of *magnified power*; 2) the initiation during which he is forced to confront and survive a succession of trials; and 3) the return as master of the two worlds. This state provides the freedom to "pass back and forth across the world division" (p. 229). The consequence of surviving this difficult and complex journey is the embodiment of a new self that has the freedom to explore their real world in their own way.

This notion of journey is the basis of the classic story line common to fantasy literature. Aligned with this is the psychological journey the reader takes when feeding fantasy, which enables the exploration of social, political, personal and even spiritual issues. As Mass and Levine (2002) suggested "exploring this new world allows readers to reformulate their opinion on any number of things…the journey through this other world is often a vehicle for the exploration of questions that have a direct bearing on the real world" (pp. 19-20). There certainly appears to be a common thread across the sociological, mythological and fantasy aspects of literature—the

undertaking of a challenging journey into a new and unknown territory plays an important part in the growth of the protagonist be they a tourist, a character within a traditional form of written or film fantasy, and the reader or viewer of these fantasy narratives.

The Game Player within the Journey

Turkle (1995) has suggested that similar things happen when an individual is engaged in game players using new technologies. A person is launched out into their fantasy game worlds where "virtual spaces may provide the safety for us to expose what we are missing so that we can begin to accept ourselves as we are" (p.263) and emerge "like the anthropologist returning home from a foreign culture, … to a real world better equipped to understand artefacts" (p. 263). Interestingly, this body of literature indicates that fantasy is not necessarily about escapism but rather the growth and change for the participants. If this is indeed the case, then where exactly does the game player fit in relation to real world travellers, the characters that reside within fantasy contexts; and the readers and viewers of fantasy narratives?

The interactive nature of the game playing allows the participant to move in and out of the fantasy world. They are able to make connections between themselves in the "real world" and their persona within the game context. In developing these personas the players establish quite sophisticated links between worlds. The participants make meaning and establish scenarios that become both realistic and authentic. The authenticity of the journey is not solely created by a magnified power—it is embedded in the concrete artefacts that surround the Pokemon world. The artefacts include the television show, the playing cards and the cheat sites. As Sefton-Green (2004) argued, players learn to accept the rules and structures that actually break the spell of fantasy but often create explanations for events that make far more intuitive sense. It seems to be the case that players "derive these rules either from [their] understanding of social behaviour or from [their] explanation that characters in the game should behave in accordance with the genres in which they are embedded (Sefton-Green, 2004, p. 161).

The genres are established through the variety and richness of the Pokemon phenomenon. Cleverly, the artefacts are explicitly lined to the Gameboy experience.

Moreover, it could be argued that these artefacts become truly authentic when they "reflect a genuine thirst for learning of the kind that engages one's identity on a meaningful trajectory and affords some ownership of meaning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 270). Sfard (2002, p. 354) asserted that artefacts we use as discourse mediators are much more than "aids of thought"—they are though enablers and generators and are inseparable from the thought just like our physical actions are inseparable from our own body and the tools we use. The present study investigates the extent to which an individual uses maps to support his engagement within the game context and monitors the influence these maps have on the authenticity of the Pokemon journey.

Methodology: Examining the Journey

This investigation uses an 'instrumental case study' (Stake, 2000) which is a technique that can be used to advance the understanding of an external interest. In this study the participant was chosen because he was able to give the researchers access to the discursive practices of the Pokemon phenomenon and to illuminate their understandings about the numeracies and literacies needed for young players to successfully engage with Pokemon texts. In particular, the analysis allowed the researchers to monitor the interplay between the artefacts (the various maps utilised to solve problems) and the notion of the journey.

The Participant

The case study participant (aged 7) had been given a Gameboy (the hand held entertainment game) as a Christmas gift. Despite the fact that he had only been actively involved in most aspects of the Pokemon phenomenon for less than four months, Morgan already completed the game on two occasions. Although Morgan's access to the game was restricted to weekend activity he had been able to discuss the game and comment on the role supportive artefacts played in his understanding of the game in a relatively sophisticated manner. He demonstrated the capacity to access these additional texts and possessed a deep knowledge of the extent to which these texts related to each other. Morgan appeared to have invested emotionally in the Pokemon experience. Not only did he demonstrate a passion for playing the game, he valued the knowledge and skills he had developed as part of the experience. It was evident that Pokemon was having a significant impact on a range of Morgan's

literacies and numeracies. In fact, his mother had noticed that his reading had improved dramatically over this period of time. She reasoned that this began to occur when he read and thought about his literature-based texts in ways that allowed him to talk about the context (like he did while playing the game). Although he did not require validation beyond the motivation of the game itself he certainly enjoyed sharing his experiences with his younger sister and helping her when she required support.

The data were collected in naturalistic settings with the participant interviewed as he played the game. Audio-taped recordings were analysed with follow-up questions posed in order to clarify the student's ideas and thinking processes. The researchers did a search of the internet cheat sites and studied the hand books in order to gain insights into the various forms of text used by the participants to play the game.

Sense Making throughout the Journey

Morgan was encouraged to describe the way in which he made sense of the Pokemon phenomenon during a 45 minute interview in his bedroom. Importantly, he had his Gameboy and magazines with him as reference points. He used these artefacts regularly, reinforcing ideas and demonstrating difficult concepts through these multimodal "texts".

Moving into a new environment

Although Morgan did not necessarily relate the idea of *journey* to all of the decisions he made within the game context, it was clear that such ideas were implicit in his descriptions of the adventure and the strategies he employed to "catch" Pokemon.

Morgan	I'll show you my best Pokemon….. Garado…. Do you know Garado?
Interviewer	No you tell me where they come from.
Morgan	You get Garado, he's a water Pokemon. A big one. You get that in Shootport City. It's overseas. You need dive to get there. You need to dive down and there's like an opening underwater. So you go through there

Morgan commented that it was like going "on a trip" to find these Pokemon. He described the processes he employed to locate Pokemon through analogies that were both realistic and lifelike. The development of this authentic environment allowed

him to begin to bridge the gap between real and imaginary worlds from the outset of his adventure. As MacCannell (1976) hypothesised, Morgan was able to conduct a search in a manner not yet attainable in his everyday life.

The Adventure of the Journey

Morgan was certainly able to cross a threshold into an imaginary world that could not exist in his "normal" life. The fact that he described his sense making in the first person tends to suggest that he had created a life-like world that he belonged to. Morgan was able to place himself within these new environments and enjoyed being part of the adventure.

Morgan	I just go along the track. There's things like yellow tracks and I follow them. When I end up the tracks that have ends I keep on going. I have to go through grass, long grass and short grass and then I actually find my way to the city. I my first game I didn't use a book, I just worked my way through it.
Interviewer	So how did you know to find that in Dragon Falls? Does this book help you that?
Morgan	That's Mountain Falls. You go across there, and that's a water fall. You need to have waterfall after you have beaten all the gym leaders, you press A at the very bottom of the water fall and you go up the water fall and you go in this little opening then you keep on going down the ladders and you will end up where another one is. You go in there then you go across. You surf, go across there.

Through the adventure Morgan was able to seamlessly move in and out of his imaginary world. When detailing this world he was able to do so with such conviction. As Turkle (1995, p13) suggested, the game player says "I can turn pieces of my mind on and off."

Accessing and Using Maps

Morgan used a number of maps to gain access to important information in the Pokemon world. Like most travellers, he used these maps to locate information that was necessary to make the journey worthwhile. His capacity to reason visually and locate information in a relatively sophisticated manner was necessary in order to complete the journey.

Morgan	The Mountain Falls. That's that place. That's the closest city you can go to. Once you from Mauville City, that's where I am, you go up there to there, then you go across here and follow that thing, you end up in Mountain Falls. That's where the Magna Team are. You need to battle the leader two times.

Interviewer	Has it been a while since you have been there has it?
Morgan	Yep. And I've got short memory.
Interviewer	[Laugh]. I don't know about that, you have good memory
Interviewer	That's the full view, the whole map, and when you are playing you go through bits at a time do you?
Morgan	Yep. And this is Everyday City right over here. That's the whole thing. I need to go over there, that's the Pokemon Centre right over there. (*Morgan is referring to the Pokenav that shows the whole Houen area map and the individual cities that are colour coded to represent different buildings*)
Interviewer	How do you know that? How do you know what that means?
Morgan	Look down here *(Morgan pointing to the symbol key on the Pokenav)*

The Pokenav (see Figure 1) provides access to important information about the location of cities and pathways (Routes) that are recommended for travel from one city to another. Morgan accessed additional information about specific pathways from the Pokemon books. In these magazines Morgan encountered different graphical representations of cities—including maps with different scale, orientation and perspective.

Pokemon World: Houen
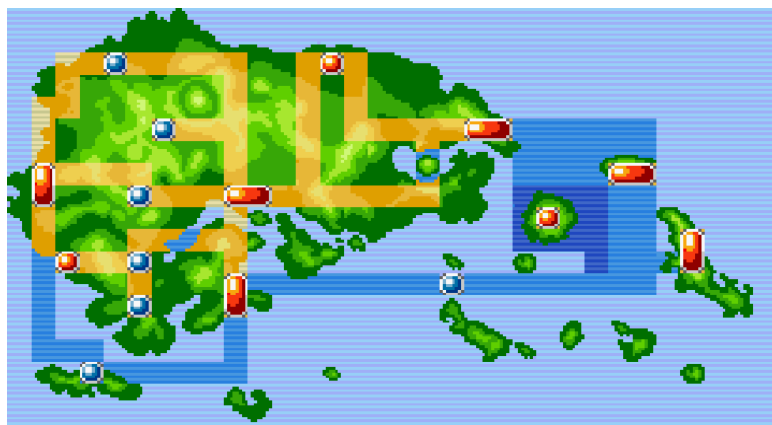### Sapphire/Ruby

Figure 1: A visual representation of the map illustrated in the Pokenav

The books became an important reference point for travel between cities.

Morgan	I use that (*referring to book*) for two reasons. I use that to find Pokemon, to tell me where Pokemon are and my HM and TM list which is right up the back (*Morgan refers to the list*)
Morgan	So I've got all the HM's that you get in different places

| Morgan | Like here, I know where Route 119 is, you get along there. You actually battle on your friend May for the third time. If you win she gives you fly, the HM move. Then you go up to the city and battle the gym leader, then you can use fly. |
| | [This is] Harbour City. That's the third town you will be in. Say I started at my home right down here, Littleroot City, then I have to work my way up there. Then I have to battle May, my friend the first time there, then come back down to there to the Professors house and he'll give me a Pokedex and then I will be able to go up to the city again and go across and battle the trainers and I will end up here. You get surf, um, I will just fly to it and show you how. |

Impressively, Morgan not only remembered the directional sequences when revisiting cities, he was able to explain why it was important to go back to these destinations. His conversations referenced the Gameboy, the books and the Pokedex within the Gameboy simultaneously. Moreover, Morgan was able to effortlessly move between several graphical representations when describing his movements with and "outside" the game context.

Authenticity with the Game

Many Pokemon artefacts and narratives are highly concerned with representation of learning and their subject is often the acquisition of knowledge (Sefton-Green, 2001, p. 168). Morgan was highly motivated by the Pokemon experience and had developed a real passion for learning. He was immersed in a world that gave him the freedom to make decisions and become responsible for his own learning. Turner (1995) maintained that travellers are provided with the spatial and social freedom to exist in a space where they are not governed by their normal constraints. The maps certainly provided flexibility and established a degree of authenticity that reinforced his personal decision making.

Morgan	(*looks up the Pokenav)* That's the whole world, the whole thing. There's different Pokemon in different places.
	Say if I was there and I got lost in here. I go to Pokenav and find where I am and then I know I've been to that place and know I haven't been to that place, so I just know which way to go then.
Morgan	I haven't been stuck yet. When I lose a battle I actually go back to the city you've been in front of the Pokemon Centre then you go back to the um, back to that city to where you were.

The authenticity offered by the maps allows the participant to move in and out of the fantasy world. Morgan was certainly able to make connections between the "real world" and his persona within the game context.

Morgan	Um, I normally battle the gym leader for her. Then, sometimes I can win and sometimes I lose. It depends on how strong her Pokemon are.
Interviewer	When you are playing the game, do you feel like you are in the game playing it? Or do you feel like you are outside the game?
Morgan	Outside the game. Yeah, but sometimes I wish that this was Pokemon world, but it doesn't come true.
Interviewer	So when you are playing it, it doesn't feel like you are in there playing it? You feel like you are out playing it in a different world
Morgan	Yeah. One of mum's students are out of a different world. They are in two worlds.
Interviewer	But you are playing the game in your real world.
Morgan	Yes, and I play myself but I am going around. I play myself in that world. I am like in this world but my person is in that world

The opportunities offered through the game context allowed Morgan to form an interactive and dynamic relationship between the game and the texts he was accessing. He developed internal narratives then became an integral component of the further external narratives that are developed when players engage with each other in talk beyond the game. Furthermore, it allowed him to become an 'insider' in the process of narrative construction, in ways which have previously been unavailable

Conclusion

The map is an integral artefact of any journey, but the degree with which travellers (real world or fantasy) engage with these is dependent on their individual needs at any point in time. There are the 'big picture' maps which provide an overview for the entire journey such as a world map, the map of Middle Earth that comes with Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, or the map of Houen in the Pokemon game. As well as these are the 'real area' maps. The more detailed maps in Pokemon allow the participant to become immersed in the game's surroundings. Morgan commented on diving into the water, passing through a waterfall or moving through long grass. These "inside space" maps magnify the game experience to an extent where Morgan felt part of the game.

Interestingly, Sefton-Green (2004) argued that the Pokemon game presents a series of detours and alternate goals that can readily be accomplished which consequently tend to mask the game being played against a clock (and consequently in a linear sequence). Since players can wander around the Poke-world and still collect creatures

and prizes, there is a sense of accomplishment even when strictly not on task (Sefton-Green, 2004, p. 161). In relation to the journey notion, Morgan was able to develop a sense of achievement even though he may have been lost.

For Morgan the journey became both challenging and enjoyable when he was able to decipher the geographic information that surrounded the Pokemon world. Through exploration and development Morgan used various maps to make sense of the unfamiliar pathways and destinations he encountered along his journeys. He quickly became familiar with a range of symbols and icons that were embedded in these maps and increasingly became aware of the maps within maps in this new world. Although young and relatively inexperienced in playing the game (having only played it on weekends for four months) he possessed an intimate knowledge of spatial arrangements that were essential in navigating through the game and developing a sense of purpose for the journey.

The sense of purpose is partitioned into a number of journeys. When he first began playing the game, Morgan often revisited cities and elected to stay on familiar paths. With growing confidence, his journeys took him to more unfamiliar territories and through foreign terrains. Flynn (2004, p. 58) maintained that "navigating is an act of speaking the language of the terrain, and through the improvised movements of the player spatial elements are transformed or abandoned". As Morgan ventured into these foreign places he had to become more adventurous and more regularly relied on the interpretation of these maps. His knowledge of the Poke-world became detailed and he was able to remember pathways and recall specific incidents with a fine attention to detail. Morgan was "forced" to explore further a field and make more problematic decisions on these new, strange, lands. He had developed the "travel bug".

Acknowledgements

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