

But Does Pikachu Love You? Reproductive Labor in Casual and Hardcore Games

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ABSTRACT

Since the first Pokémon game launched in Japan in 1996, the series has been a balancing act between casual and hardcore gaming. While the first iteration and “core” series has emphasized a modified, accessible version of traditional JRPG mechanics, other titles have frequently emphasized so-called casual play; most recently, Pokémon Go lured in a new set of players with mobile, locative Pokémon hunting. The 2018 release of a hybrid game, Let’s Go, Pikachu! and its sister release Let’s Go, Eevee!, has drawn renewed attention to the casual-hardcore dichotomy, meeting considerable resistance and criticism for its perceived casualization of the franchise. Through analyzing the discourse of the new game’s reception as demonstrated by a dataset of user reviews on Metacritic alongside published game reviews, the gendered nature of the casual-hardcore dichotomy in the Pokémon franchise becomes clear. Key themes coded from the reviewed data include grinding, difficulty, nostalgia, and “cuteness.” Placing this discourse alongside the game’s own internal representations of reproductive labor through Pokémon caretaking and the contested definition of “grinding” demonstrates a fundamental resistance from the so-called hardcore game community to what are viewed as feminized play mechanics. The revealed tension is particularly remarkable given the emotional, reproductive labor of training and loving Pokémon that is front-ended in the franchise’s overarching narrative and core values—a set of values that inherently conflicts with the “hardcore” gamer mentality of play.

CCS CONCEPTS

- Applied computing—Computer games

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1 INTRODUCTION

Pokémon Let’s Go is a hybrid of the traditional JRPG model associated with the “core” Pokémon series and the casual play mechanics of Pokémon Go—a mobile augmented reality game that made Pokémon visible thanks to its emphasis on locative play. While Let’s Go brings JRPG elements back to the series, many Pokémon fans still consider it a continuation of the departure from the core series started by Pokémon Go. Though the core Pokémon mechanics have been compared to a crafting system,[14] as they allow the player to build from an elaborate rock-paper-scissors approach to elemental attacks with customization of every Pokémon’s stats and qualities, it is more popularly conceptualized in terms of the more recognizable attack mechanics of JRPGs. Players are required to build a balanced party of Pokémon in the pursuit of victory against increasingly difficult trainers. The turn-based approach places an emphasis on thoughtful planning, although the imbalance in some iterations of the franchise has also allowed players to construct dominant parties to crush most challenges.

The combination of “traditional” role-playing game mechanics with those of a casual mobile game in Let’s Go has generated substantial backlash. One reviewer’s emphasis on the game’s attempt to bridge the divide between the two audiences gets at a key issue--whom the game is for--saying: “It’s a mix that appears awkward at first. With drastic changes to the established formula, the ‘Let’s Go’ titles risk alienating a hardcore fan base that grew up with the series. Meanwhile, the jump from simple touch-screen gameplay to a more complex form of battling can intimidate the mobile crowd.”[6] Another reviewer described this hybridity as a “portable, comfort-food quest,”

suggesting that the familiarity is comforting but also safe and not innovative.[31] Other reviewers are more immediately critical: “Those looking for a complex and competitive Pokémon experience should temper their expectations, or look elsewhere.”[28] These dramatically different expectations--from comfort food to Iron Chef--suggest a dichotomy of reception that cannot easily be resolved.

Ultimately, this paper argues that the particular kinds of backlash--what, specifically, people complain about--show social understandings of “proper” gaming, commonly referred to as “hardcore,” and, especially, social norms about who counts as “proper” gamers. The first theme that emerged in our analysis is a belief within the context of Pokémon that proper gamers are those who have liked the franchise for a long time, and that it should continue to cater to what they liked about it long ago. This is not unlike similar types of defensiveness viewed in outpourings of toxic games fandom, most notoriously GamerGate itself.[7] Moreover, we found interrelated themes that if those gamers don't like a game, it must be objectively bad, not a core series title, or casual. Like other such backlash moments, these players reject change out of proportion to its magnitude because they fear that the existence of products that do not serve them herald a shift such that no products will serve them. In the end, we argue that the response to Let's Go illuminates the ways that “good” and “bad” games are bound up in the kind of labor they require--hard and grinding labor is valorized and reproductive and care work are rejected.

2 BACKGROUND: THE DEPARTURE OF POKÉMON GO

The tensions around Let's Go build from earlier discontent with Pokémon Go, which brought many changes to the long-standing traditions of the Pokémon series. Though superficially the series has always been mobile-oriented, Go represented a turning point in the casualization and perceived demographic shifts of play, making this game's history a key context for understanding Let's Go. While the core series always emphasized handheld play--the series capitalized on the first generation of popular mobile game devices, Nintendo's Gameboy console series--Pokémon Go occupies a mobile phone instead of the gaming-centric handhelds the franchise has previously relied upon. This shift inherently demands new mechanics, as the elimination of the physical buttons of a gaming console requires different interactions. However, Pokémon Go takes this several steps further, centering one core mechanic from the original series--collection--and eliminating or minimizing most others.

In particular, the changes (and limitations) brought about by mobile was a source of rejection of Go. Mobile, this perspective contends, is an inherently illegitimate platform: “Honestly, even Pokémon fans hate Pokémon go, because it's a mobile ‘game’. If you enjoy playing video games, you don't give a flipping shit about mobiles.”[43] The responses also indicate that there's a set of acceptable mechanics, which these games fail to uphold: “They hate it because of limited/strange mechanics”; “Mobiles

are not meant for games besides the ones that should have extremely limited mechanics.” Anable notes that, while “the actual experience of labor in so-called casual games is absurdly easy,” as “the act of harvesting a crop or working an eight-hour shift on your feet is reduced to a series of clicks of the mouse or taps of the touchscreen,” the resistance to mobile gaming may be attributed to the fact that “what can seem like a discontinuity between the banal activity of tapping our digital device and the representation of increasingly difficult and endless work is actually a transformation of our relationship to the digital device on which we perform so much labor.”[2] Although the magic circle has justifiably gone out of fashion in game studies, anti-mobile sentiment does seem to reflect a similar belief that games should be wholly separate from life, using specialized (gaming laptop) or even dedicated (console, handheld) equipment, not the same phone used for work. However, the ability to completely wall off leisure from work is unevenly available, as we'll discuss later. While the shift in mechanics was a major complaint about Go, gradually, more recognizable mechanics from the original series have been introduced: first raids, or battles against more advanced Pokémon, and most recently trading and battling against other trainers. Despite these additions, Pokémon Go has fundamentally occupied the space of a casual game and as such been subject to derision and criticism.

However, Pokémon Go also maintains a lot from the core franchise. First, Pokémon has always been kid- and family-friendly. The first iteration of the series was a JRPG experience aimed at a multigenerational audience. The Gameboy that served as the Pokémon platform continued Nintendo's emphasis on family-friendly gaming and would become one of the definitive icons of the 90s. Similarly, Pokémon Go drew particular attention in news coverage for attracting players across demographics. Such attention shifts the discussion away from the original audience of 90s kids who are now adults. Pokémon's US audience was thereby shown to rest on something of a paradox: a Japanese, anime, children's program and associated series of introductory JRPGs have become a battleground for hardcore gamers to denounce “casualization” and demand an increase in difficulty to suit their needs as a player base. The disconnect of these gamers with the perceived child player's needs frequently goes hand-in-hand with an affirmation of hardcore fan status that relies upon having played every Pokémon release, presumably (though not always) starting in childhood. The response to Go therefore illuminates this existing tension.

Pokémon Go also extends earlier models of games as social. The public element of Go play is also a natural progression on the continuum of mobile games as public, but adds to the social levels enabled by previous Nintendo consoles by encouraging physical collision around sites of value, such as Gyms and Pokestops. Humphreys describes Pokémon Go's augmented play as presenting opportunities to serve simultaneously as an “involvement shield and social catalyst,”[21] suggesting that play of this kind functions both to enable socially challenged players to find community through play and to let them avoid contact. The original release of Pokémon Go attracted a lot of news

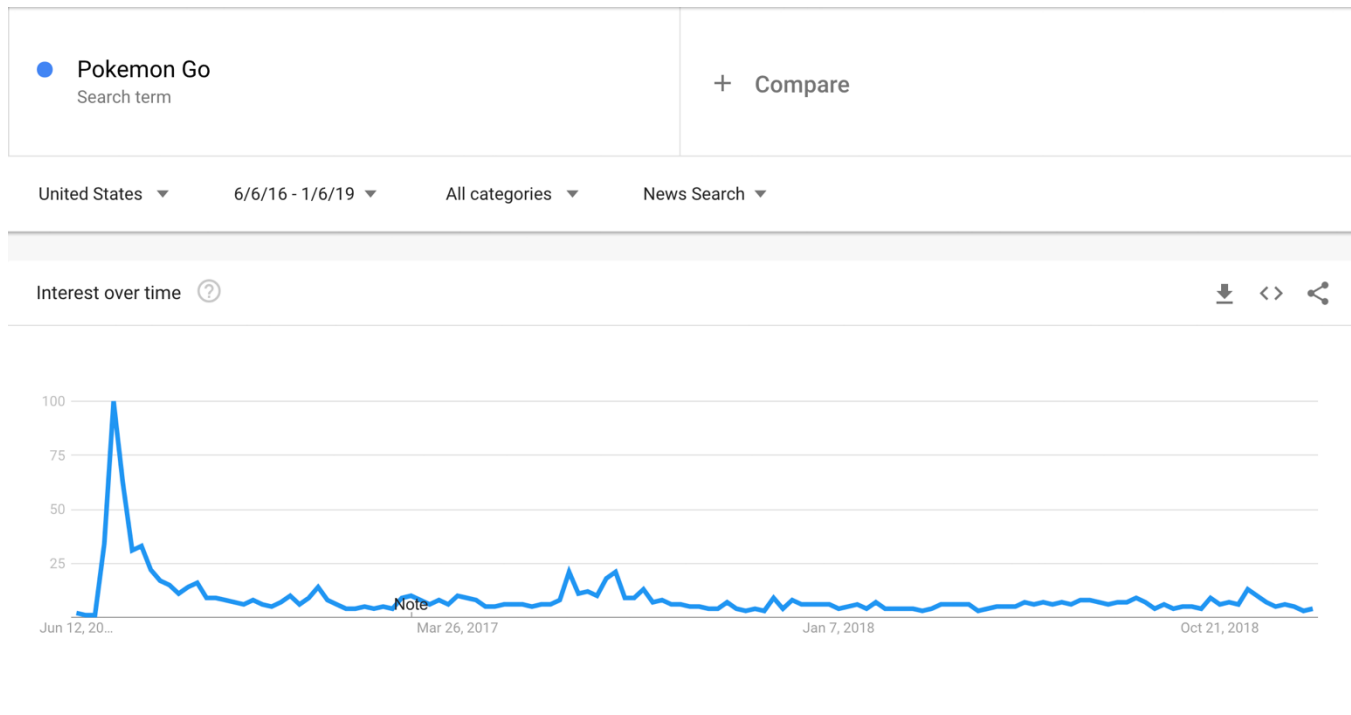


Figure 1: “Pokémon Go” Google News search from one month before its release to the present.

coverage (see Figure 1), especially because it took the world exploration and collection mechanisms out into physical space, encouraging players to hunt supplies and Pokémon throughout city centers and drawing attention to the spectacle of play.

Part of the criticism of Go rests on the fact that it is the first Pokémon-branded game to embrace some of the markers of freemium releases. It relies heavily on time-based mechanics to encourage players to seek additional resources: Pokestops can only be spun every 5 minutes, and in rural areas the availability of such stops is limited. While a patient player can draw resources from a single Pokestop through farming it repeatedly, those resources are randomly determined in the manner of lootboxes. This acts to leverage player impatience toward financial investment: “By building in deliberate periods of waiting into the gameplay and combining that with limited time offers, the developers seek to generate and exploit a ‘get-it-now’ attitude. Player impatience becomes a resource to be managed and ultimately monetized.”[11:578]

While previous core Pokémon games have included elements of grinding that require patience in the face of monotony, they have never offered a way to bypass tedium in exchange for cash, and this model, deeply associated with casual, is particularly offensive to hardcore gamers who want to view success in a game as representative of skill, as indicated by rejection of “p2w [pay to win] items.”[43] However, it’s not entirely new: the Pokémon card game franchise has long embraced similar elements. In many ways trading card packets, with their randomized assortment of cards guaranteeing an excess of

repeats in the search for valuable assets, are the original lootboxes. Thus the so-called “casual” elements of Pokémon Go are familiar, if not from the core series. The fiercely contested role of money versus skill crosses over from such spaces. Ultimately, the response to Go showed some of the contours of beliefs in the Pokémon fan population about the “right” way to build a game. It was this fracture in the fanbase that formed the environment for the response to Let’s Go.

3 FEAR OF CHANGE AND NEW AUDIENCES: SIMILAR BACKLASH CAMPAIGNS

Backlash over perceived change within a favored franchise or medium has become a common occurrence in recent years. The most notorious of these incidents, of course, is Gamergate, a campaign that sought to recenter the entire medium of gaming on its traditional audience of young, white heterosexual men, some of whom felt that expansion to other audiences and non-preferred genres disadvantaged them despite no decrease in games that catered to them.[7,27,32] GamerGate has become emblematic of identity discourse driving hatred and attacks against anyone perceived as threatening the status quo of a media property, escalating from an attack on a single game designer (Zoe Quinn) by an ex-boyfriend to incorporate widespread attacks on feminist designers, critics, YouTube stars, streamers, and gamers.[7] Women, particularly trans women and women of color, were singled out for harassment, and while GamerGate itself has ended, the legacy of the conflict continues

to shadow mainstream games discourse with questions of who is centered and catered to in franchise design decisions [32].

Some similar campaigns have been driven by nostalgia for the franchises of one's youth in particular. There was an extensive campaign of harassment and negative reviews following the launch of the trailer for the all-woman Ghostbusters reboot.[5,27] Similarly, there have been harassment campaigns against white women, men of color, and especially women of color for daring to play leads in Star Wars, perceived as rightfully helmed by white men;[17,44] complaints about Star Wars becoming too "SJW";[8] and even a petition to have The Last Jedi stricken from canon.[45]

Online outrage following the perceived reinvention of a geek-coded franchise for an apparent new audience reveals geek masculinity on the defense.[5] The release of a new Pokémon game might seem at first to be the wrong place for this type of defensive display: the series is visually coded in the style of casual gaming, associated with a children's cartoon program, and attached to the most casual of consoles, Nintendo's Switch. However, the deeply-embedded nostalgia in Pokémon gaming is just as (if not more) entrenched than the fandom of Star Wars or the original Ghostbusters movies, particularly as Pokémon has more persistent new releases and visible presence in players' lives through the continued excitement of more Pokémon to capture. In such ways, other fandoms can provide insight into Pokémon fans and their reaction to Let's Go.

Moreover, there is also a theme of adult men asserting themselves as central fans of children's media. The advent of a new generation of My Little Pony and its associated "bronies" is a case study in superficially progressive, deeply toxic fandom.[37] The ability of masculine-leaning fandom to grow around feminine-coded children's cartoons shows that the original or anticipated market for a franchise is not limiting; however, it can create conflicts when intense fandom communities arise who demand to be heard and in doing so influence the development of a product and the openness of its associated spaces to the intended market.

This is particularly troubling when it is a case of mostly white men throwing over a core audience (such as the original, mostly women-centered, fanbase of My Little Pony) in a way that decenters them and creates a hostile environment for them to continue participating in the space. In the case of Bronies, rather than appreciating the text in itself, they praise its "similarities to Japanese anime, Dungeons and Dragons, Doctor Who and Star Wars," thereby "legitimizing [. . .] My Little Pony by likening it to artifacts from traditionally masculine geek culture." [16:4.3] Like the grown Pokémon players who comfortably occupy a position as the perceived "original" fans of the franchise, bronies are frequently treated positively in public discourse, "affording them a type of nontraditional masculinity that is lacking in cultural capital but is also relatively harmless." [16:1.3] However, the consequence of this type of centering is to place the show's other fans at the margins, and thus the discourse of bronies "reinscribes a longstanding marginalization of feminized fan practices, privileging male fans and erasing from the discussion women and girls who are fans of

the show." [16:1.3] This sort of colonization of children's media would seem to be taking place with Pokémon as well.

4 METHODS

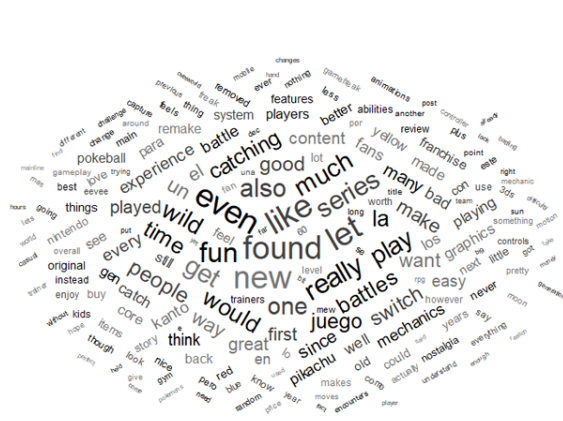
As of January 3, 2019, Let's Go, Pikachu had received 1303 user ratings and 80 professional reviews on Metacritic. The user feedback was substantially more negative than the professional reviews, with an average score of 6.1 out of 10, while the professional reviews provided a metacritic score of 79 out of 100. By contrast, a previous remake in the Pokémon core series, Pokémon Ultra Sun, received 84 from 59 critics and 9.0 from users.[46] The title is particularly valuable as a point of comparison because it could have been subjected to some similar critiques with regard to recycled content, offering an expanded version of a previously published game and storyline, yet it received more positive reviews from users than even critics. Metacritic's analysis of the professional reviews of Let's Go suggests a very different overall valence than the user reviews, with 62 reviews marked as positive and 18 marked as mixed. However, the content of the mixed reviews reflects similar concerns and themes as those that appear in the user reviews.

To investigate the response to Let's Go, we took a two-pronged approach. First, we played the game to gain a first-hand sense of how its mechanics and narrative had changed relative to earlier iterations of the franchise. Second, we collected both user and professional reviews from Metacritic. While all reviews were subject to the same analysis, we cite professional reviews directly, but protect the identity of users who may not have been fully aware of the public nature of their commentary. While direct quotations can be searched, not providing a direct identification of the user adds a layer of protection. All review spelling and grammar is reproduced as-is, with emendations in brackets as needed for clarity.

We then proceeded both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, we used data mining software Orange[9] for frequency counts to find both the most frequently used words (see Figure 2) in each conversation space and instances of theoretically-derived key terms related to labor, gender, and dissatisfaction with the experience of play, in order to gain a large-scale picture of the conversation. To also examine the data qualitatively, we used the concordance function to examine side by side all instances of the keywords found both through word frequencies and through the theoretical sampling; this allowed us to consider how these concepts appeared throughout the corpus of text.

5 FAN IDENTITY: AUTHORITY AND EXPLOITATION

Self-attributed fan identity plays an important role in the backlash to Let's Go. First, many use the term "fan" to ask others to take their negative reviews seriously. Across 69 instances of "fan," many use this tactic, as in: "as a lifelong fan, I'm sad." Another reviewer engages in gatekeeping, complaining that "people who never played pretend to be a fan," participating in the discourse of the "fake" fan as invading the space.[35] One



hours in so far Let's Go is a cute , fun and charming game that I'd love providing any legitimate praise other than "it's cute and pretty" or complaining about negative reviews. There the evidence before my eyes" because it's cute ", "because it's Kanto ", "because Pikachu meeting MC's Mom, was all very cute , but then it dwindled. After the first half This is the most feel good game ever, so cute , so adorable , so fun , such a great at work: it's relaxing , joyful , cute and I wish I could download this incredible soundtrack! it's so pleasant, so nice, so cute . This game is amazing, I'm in from Black & White 2 to this piece of ****? Cute Girls are literally the games only redeeming factor Collapse and Eevee is also lovely , with Pikachu sounding incredibly cute with his "Pika pika!" antics as we . I love the updated graphics, I enjoy the cute cut - scenes that involve eevee , and I enjoy comboing opponents in battles, or geeking out over how cute our Eevee is. Let's Go just makes a spin off, it's a fun and cute game. A good entry - point for new fans to the original game. The new graphics are very cute and adorable . I love the movement of my favorite buy the Eevee version, as I found the Eevee cute and got the female with the heart - shaped spot can watch the pokemon on the overworld and its so cute and beautiful . The world is so lively . I ? It will freeze your NS? The game is cute and decent designed, comfortable for new players , it count Eevee since she 's just so gosh damn cute ! Are these games dumbed down? Maybe for those say about this game is that it 's ' cute ' or 'comfy'. If you want cute and

Figure 2: Word cloud created from reviews of Pokémon Let's Go and examples of the term "cute" being used in reviews.

who calls the game "lazy, overhyped garbage" also claims "I have been a fan of the series since the very beginning." A few reviewers leverage their own fan identity to contest toxic fans leaving negative reviews: "I've been a huge Pokémon fan regardless of butt hurt fan boys who insist on creating toxic environments." Fan identity here is employed to establish authority--mostly to critique Let's Go, but sometimes to support it. There is, particularly, an idea that Let's Go mistreats existing Pokémon fans. A number of negative reviews were identified due to their use of the word "bad" (115 instances), such as: "This game is boring, lazy, it looks bad. I don't recommend to anyone." Another makes a direct comparison to casual mobile games: "They made a bad made phone game for Nintendo switch." Among this subset, several reviews suggest inattention to veteran players as a reason the game is bad: "They are ignoring the actual fans." Similarly, the subtitle of one professional review, "A Pokémon game for everyone, except Pokémon fans,"[38] draws attention to the very definition of a fan, and particularly the gatekeeping involved in drawing an exclusionary boundary around the perceived illegitimate other represented as "everyone."

One key issue in this argument about fan mistreatment is the leveraging of nostalgia. In 73 mentions of nostalgia, reviewers are divided on how they feel about the throwback elements of the game. Many clearly feel their nostalgia has been exploited: "This is just a cash grab using the Pokémon nostalgia"; "Such a lazy, shallow attempt to pander to nostalgia it should be illegal"; "nostalgia blinded normies are trying to protect the game"; "its only mission is to pander to nostalgia cravings and GO fans and it's honestly offensive." There is some legitimacy to this, in that a deliberate attempt to recapture the series' origin points is at the core of the game, which removes more recent additions to the Pokémon monster gallery in favor of the original set of friendly, adorable--and importantly, recognizable--characters. In a review that opens with by renaming the games "Pokémon Let's

Desecrate the Past Pikachu and Let's Make You Feel Old Eevee," one reviewer conveys a feeling of betrayal that these nostalgic elements induced: "At first, I thought Let's Go was a love letter to me. I've long begged for a return to Kanto before a Gen IV remake and have grown tired after a lifetime of random encounters. How, then, could I find myself bored by yet another trapeise through what must be my most well-worn game map, this time with a simplified encounter mechanic and simply stunning art?"[1] As a remake of the entry-points to the series, the game suggests it will be in line with the nostalgic memories and love of those original fans. However, the resulting experience of the changed game is not the nostalgia-gaming expected. In these ways, fan status both serves as a source of authority and, potentially, of exploitation.

6 THIS IS NOT MY POKÉMON: NOSTALGIA AS ENTITLEMENT IN ASSESSMENTS OF LET'S GO

However, fan nostalgia has a slippery relationship to entitlement. Approaches that could be paraphrased as "I am an original or longtime fan" or "This is not the game it seems to pretend it is" frequently tip over into something more like "This was for me before and it should be for me forever." In keeping with Nintendo's broader branding and the early transmedia instantiation in a cartoon, Pokémon has long been associated with children. This puts adult fans in an uneasy position; in addition to the longstanding stereotypes of fans in general as immature,[24-26] adult fans of children's media are especially suspect.[16] This is perhaps increased by developer GameFreak's decision to emphasize the new player, and particularly the new child player, in the game's marketing and interviews. Overt courting of this market effectively warned the adult hardcore gamer they were not central in the game's design.

Reviews show some acceptance of children as the assumed or targeted audience, though there is also concern trolling around the game's perceived lack of difficulty. Even professional reviewers suggest that the alleged easiness reflects poorly on Let's Go's presumed targeted players:

"The games are primarily for children, but children shouldn't have their hands held for them. A fair challenge can be a good thing, but as a child, there was no better feeling than finally defeating a difficult trainer with my specially selected team. Did I get temporarily stuck at some spots? Yes, but figuring out a puzzle or progressing past a difficult trainer felt infinitely more rewarding. It's a bit sad kids don't get the opportunity to overcome these obstacles without excessive hand-holding."^[36]

These critiques particularly spotlight the way the design allows for parental assistance: a co-op mode allows another player to join without scaling up the difficulty of opponents, for instance.

As with using fandom identity for authority, this argument centers the adult player and their (perhaps rose-colored) memory of both the game and their own childhood skill. But it also may be a way to re-center their adult gaming desires for more challenge, ventriloquized through child players. The theme of the game's easiness being associated with children leans toward a notion that "This should be for me forever even though I am an adult now." The responses to Let's Go Pikachu and Eevee are laden with these fears: "What if future Pokémon games aren't for me?" the hardcore player asks, and demands reassurance.

That this is an assessment centering their current desires (if sometimes filtered through remembered child selves or imagined contemporary children) may explain the particular form the response to Let's Go took. We find three themes:

1. "If I don't like it, it is objectively bad" (review bombing)
2. "If I don't like it, it's not a main series title"
3. "If I don't like it, it's casual."

To begin with review bombing, this is "the practice of leaving negative reviews on various websites en masse by groups attempting to harm the sales or popularity of various productions, most often targeting video games and films."^[47] The attempts to review bomb the game suggested an attempt at resistance to change: these attacks, like the downvoting of the trailer for Ghostbusters or the review bombing and petitions against Star Wars: The Last Jedi, are a threat against franchise-owners to keep the hardcore fan centered or face decreasing profits. There are 13 mentions of review bombing directly, although one of them is defensive, stating directly that "these negative reviews are not 'review bombing', they are just honest expressions." However, other reviewers reference it as something that should be stopped, for instance: "Metacritic should really review it's system to prevent review bombers who clearly have not played the game" and "This bombing reviews are getting out of hand." This indicates a sense from both supporters and detractors that review bombing successfully dragged down the game's score.

Second, players have refused Let's Go as a main series title, much like the attempted decanonization of Star Wars: The Last

Jedi. One professional reviewer characterizes dissatisfaction with the game as "to the point that many players refuse to accept it's a main series title, despite Game Freak, Nintendo and The Pokémon Company repeatedly stating it."^[33] In 99 instances of "core", many of the comments are negative: "if you want a core Pokémon RPG, skip this"; "if this is a core game, then it's plain bad"; "It is not the core Gen 8 game I and others wanted"; "does not cut it for a core game in my eyes"; "a COMPLETELY DIFFERENT game from what the legit core series is about." Some professional reviewers had a similar sentiment: "for anyone looking for a core Pokémon game, you'll want to wait for the next Switch iteration."^[41]

Third, though the Pokémon series has long managed a balancing act between casual and hardcore gaming, the balance has become less successful lately; as noted above, the casualization of Pokémon as a franchise is commonly attributed to the launch of Pokémon Go. Casual, of course, is a dirty word to many gamers. In 52 instances of "casual," as many as 50 of the mentions are negative: one review states that the game is "an obvious cash grab aimed at the casual and GO audience," while another notes, "I could not believe how much they shilled out to the casual gamer." Another argued that "it shouldn't be appealing to the casual - fanbase, in truth its insulting," while others warned off casual players: "if you are a casual gamer don't waste your money on this." The rejection of the casual gamer throughout the discourse makes it clear that those using the term view the casual gamer as an other: reviewers rarely self-identify as "casual" in any way. One professional reviewer who calls the game a "casual cash-in" describes the changes as leaving the game "disappointingly bereft of many of the things that made Pokémon great in the first place. There's no doubt casual players will take no issue with the watered-down mechanics, missing features, and excessive handholding."^[41] Let's Go is part of a broader pattern of perceived casualization of titles that hardcore gamers feel ownership of. An article addressing these fears prior to release refers to the justifiable "worries of the 'casualization' of the Pokémon franchise," and particularly the idea that the game is a 'test' of their acceptance of that simplicity.^[42]

The assumption, of course, is that "real" gamers are hardcore. In a soapbox article defending the series, one reviewer noted: "This game was never meant to be the big hardcore Pokémon experience that we have come to expect, and that's why it's proving to be the most divisive game we've seen so far."^[33] Even in defending the game, "hardcore" is something other than this--the only difference is in whether non-hardcore games are acceptable. Writing in 2013, John Vanderhoef described the perceived threat of casual games to the hardcore games industry in terms that hold just as true today: "Together, sectors of commercial culture and core gaming culture work to position casual games as first feminine and then, tacitly if not vocally, as inferior and lacking when compared to masculinized hardcore video games. As a culture established upon a vulnerable masculinity with anxieties of infantilization and illegitimacy, hardcore gaming culture perceives these feminized casual games as a threat."^[40] The vehemence of the rejection is



Figure 3: The new capture mechanic in Pokémon Let's Go no longer requires battle mechanics, but instead players throw the Pokéball using gestural controls.

disproportionate to the actual impact of such games on the audience, which presumably fears the redirection of resources away from cultural products that serve their desires first and foremost.

7 CHANGING MODELS OF LABOR: FROM GRINDING TO CARE WORK

Ultimately, we argue, analysis of the patterns in the response to Let's Go demonstrates that one key way "right" and "wrong" kinds of games are classified is through labor: hard, grinding labor is good; reproductive and care work are bad.

Hardcore play is associated with grinding, and the removal of grinding is one of the major changes in Let's Go. Some praised the change. The removal of the game's most grinding mechanics ultimately streamlines the experience of play, as one professional reviewer notes: "But what if the press-A-over-and-over standard was swapped with a quick-flick alternative? And what if you could instantly see which monsters were in your zone, so that you're not wasting your time with 40,000 useless Rattatas? Pokémon Let's Go places a bet on both of these ideas as upgrades, and they sure feel that way in action."^[31] Another professional reviewer explicitly names the grind as something now escaped: "I'm less interested in catching them all these days, or massaging specific stats into my perfect fighter. Let's Go allowed me to live in its world without the grind."^[12] This type of review illuminates and embraces the changes to the game's visual and procedural rhetoric.

A third reviewer directly raises the specter of hardcore, arguing: "Any 'hardcore' aspects have been dropped. Random enemy encounters are nowhere to be found. Instead, gorgeous models of each creature roam the overworld. Using Pokémon Go's capture mechanic, the emphasis on battling monsters has been replaced by a motion-heavy control scheme [as seen in Figure 3]. Streamlined progression and a lack of significant challenges might give the impression that this is a breezy, undemanding experience—but beneath the surface, there are plenty of engaging systems to find."^[34] Though this reviewer

sees the streamlining as an acceptable trade-off for losing hardcore, that is part of what has met resistance from the traditional fanbase, and others complained. In 25 mentions of "grind," the mixed perception of grinding and difficulty comes through: some note that "this game is not for you if you look for the grind," while others point out that "You usually don't need to grind as battling in this game is pretty tame."

As the mention of "tame" suggests, grinding and perceived difficulty are closely linked. One reviewer contends that playing with and caring for your Pokémon is too "easy" a way to make your Pokémon better: "you can just hop into a petting session with your Pokémon, touching them with the motion controls or feeding them items to improve their abilities. I'll admit, as cute as it is to virtually pet a Pikachu and see it coo in your hands, the trade-off for mechanics like this just seem like wasted potential."^[38] Forty-six user reviewers mention the difficulty, while twenty-six include the word "difficult," and most are dismissive: one calls the lack of difficulty "patronizing," while another states this is "difficulty for babies." Among the mentions of "difficult," all but three refer to the game's reduced challenge: "The battles are difficult for new people but not for hardcore Pokémon fans"; "damn Pokémon snap was more difficult"; one reviewer notes, "I guess they [battles] were too difficult for the casual market?"

Along with grinding, the idea of subduing Pokémon in the wild through violence that previously dominated the core series gameplay has hardcore elements more in line with first-person-shooters: everything is hostile, and everything must be beaten. In 118 mentions of "battle" in the user reviews, many focus on the removal of combat elements, such as: "this game takes it too far and makes every battle require no thought"; "I think this game's main crux is the inability to battle wild Pokémon to weaken them for capture"; "just feels tedious when there's no thrill of battle"; "I now think the random encounter and battle catch system are just plain wrong." This creates a definition of proper gaming as difficult, requiring extensive time, and violent.

To remove the grinding and diminish the violence would violate the tenets of hardcore enough, but on top of this there is now more emphasis on the care work of bonding with and taking care of your Pokémon. Even the frequent dismissive description of the game's "handholding" suggests an implied rhetoric of care that the game's design choices embody. One reviewer emphasizes the emotional bond: "Incidentally, the close bond with the companion not only makes us happy, but sometimes sad: If Pikachu is defeated in battle and comes whimpering back to us, we feel really bad."^[29]

Similarly, the choice of starters who refuse to evolve and are instead as focused on building a relationship with the player as they are on battling recalls Nintendo 64's Pikachu companion app and deviates from the expected play of the core series. As Gita Jackson points out, the emotional aspects are central to succeeding at the game: "It's not about how complex the world can be, but about how you learn the skills you need to take it on, with the help of the pocket monsters you're raising. Pokémon Let's Go! Eevee and Pikachu doesn't just test your mettle in the

catching and battling of Pokémon. It gauges your ability to care for and nurture them.”[22]

The emphasis on the player’s effort at caring for Pokémon, we argue, puts Let’s Go into the realm of reproductive labor, or “all the many tasks that we might have to perform in order to reproduce and maintain life.”[18:276] According to Marxist theorists, reproductive labor is not merely a personal and private matter in the home, but necessary to the broader economy because, “the value of a worker’s labor-power is generated through the consumption of use-values produced by the domestic laborer.” [23:19] This then makes the necessity for caring for Pokémon to get the labor of battle out of it quite radical.

Importantly, reproductive labor is “unwaged,”[13] “unpaid,”[13,18,23] or “for free.”[15] It is a way the current system allows capital to externalize some of its costs: “it can be argued that capital accumulation is advanced by outsourcing reproductive labor from corporations to the private and public realm.”[15:188] This externalization is facilitated by “the systemic devaluation of reproductive work.”[13:71] After all, “these systems privilege strictly monetized exchange while undermining the importance of nonmonetized production” [23:15] Indeed, reproductive labor is not often seen *as* labor, which is why it was so revolutionary for Hochschild to name housework as working women’s “second shift,” saying that “Most women work one shift at the office or factory and a ‘second shift’ at home.”[20:4] In part, this is because “capitalism never industrialized domestic work,”[13:62] making it hard to incorporate it into the industrial value system. Let’s Go’s mechanics, however, make that work visible and valuable. We argue that the broader systematic devaluation of reproductive labor and valorization of labor perceived as difficult drives valuing the grind and devaluing care work, and it is what Let’s Go reverses.

Reproductive labor may seem like an odd framing given that literal reproduction is absent from Let’s Go. In fact, the lack of breeding is a complaint people have about the new game. Designer Junichi Masuda commented on the removal of egg-hatching: “I know that a lot of people and fans have spent a lot of time hatching eggs, they’ve hatched... a lot of eggs, but we want them to kind of discover new ways to enjoy Pokémon games, you know I’d be really sad to think that for them, Pokémon is hatching eggs, so with this one we’re trying to show them a different side of the game.”[39] Four user reviewers mention the system specifically to note their disappointment at the removal, with one succinctly stating “Just let them breed.” However, egg hatching was a grinding mechanic: in Go, it is literally a matter of finding eggs and walking a defined distance, but in the core series it required grinding to catch Pokémon of the right gender and types, and waiting patiently after co-locating the potential breeding pair--which often would still not result in the desired outcome without multiple attempts.

Despite resistance, these changes bring the mechanics of Pokémon into better alignment with the narrative. This idea of emotional connection to a Pokémon is akin to the bond between Pikachu and Ash central to the original Pokémon cartoon, but



Figure 4: Visual interaction with partner Pokémon

has been missing from all but the spoken dialogue of previous core Pokémon titles. One reviewer notes that the changes help the game better match its own rhetoric: “I’ve always thought that the key messages of friendship and bonding present in Pokémon weren’t exactly congruous with the fact you’ll beat them into subjugation before capturing them and forcing them to do battle for you. This, at least, makes more sense than that – all the way up until you first encounter Snorlax, the first Pokémon boss battle.”[3] Similarly, another reviewer notes that changes in play mechanics amplify the game’s original narrative and remove hardcore elements that were out of sync with that narrative: “The whole change also fits better thematically with the very friendly image for the series anyway – with Pokémon as willing, loving companions to humans rather than animals you beat unconscious in order to grind up the levels of your own loyal beasts. Again, this is how it’s all more frequently portrayed in the anime and other Pokémon stories anyway – it’s just this storytelling is finally making its way back over to the games – and it makes sense.”[10]

Importantly, both of these reviewers note the ways the hardcore mechanic of violence was out of place before. In this way, much like Star Wars was more progressive than its contemporary detractors over SJW politics remember, Pokémon was not what the negative reviewers remember either—the nostalgia is false. This emphasis on care and nurture is part of the Pokémon’s narrative rejection of toxic masculinity: a Pokémon trainer who just seeks to exploit Pokémon is inherently villainized, represented by the iconic Team Rocket and its heirs, while trainers who value Pokémon for their beauty and personality are represented within the game as extreme and loving fans.

Moreover, at the same time that Let’s Go moves away from toxic masculinity, reproductive labor is deeply feminized. As Federici argues, “Social reproduction still relies on women’s unwaged work.”[13:67] By and large, “men do not share the raising of their children and the caring of their homes.”[20:x] That is, the devaluation of reproductive labor is also because this labor is so deeply gendered. Additionally, the ways the home is a space of specifically women’s work underlines how leisure and

work are not as sharply divided as they are for men: “just as there is a wage gap between men and women in the workplace, there is a ‘leisure gap’ between them at home.”[13:4]

It is therefore unsurprising that girliness and cuteness are foregrounded in reviews of Let’s Go, both positively and negatively. One reviewer exemplifies the slippage between general emotional bonds and cuteness: “Building a bond with your Pikachu or Eevee is all part of that. Not only can you deck them out in adorable outfits, they’ll tell you when they’re happy or sad, giving you a nudge to interact with them after beating a gym leader for example, or telling you they can feel the tension in Seafoam Islands just before you meet Articuno, while attacks and buffs are linked to your relationship with them.”[30]

Jason Hidalgo describes the cuteness factor at length: “Within seconds, I was melting in a puddle of cuteness overload as a three-dimensional rendition of Eevee jumped out of a TV screen and started doing cute Eevee things. Was Eevee always this cute? This level of adorable shenanigans should be criminal! (As an added bonus, I got a female Eevee, which comes with an adorable heart-shaped pattern on her tail — something that’s unique to the starter Eevee.)”[19]

Another reviewer honed in on the elements that are most visibly associated with the reproductive labor of care: “Even dressing up my Eevee, or spending time rubbing its head, for no reason other than that I could, made the game feel that much richer.”[12] (See Figure 4.) However, those forms of labor are still devalued. In 24 mentions of cute, the conversation is more mixed: some put down other reviewers for only caring because “it’s cute,” while another says “If you want cute and comfy, get a Pikachu pillow,” or the more direct “Cute Girls are literally the games only redeeming factor.” Approximately half are more positive: “Let’s Go is a cute, fun and charming game”, “This is the most feel good game ever, so cute”; “it’s relaxing, joyful, cute”; “it’s so pleasant, so nice, so cute”; “a fun and cute game.”

Even the game makes a nod to the cuteness factor that self-references the more casual nature of the game. After a battle with a “beauty”-type trainer, the character says, “I don’t know anything about Pokémon, I just chose mine based on looks.” This might be internal uneasiness with the cuteness factor, or else this character could be meant to salve the wounds of the hardcore fan base by allowing them to battle it out with the ideals that they have so strongly spoken out against.

8 CONCLUSION

The Pokémon Let’s Go titles may seem like an odd choice for geek cultural battlegrounds—yet, as the history of embattled fan culture reminds us, flame wars have been fought over less. The shift away from the more “hardcore” aspects of grinding, and particularly the de-emphasis of violence as a way to gather Pokémon for one’s private army, carries with it the promise of future installments that further center the bond of Pokémon and player. The commercial success of the two releases, which together broke previous records for Nintendo’s Switch console,[4] suggests that the rejection of the hardcore gamers of

these new models of play and labour might not be enough to shift design back to centering their preferred playstyles. In that sense, the fears gamers expressed of casualization might indeed reflect a growing awareness that designers are engaging further with the question of who plays, and who might play, as games themselves shift to welcome them.

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