

Pokémon is Evolving! An investigation into the development of the *Pokémon* community and expectations for the future of the franchise

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Abstract

Pokémon is one of Nintendo's largest, most influential franchises. With a history ranging more than twenty years, its enormous fan-base spans video and trading card games, anime TV shows and films, amongst other media. This paper aims to investigate the *Pokémon* fan community while exploring how the franchise has grown: from its beginnings as a pop-culture phenomenon, to one of the strongest and friendliest gaming fan communities in existence today. Data gathered from 165 online respondents examines how fans' past experiences with the franchise inform their expectations towards future products. It also explores how considerable efforts from developers – as well as the gaming community – contribute to the creative growth of a continually-expanding fan-base. Additionally, this study was in a unique position to gather data before two new *Pokémon* games were released: *Pokken Tournament* and *Pokémon GO*. The former did not generate high expectations but still performed well in terms of sales. The latter was thought of as a casual game but, as the world now knows, was a tremendous success. Insights obtained from researching fan attitudes to unreleased games show that expectations do not always become reality.

Keywords

Pokémon; *Pokémon Go*; gaming community; online community; RPGs; role-playing games; game franchise

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Introduction

Pokémon is set in a modern fantasy world, filled with over seven-hundred creatures for players to capture and train as they travel. These creatures have special fighting powers and are categorised according to their types (earth, water, fire, air, and others) in varying combat power. Fighting various gym members and collecting badges, along with tackling criminal organisations that populate each of the game's regions, the player rises up the ranks as they adventure through the world (Niantic, Inc., 2016). This worldwide phenomenon has sold over 200 million copies over the entire series (with over 25 different titles), and its success has branched out into other media, such as an anime TV series and a trading card game (The Pokémon Company, 2016b).

The *Pokémon* franchise remains very relevant due to the recent success of *Pokémon GO*, and a strong act to follow for newer franchises wishing to gain similar popularity. Exploring the world of *Pokémon* is significant in understanding why its community has grown and survived for the last twenty years in such a strong position, while others around it have not. The newest additions to the franchise will be addressed in this paper, including how the adoption of new technologies and platforms can impact fans and their expectations for the future of *Pokémon*.

Overview & Literature Review

Pokémon debuted in 1996 as the brainchild of game developer Satoshi Tajiri, who co-founded the Game Freak Development Company in 1989 with Ken Sugimori. Tajiri was an avid collector of insects when he was a child, giving him the initial inspiration for *Pokémon* (Plunkett, 2011). Using this hobby as a basis for the franchise, Tajiri acquired the remaining aspect of the winning formula from his favourite TV show, *Ultra Seven* (Tsuburaya Productions, 1967); capturing giant monsters into capsules and using them to fight. Both of these elements combined to create *Capsule Monsters* – the original name – and, while the game was not an overnight success, Tajiri's friend and mentor Shigeru Miyamoto (of *Mario*, *Donkey Kong*, *Legend of Zelda* fame) saw its potential. After a name change to *Pocket Monsters* (later shortened to *Pokémon*), Miyamoto successfully pitched it to Nintendo, convincing them to publish the game (Plunkett, 2011).

The collection of items – as with Tajiri's bug-collecting hobby and initial idea for the franchise – is a powerful psychological drive, usually adopted by game designers to incite completion of a game (finding all hidden items), replayability (uncovering different endings/unlockables), as well as completing the purchase of a series of games (Graft, 2009). Indeed, what *Pokémon* fans are 'catching' are not only the creatures but also the whole series; with each new game, the number of Pokémon creatures available to collect increases. With each expansion, players do not want to miss adding these new creatures to their Pokédex, which is an in-game database of all captured and encountered creatures in

gameplay. Arguably, the gameplay appeals to all specific types of player defined by Richard Bartle (1996): the 'Achievers' because of the collection aspect mentioned, the 'Killers' because of competitive play and battle aspects, the 'Explorers' for traversing the fictional world, and finally the 'Socialisers' because, in both real and game worlds, players are encouraged to meet in order to complete their Pokémon creature collection.

Although recent Generations (the name given for each new release) saw a decline in sales, the franchise as a whole is still one of the most successful in terms of software sales, with over 280 million units sold worldwide (The Pokémon Company, 2017). This is possibly due to the psychological enjoyment of collecting items, relating to a hobby (Geraghty, 2014), or even due to the strong social aspect, especially considering age and social comparison (McIntosh & Schmeichel, 2004). Collectors take enjoyment in boasting their accomplishments, and gamers are no strangers to this (Tondello, Wehbe, Toups, Nacke & Crenshaw, 2015). The following paragraphs describe some of the developer's efforts to maintain the gaming community's interest in the franchise. Community-led endeavours that aim to sustain the games' popular momentum while simultaneously broadening their reach are also described.

The game was envisioned as multiplayer from the start, and thus also as a community-focused game, bringing players together through the Game Link Cable (for Game Boy) in order to enjoy *Pokémon* together, be it through trading Pokémon or battling against another player. Each Generation of the game is split into two almost-identical versions at release, but these versions have a number of differences; some creatures are rarer than others, each storyline is slightly different, but most importantly, each version has its own unique, exclusive creatures. This, along with the idea that certain Pokémon are only available to evolve through trading, ensured that players wishing to have the fullest experience in completing the overall objective to "catch 'em all" (The Pokémon Company, 1996a) would have to find other players to trade Pokémon with. If not, their Pokédex can never be completed. Again, this aspect of the game reinforces the need to complete the series as a collection, further supporting the social interaction aspect of multiplayer mode.

Substantial research has explored these online fan communities: how they engage with the game and recruit new fans, as well as which genres are more prone to thriving and which creative communities can flourish under what conditions (Seay, Jerome, Lee & Kraut, 2004; Sherlock, 2009; Williams, 2009; Park & Chung, 2011; Monroy-Hernández, 2012; Trepte, Reinecke & Juechems, 2012; Lammers, 2013). Individuals in communities support each other, spread information about the subject and thus reinforce an identity, in this case, the *Pokémon* fan (Willett, 2004).

With each new Generation of *Pokémon* games, communities of players appeared based on their enjoyment of multiplayer experiences around a certain release. This has served almost as an identifying label within the *Pokémon* communities e.g. fans who played the first two Generations are called 'Genwunners', and those whose first games were Ruby and Sapphire are called 'Hoenn babies' ("Basileus", 2013). Generational conflicts (in both meanings of the word) are common in this gaming community but do not affect the overall cohesion of the group. The names are used in a light-hearted jesting way to describe fans based on their first game and, regardless of its intended offence or not, it is very clear that fans of *Pokémon* are often grouped depending on their first played title.

However, certain fan communities dedicated to specific games have been the topic of research for their socially toxic environments. *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) is a popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), known for its high levels of griefing; defined by Achterbosch, Miller and Vamplew (2013) as cyberbullying in the online gaming context. Griefing can include activities like exploiting game rules to prohibit other players' enjoyment of the game or deliberately causing irritation by methods of sabotage, among others. Though *Pokémon* is not a MMORPG, the number of players/fans in both is comparable and thus should provide some insight into large fan communities due to similarities in their cultures, regardless of game genres.

The inherent social interaction when playing any Generation is significant in regards to *Pokémon*, and some of the ways in which Game Freak ensured fans were brought together in one place to meet, trade, and battle with one another was by organising promotional events, Trading Card Game (TCG) contests (*Pokémon/Nintendo*, 2016), and video game tournaments. Events included anything from collecting codes for special creatures at participating stores, to physically meeting characters from the franchise; for example, a week-long festival has taken place in Yokohama, Tokyo, since 2014 which sees thousands of Pikachu (arguably the most well-known character from *Pokémon*) parading, dancing, and performing (*Pokémon*, 2016). TCG contests and video game tournaments enable players to meet in a safe space and enjoy the franchise together, while allowing Game Freak to engage with their community as it forms. Fans from all over the world can partake in regional qualifiers, ultimately leading to a final battle to determine a champion ("Magic", 2016).

These video game tournaments led to the creation of a website entitled 'Smogon University', a fan-made community which encompasses competitive battling¹ (Smogon University, 2013). Smogon University provides game-play strategies and tutorials to improve techniques,

¹ http://www.smogon.com/dp/articles/intro_comp_pokemon

therefore bringing a large number of the entire *Pokémon* fan community together outside of Game Freak's official forums and events. With over 150-thousand members, the website is said to be "growing at an ever-increasing rate, constantly expanding [the] knowledge base and [...] ability to be at the cutting edge of the game" (Smogon, 2015). This is a significant way in which fans have filled a gap within the market of the original games, and have repurposed websites to fulfil their own needs, creating more places for fans to join together and involve themselves in the social aspect of *Pokémon*.

The features described above are just a few ways in which the *Pokémon* fan community has been shaped, and has shaped the culture surrounding the franchise. In a paper exploring player agency, Ashton and Newman (2010) demonstrated how the phenomenon of recording walkthroughs for *Pokémon* games allowed for new play styles, strategies, and techniques to emerge, as well as a chance to explore code glitches or rule-bending, which allow other gameplay options. The Smogon University website, for instance, created a new set of game battle rules for players (Smogon, 2015), and shows how *Pokémon* fans can further expand their community by creating their own rules, games, and tournaments, alongside the original game releases.

Aside from the main *Pokémon* games, Game Freak also branched out into a number of spin-off video games (i.e. *Pokémon Ranger*, *Pokémon Mystery Dungeon*, *Pokémon Rumble*, *Pokémon Battle Trozei*) – with the most recent being *Pokken Tournament*, a game which originated on arcade machines in Japan². The issue with being a arcade game was that it could take up to forty-five minutes for one player to use just one credit, making machines less profitable than others in the same category. However, when the game was ported to home consoles, it gained momentum within the gaming world, and the Wii U version topped sales charts in its debut week, selling just under seventy thousand copies in Japan alone (Romano, 2016). By August 2016, *Pokken Tournament* had sold over one million copies on Wii U (Carter, 2016). Furthering *Pokémon's* spin-off popularity is its newest venture, *Pokémon GO*.

In 2016, *Pokémon* took its first step into the smartphone market with *Pokémon GO*, a location-based augmented-reality game where players explore their actual surroundings to capture and evolve creatures in the real world (Niantic, Inc., 2016). When in the vicinity of a Pokéstop – a real world "public art installation, historical marker [or] monument" (Niantic, Inc., 2016) – the player can gain items such as Pokéballs, potions, and eggs to help progression, but also, when seeking out a Pokéstop in the real world, players may coincidentally meet at the same location, thereby tying into the social aspect of the game. It is also fairly obvious to other players when a person is playing *Pokémon GO* due to

² <http://www.pokemon.com/uk/pokemon-video-games/pokken-tournament/>

certain play mannerisms: walking certain routes near Pokéstops and gyms (where they can challenge other players), and standing still while flicking the screen of their phone in order to capture creatures. The app was said to be “the most downloaded mobile app in its first week of release in the history of the [iOS] App Store” (Statt, 2016), and statistics show that, in the US alone, it attracted just under 21 million active users per day within three days of release (Allan, 2016). As if this wasn’t enough, some estimates say that *Pokémon GO* managed to “generate \$14.04 million across mobile platforms” within one week of release, and explained that it should not be a surprise since *Pokémon* “is one of the most enduring and widely popular game franchises in the world” (SuperData Research, 2016).

The immense popularity of *Pokémon GO* gave fans the chance to extend current communities and their cultures further. Fans quickly created online spaces to highlight real world locations where rare creatures were spotted, allowing other players to travel there and capture those Pokémon (e.g. FastPokeMap). This brought players together *en masse* with stories documented by the media; for example, footage was captured showing “a frenzied stampede of thousands of gamers flocking to catch a very rare Pokémon” in the capital city of Taipei (Moore, 2016).

As a way of capitalising on the expected popularity of the *Pokémon GO* app, Nintendo released the Pokémon GO Plus accessory; a small device in the form of a wristband which connects to the app via Bluetooth, and vibrates to notify players of nearby Pokémon or Pokéstops. It allows players to interact with the app without looking at their phones by pressing a button located in the middle of the device when it flashes green (signalling a Pokémon is nearby) or blue (signalling a Pokéstop is nearby). Nintendo, however, did not expect the demand to be quite so large, resulting in a stock shortage across stores. This immense triumph, however, is not entirely typical, and the present study aims to showcase some of the aspects that might explain a decline in sales throughout *Pokémon*’s lifespan.

Indeed, despite *Pokémon*’s rampant popularity and huge success in numerous media, the early 00’s saw a large decline in sales of the Game Boy Advance games (Baldwin, 2012). The switch to Game Boy Advance for the sequels may have played a significant role in the decline, due to the lack of backward compatibility to older versions. While this could serve as a good reason for the decline, those fans who were with the franchise from the very beginning were now adults, and a switch to the newer handheld console made older fans feel as though the franchise was moving on without them (Anderton, 2014).

Methodology

To investigate this popular franchise, an online questionnaire was created and posted to Facebook, official *Pokémon* forums and websites,

along with the Smogon University forums. This recruitment process was chosen as it would reach out to respondents who are a part of the online community and already potentially contributing to the independent creative work done in places such as the Smogon University website.

As a way to contextualise participants, two demographic questions were included: age and gender. The questionnaire then explored the main variables of interest, relating to the respondent's history with the *Pokémon* franchise, both through games and anime. Looking towards the future, the questionnaire asked participants what their expectations were for the franchise as it continues to grow. It is also worth noting that this research was conducted before *Pokémon GO* and *Pokken Tournament* were released, thus it was timely to investigate fans' expectations for these to gain an insight into both their interest and intention to play, as well as how frequently they felt they would use them.

The online questionnaire obtained 165 responses from participants aged between 10 and 33 (distribution shown in Table 1); 82.4% were male. Although the sample is not representative of the entire gaming community, having 165 participants enables the researchers to identify trends within answers and begin to gain an insight into the *Pokémon* community and its expansion.

Age Group	Frequency	Percent
10-15	8	4.8
16-21	80	48.5
22-27	66	40
28-33	11	6.7

Table 1. Age Group Distribution

Results

From the 165 respondents, 109 first started playing *Pokémon* at the Generation 1 (Red, Blue, Yellow) stage, followed by 24 who did so at the Generation 3 (Ruby, Sapphire, Emerald) stage, and 18 at Generation 2 (Gold, Silver, Crystal); (Figure 1).

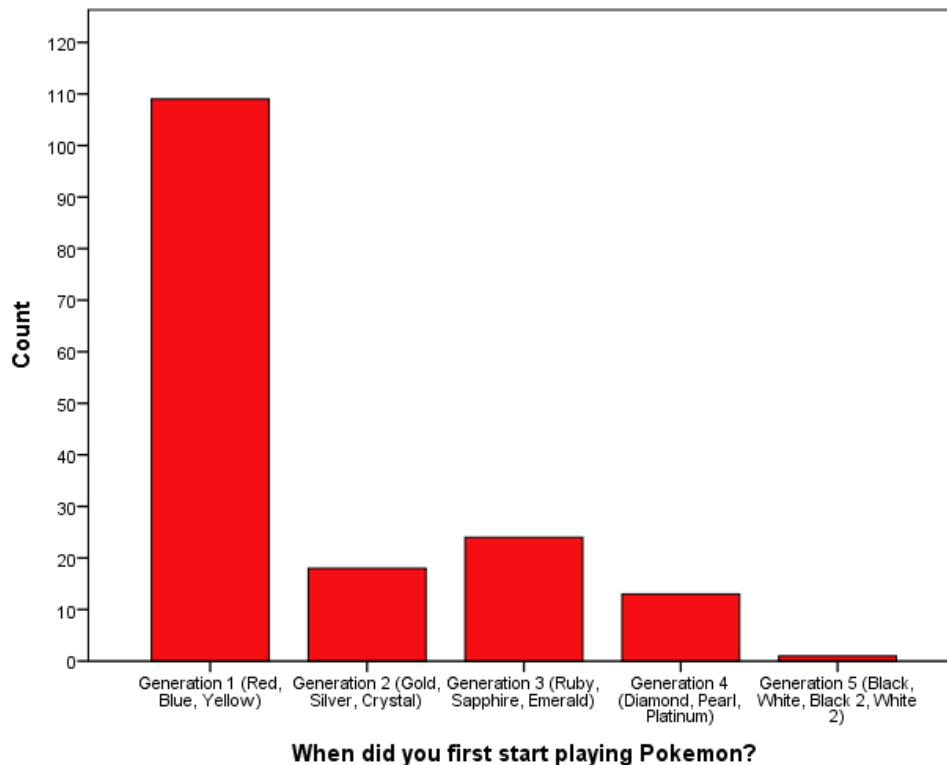


Figure 1. Graph representing when players started playing the *Pokémon* series of games.

Participants were also asked when, if at all, they had stopped playing *Pokémon*. The great majority of respondents (N=114) still play, and Generation 5 had the highest drop-out frequency (N=15), followed by Generation 3 (N=10), 4 (N=9), and 6 (N=7). Nonetheless, only 15 participants claimed that they had never played any spin-off games.

Most participants do play competitively (N=120); only 26 used to, and 19 do not. In regards to watching competitive play in the official world/regional championships of *Pokémon*, 57 participants do not enjoy them, and 35 were not aware they existed. Only 30 respondents had watched them in the past but do not every year and, additionally, 24 participants only watch the interesting matches after the event.

Referring to the *Pokémon* anime TV show, only 11 respondents had never watched the show. The majority (N=129) started watching it as a child (between 5-10 years old), while others (N=17) watched it during their teen years (11-19 years old). Almost equal positive and negative responses were recorded in regards to whether watching the TV show had an influence on respondents playing the franchise's games, with 53 participants stating that the show introduced them to the games, and 56 participants stating that they played the games before watching the show.

Pokken Tournament gained a large amount of negative responses from participants (N=86), regarding either a lack of interest, not owning a supported device, or being unaware of its impending release. Positive responses remained skeptical since most, although interested, would not buy the game on its release date (N=34).

Looking to *Pokémon Go*, although most responses fell on the positive side (N=106), 25.5% of respondents had no interest in the game. The majority of participants (N=86) already had a device capable of running the game, while a small number (N=8) would buy one specifically for it. Additionally, 55 individuals were interested in purchasing the Pokémon Go Plus device, but would wait to find out its usefulness, while 21 did not see its appeal. Expectations of time spent playing the game ranged through the majority (N=49) expecting to play casually, 26 expecting to play whenever they have a moment spare, 13 expecting to play daily and integrate it completely into their lives, and 13 expecting to play it only every now and then.

When commenting on the trailer for *Pokémon Go* and its decision to only feature Generation 1 creatures, the largest group of participants (N=37) were indifferent (admitting the developer can add more creatures in subsequent updates), 22 were positive due to the nostalgic feel, 19 were negative (wanting at least Generation 2 Pokémon to be shown), and 12 were very negative, feeling that it should have included all 721 creatures. Alongside this, the prediction that the game would be restricted to certain locations to encourage travel (due to it being location-based) incited mostly positive responses. These positive responses included "this sounds good, but only if they aren't too extreme with it" (N=60), and "I believe this would be an incredible feature that would only serve to make the game more immersive" (N=22), while the major negative response was "I dislike the idea, I may not have the time/money for that sort of travel to commit to the game" (N=14). Finally, the overall expectations participants had for *Pokémon Go* were moderate (N=53) where they had not seen enough information for it, and high (N=30) where they believed the game looked good with very few flaws.

Discussion

Taking into consideration that the questionnaire reported here was posted on *Pokémon*-related web pages, there is a degree of certainty that the majority of respondents (aside from Facebook participants, considered opportunity sampling) were actively interested in the franchise at time of distribution. Their history with *Pokémon*, as well as expectations towards the future of the franchise, were then investigated to discover how previous experience with the franchise influences opinions on potential future media relating to the *Pokémon* world, and why.

The results indicate that participants have remained faithful to the franchise for anything up to twenty years, which is evidenced when asked whether they had stopped playing; the majority said they continue to play (N=114). This question is potentially explained by the recruitment method chosen as, given that the questionnaire was posted to pages and forums dedicated to *Pokémon*, those respondents using these pages are bound to be strongly interested and dedicated to the franchise (Hau & Kim, 2011). Additionally, when asked about spin-off games, only fifteen participants said that they had never played any, further enforcing this dedication.

Regarding the competitive aspect of *Pokémon*, official championships seemed to divide opinions. Among them, thirteen participants used an open textbox within the questionnaire to provide their own answer, where the main themes were 'not having time to watch', 'watching only sporadically', and 'not being aware of them'. These answers are interesting when linked with the previous section; respondents have been fans of the franchise for a number of years, yet tournaments create a visible divide within the community. Of these respondents who choose not to watch the tournaments, it could be possible that their age range or academic/professional commitments play a part in this decision, as they may not have time to watch others play the games that they already spend a considerable amount of time playing themselves. Additionally, watching others play a game that they can take part in themselves is not something that appeals to everyone (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017, forthcoming).

The *Pokémon* anime TV show is an important part of the franchise because it is almost as old as the first video game (The Pokémon Company, 2016b). This research found that the vast majority of participants had watched the anime show in the past, and some still continue to watch it even now (it is still on air). Most respondents began watching it as children, which ties in with both the airing date of 1997 and the ages represented within the sample, making them approximately five years old at time of release. In regards to the anime's influence in leading participants to play *Pokémon* video games, the data showed a bidirectional tendency. There were just as many who played the game before watching the anime as those who did the opposite. An alternative positive answer scored 34 responses – "Yes, but I was interested in playing the games anyway" – showing that the anime had no influence on these participants due to a large interest in the franchise regardless. Overall, the overwhelming positive responses support the presumption that *Pokémon*-related media help the franchise to thrive, by recruiting those fans not readily interested in playing video games and wishing to participate in another way.

Looking towards the expectations for the future of the franchise, participants were asked about *Pokken Tournament*, a title not released at the time of distribution. The majority of responses were negative in

terms of interest and awareness of the title, with many saying that they did not have a device capable of running the game. The few positive responses were sceptical, stating that they would neither purchase the game on its release date nor buy a device especially for it. This may link to the aforementioned data showing a drop in sales for the most recent titles, as well as in new fans for the most recent *Pokémon Generations*, and it could signal a disenchantment with the most recent efforts by developers. Although the fans in the sample are seemingly staying true to the franchise, they are not impressed by the spin-off games and frequent new releases. Alternatively, this dissatisfaction could be due to the change in genre that *Pokken Tournament* represented in comparison to the original *Pokémon* series; *Pokken Tournament* is a fighting game based on the *Tekken* (Namco, 1994) series, but with *Pokémon* characters – hardly a completely original endeavour.

Pokémon GO, on the other hand, created high expectations regardless of not yet being released. Some respondents were interested in purchasing the Pokémon GO Plus device, due to its interesting concept and ability to add a playful item to a device that people use on a day-to-day basis, ideally making the activity feel more “gamey” and less “casual”, which is the curse that smartphone games usually carry among those hardcore gamers (Juul, 2010). Most participants, although interested in the new title, considered it to be a casual game due to its platform, and being seen as a mobile game. Associating it with sporadic, infrequent play, this relation to casual gaming completely ignores the innovation of augmented-reality technology applied to a very famous franchise which has the potential to be extremely successful. Contrary to some of the responses, and with the added benefit of hindsight since its recent release, *Pokémon GO* players are purposely finding excuses to leave the house and explore the real world to play the game, thus actually making free time for the game, not the other way around (Mannell, Fordyce & Apperley, 2016).

Regarding the initial collection of Pokémon in the new mobile game, some participants reacted positively due to the nostalgia of seeing characters from their childhood, while others reacted negatively due to its seeming incompleteness by not including the entire collection of creatures. This finding can be linked to recent articles since release, claiming that interest in the game is declining due to a lack of updates from Niantic Inc. who previously promised features such as trading, chatting, groups, profiles, quests, among others (Smith, 2016). These claims could potentially ensure interest is piqued before updates are released, however, the subreddit where they originate is very active with over 750 thousand subscribers. Video game fans can be ruthless and are essential to either making a title – or breaking a title, when it fails to provide the entertainment it promises, as was the case with *No Man's Sky* (Makuch, 2016). However, it could also be Niantic's strategy

to release an early, unfinished game, only to rekindle the interest of fans every six months with major updates (Niantic, 2017).

Although location-based games are not completely new (Meta, 2016), this feature incited curiosity and interest; not only because of the physical aspect of having to move to play, but also because it taps into the very narrative of *Pokémon*, i.e. travelling the world to catch creatures, thereby greatly increasing immersion.

Overall expectations for *Pokémon GO* were moderate to high, regardless of a lack of information released besides the trailer. Although respondents did not have many resources on which to base their opinion, many had positive expectations due to the characteristics of the game. Although spin-off games and the most recent iterations were disappointing fans – as evidenced by lower sales numbers – *Pokémon GO* spiked respondents' interest because of how the innovation enables players to become more like a character within the original series. These insights from before the game was released can be linked to the fear-infused cries surrounding *Pokémon GO* in the media during the first few weeks of its release; reports of children lured into dangerous places, or people shot because of trespassing on property are just a couple of which that were actually hoaxes (Ferguson, 2016). The game created so much notoriety that it provoked an outrage unlike any other location-based game has ever generated before. On the other hand, reports of positive impacts on individuals with agoraphobia, issues with physical activity, and mental health problems have also been abundant (Barry, 2016; Klein, 2016; Lanechal, 2016; L-Z, 2016, Tateno et al., 2016). Research into this phenomenon is booming and, although the game's sales seem to be slowing down, there is no way to tell the full extent of positive results of playing *Pokémon GO* just yet.

The following sections describe both the limitations in the present study and opportunities for further research. The limitations are made clear in order to identify improvements in gathering data in future studies similar to the one set out in this paper, and also to explain how these limitations have been taken into consideration. Subsequently, further research ideas are suggested which tie in with the limitations, giving recommendations for research intended to explore the community of the *Pokémon* franchise in future years.

Limitations

The main limitation of this research is that the sample is not representative of the entire gaming community, as it mainly focuses on *Pokémon* players. The questionnaire was distributed to official *Pokémon* forums and websites, along with Smogon University forums, which can all be assumed to attract respondents who have been fans of the franchise for a number of years, reducing diversity in the sample. This could be significant due to non-*Pokémon* players (or fans of the anime TV show) potentially having expectations for both unreleased video

games. Also, this sample is not representative of the entire *Pokémon* community, as it is impossible to distribute the questionnaire to all fans through only these websites. Recruiting only *Pokémon* fans is used as an advantage for this investigation, as its aim is to determine how the community has evolved and what lies ahead in its future, which has been explored satisfactorily for this paper.

Another shortcoming of this research is that a pilot study was not conducted. A pilot study would have enabled the researchers to gain test data and revisit the questionnaire in order to improve upon those questions that were perhaps either too broadly conceived or did not have appropriate scales within answers. In hindsight, the clear patterns that emerged within responses would have allowed for statistical tests and comparisons only if categories and scales were employed. However, since the sample is relatively small, this limitation is minor and the study gained interesting insights regardless.

Further Research

One suggestion for further research is to investigate the *Pokémon* community now that *Pokken Tournament* and *Pokémon GO* are released. Although these games have already been released at the time this paper was written, the data was collected beforehand, thus it would be interesting to gather opinions on the same topics further into the future through a longitudinal design. Conducting this research before the release of these two games provides an insight into the impressions created by marketers and influencers among the community. The creation of hype about future releases and its impact on players' experiences remains unstudied, and, in a case study such as *Pokémon*, would enable researchers to compare the past with the present.

Another suggestion for further research is to ask participants for their play frequency. The rationale behind this is that posting a questionnaire to a forum is bound to recruit more avid gamers with longer playing hours (Porter, Starcevic, Berle & Fenech, 2010), so displaying approximate gaming hours can give a more accurate picture to the respondent behind the answers. This relates to both limitations; posting the questionnaire on specialist forums, and improving upon questions after a pilot study.

Conclusion

The research within this paper aimed to explore participants' history with the *Pokémon* franchise cross-media, as well as expectations for future endeavours by the company (*Pokken Tournament* and *Pokémon GO*). Although the sample recruited was not representative, the insights add value to the knowledge surrounding this well-known and incredibly popular title.

The study found that a large franchise such as *Pokémon* has had to work hard at keeping their fan-base both active and interested. Of course, we

cannot generalise from the sample or from this franchise, because gamers cannot be treated as a one-size-fits-all case. The context in which the franchise was developed may have had an immense effect upon what has worked with *Pokémon* fans, while the anime was a great influence and regular releases seem to have maintained the interest of older fans.

The *Pokémon* franchise has a very similar gameplay style throughout Generations, and the only major differences between each release are a number of newer creatures and updated graphics. This is clearly a winning formula, as many *Pokémon* fans have stayed true to the franchise throughout its many spin-off games and newer ventures.

Though these spin-off games and related products (such as merchandise) seem to interest hardcore fans of the franchise, the present research shows that expectations for games like *Pokken Tournament* and *Pokémon GO* are not incredibly positive. Perhaps the reason behind this is that there is too much distance in terms of design from the original formula, therefore creating fear among those hardcore original fans. The insights in this paper, however, show that expectations of unreleased games do not always become reality.

Indeed, the almost retro look of *Pokémon GO* during the first months in which only creatures from the first Generation were available, seems to have conquered the hearts of those who grew up with them in the 90s. Perhaps the vintage content paired with the innovative gameplay convinced fans and non-fans alike to play, exceeding expectations of those who answered our questionnaire. In terms of design, the innovation of putting a player into the shoes of the main protagonist within *Pokémon GO* interested players, potentially due to the augmented-reality function. This shows that *Pokémon* has captivated players in a way that not many other franchises have, and no matter how many Generations are released, fans stay faithful.

The franchise inspired some fans to create websites exploring game mechanics, exploiting narratives, and hosting competitive tournaments paralleling official ones. The community also debates narratives or theories in social media (e.g. Reddit, YouTube). These activities fulfil a need for connection with the franchise in cases where the fan-base expands faster than developers expected. This is important to note as players have been willing to create their own avenues within which to participate, instead of waiting for creation by the game company itself. This self-improving community shows that players have a bond with *Pokémon* which goes further than the video games themselves, and that it is in fact a relatively isolated case of a video game becoming part of a player's lifestyle.

It is not clear whether *Pokémon* will always continue to be as successful as has been shown within this research, but it is obvious that the

current state of *Pokémon* is that of an incredibly successful video game franchise. The popularity of this game and its counterparts is similar to no other, and, in conclusion, it seems that Game Freak have stumbled upon an incredibly lucrative and successful formula which video game fans have latched onto. There is no clear reasoning behind *Pokémon* being so prosperous, but there are a number of ideas behind why fans appreciate this franchise more than any other. As mentioned previously, the video game caters to all four types of player (Bartle, 1996), and thus attracts a large audience. Each Generation of the game continues from the previous, and therefore instils a need within the player to collect every single creature from across all games, creating a sense of loss if a newer Generation is not purchased. Finally, the *Pokémon* franchise is so deeply ingrained within the memory of those people who grew up during the 90s that those fans who played from the very start would tend to want to try newer, spin-off titles regardless of their differing nature, simply because of their relation to the *Pokémon* name.

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