UWP 001

Go Ahead, You Belong: Pokémon GO and Belonging at UC Davis

How does being involved in the Pokémon Go community influence UC Davis students' sense of belonging on campus?

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2023-12-10

Abstract

The mobile game Pokémon Go (PGO) uses augmented reality techniques, valued intellectual property, and other strategies to create a sense of community among students on the UC Davis campus. This report shares findings from interviews with two UC Davis students who play PGO and are members of the UC Davis PGO discord. The results indicate that PGO fosters interaction between students, relieves stress, increases social connections, and encourages longer stays on campus. These effects may stem from the communal enthusiasm for PGO, resulting in a versatile forum for the exchange and dissemination of information. The study also reveals how AR technology impacts the emotional attachment of students to the buildings and sculptures located at UC Davis.

Introduction

Pokémon Go (hereinafter referred to as PGO), as a representative of augmented reality gaming, has captured a global audience with its innovative approach. According to Teemu H. Laine and Hae Jung Suk, "Augmented reality (AR) is a user interface technology in which a camera-recorded view of the real world is augmented with computer-generated content such as annotations, graphics, animations, and three-dimensional (3-D) models." (2016) Rooted in the cherished Pokémon IP, this game incorporates real-world maps and landmarks into its gameplay via AR technique. The game not only promotes physical activity by having players walk along a designated route to discover treasure and encounter virtual creatures in their immediate surroundings, but it also facilitates social interaction. Players can trade in-game items and collaborate in battles, forming new friendships and inviting family members from different generations to participate.

The undeniable success of PGO in incentivizing players to go outside and build social connections enhances the sense of belonging to a community. Sense of belonging is defined by Bonnie M.K. Hagerty in a medical report as "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment." (1992) When players are required to walk to a Pokestop which is a particular building or facility in their community and

meet together with other players to transfer pokemons, their connection to a community or grandly, the society is formed, as they become more familiar with the community they live and the residents around the community.

So, given that PGO can enhance connection to community, can PGO also be a good contributor to belonging in college? Ida Salusky and others point out the importance of the sense of belonging in campus life. "A reduced sense of belonging at college has been linked to poorer grades, and lack of belonging is a commonly reported reason for the decision to leave college before graduation. In contrast, a greater sense of belonging and attachment to one's campus predicts reduced rates of anxiety and depression, stronger engagement with academic material, and increased likelihood of college persistence." (2022) The campus is a very large public space with many people from different countries and backgrounds. Many students find themselves different from others and they always cannot share the same perspective with others. Therefore, the problems with a sense of belonging are very intense on the campus. But undoubtedly, a sense of belonging has many benefits to academy, physical health, and psychological health. UC Davis needs to create a space where students can share their interests and have an intensive sense of belonging. Hence, I am interested in the effects of PGO on the sense of belonging to UC Davis students.

Background Research

When considering the sense of belonging, the function of PGO as a discourse community cannot be ignored. According to Writing Spaces, a collection of essays used in the writing classroom, "discourse community" describes a community of people who share the same goals, the same methods of communicating, the same genres, and the same lexis (specialized language)." (Melzer, 2022) The subject of this study is UC Davis students who play PGO. They share the same goal of owning better pokemons. They converse in the same discord channel and often hold offline meet-ups to combat raids. They work on the same genre of game-related secondary creations. What's more, the lexis of the game like "raid" and "shiny" is unachievable to others.

As mentioned by Kellie Vella and others (2019), one characteristic of PGO that leads to a sense of belonging is the enduring Pokémon franchise. Social connection is fostered via nostalgia, a psychology of dependence on a typical place or character. PGO inherits the wonderful history of Pokémon and allows players to catch and train pokemons that are popular in TV shows. Nostalgic connection to the franchise stimulates shared passions between players who are willing to engage in relatively closer social interaction with others, regardless of different backgrounds and social milieus. However, when it comes to a campus, would the shared passion still be in effect, considering that students are also dealing with other different things? Thus, I would like to figure out the effectiveness of the shared passion on the sense of belonging under complicated other factors.

Another characteristic of PGO for the promotion of the sense of belonging is the AR technique. Such a technique connects online with offline and helps enhance users' sense of belonging to real places. " Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (1983) describe how a component of self-identity is composed of ever-changing cognitions about the physical locale in which we live—a "place identity" that contributes to a psychologically healthy sense of self." (as cited in Kellie Vella et al., 2019) The "place identity" help players gradually form memories of some places and find their geographical and social connection. What's more, a place can be linked with a specific emotional experience of a player. Accordingly, I decided to examine how PGO utilizes its AR technique to encourage students to hang out on campus and strengthen their sense of belonging.

The Current Study

To compare the change of sense of belonging owing to involvement in the PGO community, I decided to interview several PGO players via searching on the Discord channel. My interview questions involve basic background like age, PGO level, playing frequency, and specific personal experiences when they play PGO.

Method

A qualitative method was employed. I posted an invitation message on UC Davis PGO Discord and conducted two interviews with different students via email and in person. Social study requires all kinds of opinions, especially for the investigation of the sense of belonging, a personal sensation. Interviews helped develop profound insight into the research question.

Participants

Participants (N = 2) were recruited by an online platform, Discord. I posted a similar topic twice in different channels and recruited two volunteers one after another. The participants should be UC Davis students and have joined the PGO Discord, making sure participants play a role in the PGO community.

Interview participants' descriptive information

ID	Age	Gender	PGO Level	Plays with
1	19	Male	27	Girlfriends, friends
2	21	Male	45	Alone, share it with friends, family

Measures

A semi-structured interview created myself is conducted. Overall, the interview questions focus on the players' play experience, as well as the change owing to PGO. For instance, when and why do they start playing, how often do they play, do they play alone or play with other people, have they played other Pokémon games or watched Pokémon TV series, why they join PGO discord, how frequently do they interact with other people on PGO discord, do they want to stay long on campus, and do PGO help they engage on campus differently. Follow-up questions could be raised

depending on their responses.

Data collection

One interview participant was provided with research information and interview questions via email. His answer was replied with follow-up questions, and then he replied again. Email interview takes a week long due to the participant's schoolwork. Another participant was interviewed at noon on an outdoor table and chair beside the Teaching and Learning Complex. He was asked to know the research information and was asked to consent to audio-record. The interview lasted almost 10 minutes and was transcribed. He was reimbursed free drink for his time. All identifying information of participants was removed from the report.

Data analysis:

The procedure of open coding is followed by understanding the research question, familiar with the data, assigning a word to parts of the data, grouping codes into broader categories, and defining categories. The research question is divided into two parts, "involved in the Pokémon Go community" and "sense of belonging on campus". The latter phrase can be categorized into three aspects –social interaction frequency, perceived value of opinions, and active role-taking. Several codes like "interaction" and "playmate" are underlined. The theme reflected by codes will be mentioned in the result.

The data was analyzed by concluding codes and categorizing them into several themes. Abbreviations are as follows: "Q" stands for interviewer's questions, "A" refers to participants' answers. Interview participants are denoted by "P#", where "#" shows the number of a participant.

Results

This preliminary data shows that engaging in the Pokémon GO community helps

them engage in campus life comfortably, and stay longer. The development of the sense of belonging could be explained in four facets. Players reported they have deeper engagement with other players, either online or offline. They also reported Pokémon Go provides them with a tool for knowing new people. Furthermore, PGO can provide them with a comfortable environment and help relieve pressure on campus. What's more, they found themselves staying longer on campus, no matter if they were searching for wild pokemons or defeating gyms.

Interaction online or offline

Both participants reported that they developed their interaction with other players within the PGO community, either online or offline. In many cases, PGO increases players' social activities when they are participating in game tasks.

> But if they set up a raid party, that's when I'll probably interact with them. (P1)

PGO Discord channel, as a kind of online community, also offers a way for them to interact with each other.

> Um, I mainly just, uh, looking at the information like, um, what they post, like what type of, um, events there are. (P1)
> I actually started the Discord myself as a means of connecting with other players in the Davis area. Many peers shared concerns about the lack of a Pokémon GO community in Davis, and I wanted to help make a safe space for them to share their love for the Pokémon franchise. (P2)

But schoolwork or other tasks could also reduce the interaction frequency.

> I try to interact with other people online at least a few times a week. It gets hard to maintain my relationships during the quarter as being a full-time college student can get tedious and overwhelming. (P2)

Tool for knowing more people

PGO community provides a platform for people who have a common interest to share their passions. They tend to be familiar with each other when they are playing PGO.

> You know. if I join more raid parties, that'll change, but, um, as of now, um, it just helped me get to know them. (P1)

For some players, PGO helps them to find friends.
> Pokémon Go helped me make my first friends in college. (P2)

Pressure reliever

The PGO community makes the campus more comfortable for people to stay with. Especially for freshmen, they found themselves immersed into a campus more smoothly.

> as of right now, I'm not really part of too much clubs, cause um, I just entered. Yeah. So, um, it can help me to, to let me know that there is... bit more of a community that, um, I could join right now. Um, that's not like too much of a, um, too much work to be able to join, you know, because, um, a lot of clubs you have to put a time commitment, but I don't really feel that way towards here, which helps me be able to feel more comfortable just like walking into. Um, whatever they set up, so. (P1)

> The game has established a sense of "home" and comfort within the UC Davis campus. I randomly bump into players on campus and it is always nice to be able to see and speak with familiar faces. Coming to UC Davis without knowing anyone my freshman year was terrifying, and Pokémon GO helped me make my first friends in college. (P2)

Staying longer

Most participants reported that they stayed longer after they started playing PGO. They would like to walk around for in-game events or to achieve some special game content.

> Yeah. Um, yeah, um, sometimes I find myself walking around, um, just trying to find, um, a specific Pokémon that I see, or like, or if there's a raid, or if there's, um, a nearby Pokémon that I like. Um, I'll be walking around, and then even after doing the raids with them, Um, I was walking around on my own just trying to see if there's any, like, special Pokémon I could find. (P1)

> I have found myself staying on campus longer while playing the game. I come to campus for in-game events because there are more resources available, like Pokestops and gyms. (P2)

What's more, they also mentioned they leave on campus to meet other fellows.

> It is also a great way to meet with and interact with fellow Aggies who also play Pokémon GO. (P2)

The data also suggests that a newer player always plays with previous friends and just gets to know some new players to a kind of extent. They tend to play games in high intensity. The participant who downloaded PGO last month "has been playing it pretty much every day". (P1) The older player often plays the game for a while a day. They try to connect with other players several times a week and also build up friendship with others, like participant #2 who have been playing since 2016.

Discussion

Involvement in the PGO community among UC Davis students fosters a sense of belonging on campus by intensified social interaction, the availability of new fellows, the relief of pressure, and a longer time spent on campus, as suggested by the

findings. The shared passion and use of AR technique may explain the development of such a sense. Driven by shared passion, students engage with others on Discord to share messages while participating in local raids at designated locations. This participation exposes them to a range of activities that expand their networks and occasionally lead to friendships. Students also feel less pressure when they are playing PGO, paving the foundation to integrate into campus life. Whether they are looking for rare pokémons via AR technology, or meeting up with fellows, students find themselves staying longer on campus and forming an emotional connection to some buildings and places.

PGO is meaningful for students who are not familiar with the campus, especially freshmen. The community welcomes every player who is interested in PGO. Their shared passions help them find their friends on campus and no more feel afraid of unfamiliar campus. As Vella points out, "PGO became another means with which to maintain and build on established relationships, albeit more geographically localized ones." (2019) Players like to share information and news through online social applications and organize offline raid activities from time to time, creating a good atmosphere for new members to make friends.

This study also illustrates the practicality of AR technology on the sense of belonging via combining games and the campus. Players come to and walk around the campus to participate in raid activities and look for rare pokemons, greatly increasing the time they spend on campus. It suggests that while players reestablished a connection to a place through nostalgic recollection, they develop a sense of belonging to others, as Vella and others' studies demonstrate. Geo-mapped technology utilizes games to provide a new viewpoint to enhance students' sense of belonging on campus. It seems that UC Davis could increase the connection between game content and the real world by putting a game tag on each building and sculpture.

There is also a finding that is different from the previous study. The game mode seems to have no relation to the social behaviors. The study shows that while one participant is more willing to "play with friends" (P1), another participant thinks "it provides a calming activity" (P2) when playing alone. However, another study argues "it is the inescapable game mechanic of having to play outside, combined with their

passion for the game, that draws them into unpredictable social spaces (an experience they can then share with an online community)." (Kellie Vella et al., 2019) Further study could aim to figure out the effects of the game mechanics on players' playing behaviors. Besides, it's not hard to find the amount of time a player plays PGO also determines their different gaming behaviors. Therefore, this part is also waiting to be further investigated.

Conclusion

PGO shows us the infinite potential of AR gaming. Its community helps UC Davis students develop a deeper sense of belonging to the school. Specifically, the sense of belonging is achieved from intensified social interaction, the availability of new fellows, the relief of pressure, and a longer time spent on campus. The research could provide both educators and students with a reference to establish a comfortable campus environment. Nevertheless, how the campus could be developed concerning AR gaming and how to find the balance of AR gaming and schoolwork are still waiting to be settled.

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