

LEE LI MING
PROGRAMME IN
AGEING URBANISM

Pokémon GO and Older Adults

Virtual games for older
adults¹

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Introduction

Pokémon GO is an augmented-reality (AR) game developed by Niantic Labs and released in July 2016. While the game and its predecessor, Ingress, have been widely touted as the world's first AR games, they are better understood as the latest manifestation of hybrid-reality games (HRGs) that have been around for at least the past 15 years (de Souza e Silva, 2017). HRGs share common design elements, including an emphasis on mobility, sociability and spatiality (de Souza e Silva, 2009). Past examples of HRGs include Can You See Me Now? (2001)², Mogi (2003) and Foursquare (2008). However, none of the past HRGs attained the kinds of mainstream success witnessed with Pokémon GO. At the height of its popularity in August 2016,

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

² Developed by Blast Theory, Can You See Me Now? (2001) was the world's first HRG (de Souza e Silva, 2017).

Pokémon GO had at least a hundred million users worldwide (Hollister, 2017). While its user base has shrunk, Pokémon GO continues to hold its position as one of the top games in the world by engagement: according to app analytics firm App Annie, Pokémon GO was ranked 6th by global average smartphone monthly active users (MAU) and ninth by worldwide consumer spend in Q2 2019 (Sydow, 2019).

Discovering the Pokémon GO community in Singapore

While the initial hype surrounding Pokémon GO has faded, the game continues to thrive in Singapore. In April 2019, the city-state played host to a Pokémon GO Safari Zone event – the first in Southeast Asia – which saw over 100,000 attendees. During the same month, I conducted an ethnographic study of Pokémon GO Trainers in Singapore’s public housing neighbourhoods – specifically Bukit Merah and Tiong Bahru, and to a slighter extent, Teban Gardens. I sought to understand how and why neighbourhood communities around the game were formed and are sustained. In the process, I discovered various fascinating insights that I have distilled as follows:

1: The middle-aged and older people make up a significant proportion of Pokémon GO players in Singapore

In both Bukit Merah and Tiong Bahru, the core Pokémon GO Trainers were middle-aged or older. They were the parents or grandparents of children and adolescents who made up the first wave of Pokémon GO Trainers back in August 2016. Tan³, a 72-year-old player residing in Bukit Merah said: “They [his grandsons] wanted to play it but they didn’t have their own phones because they were too young. So I downloaded the game for them to play. But I ended up playing as well and just never stopped. The only time I took a break was when I had to go for a spinal surgery [earlier this year].” This was echoed by Lin, a 53-year-old player from Tiong Bahru: “It was my daughter who downloaded the game for me. She thought it would be a fun family activity, so she made an account for me, my wife, my son, and herself.” In time, their (grand)children had lost interest and stopped playing the game. However, these players remain devoted players of the game. Crucially, Pokémon GO provides this group a way of spending time in a manner that feels positive, productive and beneficial to both their physical and social health. In particular, many older folks felt that the game was helping them to stay active, ward off dementia, and meet people around the neighbourhood.

³ All names have been pseudonymised to protect the identity of the individuals.

What makes a high-quality PokéStop nomination?

To make the most of each nomination, be sure to submit high-quality nominations that have a good chance of being eligible. These categories are considered an eligible candidate for a PokéStop:

- A location with a cool story, a place in history or educational value
- An interesting piece of art or unique architecture (Statues, paintings, mosaics, light installations, etc.)
- A hidden gem or hyper-local spot
- Public parks
- Public libraries
- Public places of worship
- Major transit stations hubs (like Grand Central Station)

These categories are **NOT** considered an eligible candidate for a PokéStop:

- Places without safe pedestrian access. All PokéStop nominations must have pedestrian access otherwise they will be rejected regardless of the quality of the PokéStop.
- Private residences & surrounding private residential property
- Locations that interfere with operations of fire stations, police stations, or hospitals
- Places on the grounds of child care centers or primary/secondary schools
- Natural features such as landscapes, mountains, waterfalls (however, man-made points of interest connected to these natural features are great, such as plaques or informational signs)
- Objects that are not permanent (such as seasonal displays)
- Adult-oriented stores or services (such as liquor stores, adult entertainment, shooting ranges, firearm stores, etc.)

Figure 1. Niantic’s criteria for PokéStop and gym locations (source: Niantic, 2019)

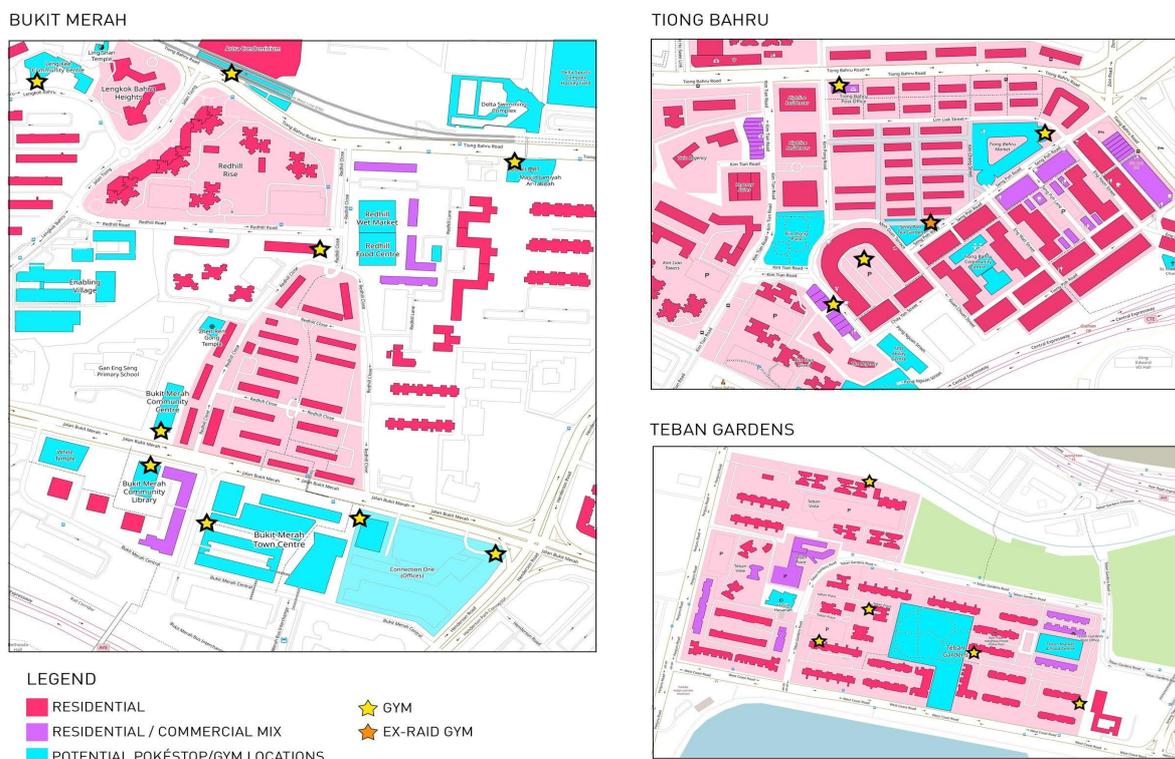


Figure 2. Maps of Bukit Merah, Tiong Bahru and Teban Gardens (accurate as of May 2019). Residential areas have been highlighted in pink, and common spaces in blue. Stars indicate the locations of Pokémon GO gyms. As shown, gyms often coincide with where residential blocks or common spaces are.

2: Densely connected cities with recreational public spaces are particularly fertile places for Pokémon GO gameplay

Pokémon GO research has been largely fixated on Pokémon capture (i.e. the catching of Pokémon). However, the vast majority of Pokémon GO activities in Singapore are concentrated within Pokémon GO gyms (i.e. battle arenas within Pokémon GO). This is because gyms allow Trainers to earn Poké coins that can be used to purchase game items and upgrades. The only other way Trainers can gain coins is by purchasing them using real-world currency. To earn coins, Trainers must simply leave a Pokémon to defend a gym against opposing teams⁴. They will then earn one Poké coin for every 10 minutes that the Pokémon spends defending the gym, up to a maximum of 50 coins per day⁵. This daily limit has morphed into a daily goal for Trainers. Besides this, Pokémon GO gyms also host Legendary Pokémon Raid Battles and Ex-Raid Battles. These are time-exclusive events that players can participate in to defeat and capture powerful and rare Pokémon not available elsewhere.

The real-world locations of Pokémon GO gyms are therefore critical for they affect

⁴ Upon reaching Level 5, a Trainer can choose between three Teams: Valor (Red), Instinct (Yellow), and Mystic (Blue). Their team affiliation shapes their subsequent gym activities, including which gyms they can battle and which Trainers they can cooperate with. For instance, a Mystic Trainer can only cooperate with other Mystic Trainers to defeat either Valor or Instinct gyms.

⁵ The game refreshes at midnight (00:00), so a Trainer has until 23:59 to earn their 50 coins.

the accessibility of these gyms for players. Figure 1 shows the criteria that Niantic uses to determine the placement of PokéStops and gyms. In Singapore, the deliberate injection of common spaces into public housing neighbourhoods by urban planners have produced a highly accessible gameplay arena⁶. Figure 2 shows how gyms often coincide with where residential blocks or common spaces are. Trainers can, therefore, easily play the game and meet other people without having to venture far from their individual homes.

3: Culture of learning and teaching one another

Language was an issue that older folks faced at the start. The default Pokémon GO application is in English which older folks were less likely to be literate in. While there is an option for users to switch the interface to other languages such as Mandarin Chinese, most players used the app in its default state. This language barrier affected players' abilities to understand the game's interface, instructions, and gameplay news. However, they were able to overcome this difficulty by reaching out to other Pokémon GO Trainers who were English-literate and happy to help.

During my fieldwork, I was repeatedly struck by this culture of teaching, learning from, and sharing with one another that has emerged between

⁶ More detailed information on what makes a high-quality PokéStop is available here: <https://niantic.helpshift.com/a/pokemon-go/?l=en&s=pokestops&f=what-makes-a-high-quality-pokestop&p=web>

Pokémon GO Trainers. When I asked a group of players at Tiong Bahru how they became friends, Ahmad who was in his sixties, said: “I remember these people always complain, cannot put the Pokémon at the gym. I always wondered why they cannot put at the gym. They say fight, fight, fight, cannot bring down. So I say, come, I bring down the gym, you put inside. That was how it was in the beginning la. Now they all experts already.” This helped me understand why, upon Ahmad’s arrival at the pavilion where the Tiong Bahru Trainers liked to gather to play, the other Trainers turned to me and said: “That’s the one you should interview! He’s the grandmaster here! We learnt everything from him.” It was very common for Trainers to direct me to other Trainers who were the “grandmasters” or experts within their community when I told them that I was conducting a research on Pokémon GO. While these experts do not play the role of a community leader in the traditional sense, they, nonetheless, formed the core of the community, simply because they were the ones that the others had gone to for help when they first started playing the game.

That said, a Trainer does not have to be an expert in the game to be a source of support and help. The case of the Mystery Box Exchange is instructive here. The Mystery Box is an item that was added to Pokémon GO in 2018. When the box is opened, the rare Pokémon Meltan would appear around the Trainer. The box will remain open for 30 minutes, and this period is the only time that the Trainer is able to catch Meltan. However, a Trainer can only obtain a mystery box if they linked their Pokémon GO application to the Nintendo Switch

Pokémon Let’s Go game. The Mystery Box exchange was, thus, a clear marketing strategy by Nintendo to promote the sales of the Switch and Pokémon Let’s Go.

However, in Singapore, the culture of learning and of sharing within Pokémon GO has encouraged some Trainers who already own a Nintendo Switch to organise meet-ups with other Trainers to share a Mystery Box with them. These meet-ups are typically organised via instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp or Telegram. Knowledge of such meet-ups, therefore, entail being a member of chat groups through which such meet-ups are being organised. However, many Trainers also learnt about these meet-ups via word-of-mouth, spread through friends within the neighbourhood. In Teban Gardens, located in West Coast Singapore, Aaron would regularly come down to the void deck with his Nintendo Switch to share Mystery Boxes with other Trainers within the neighbourhood. Each exchange takes roughly a minute. When I asked Aaron why he was willing to spend his time performing these exchanges, he said, fairly nonchalantly: “Why not? These people don’t have a Nintendo Switch, while my family has one because my son likes playing games on it. If I can help, why not?”

Such a willingness to help was not unique to the Teban community. While I was not there to witness this myself, Tan described a similar situation that takes place in Telok Blangah, a housing estate just a stone’s throw away from Bukit Merah. He said: “One of the members in the WhatsApp group I am in has a Nintendo Switch. The WhatsApp group

leader will contact him and if he's ending work at 7:30pm, we'll meet at the void deck at Block 3 Telok Blangah Rise. There's a table there. He'd bring his Nintendo Switch down and those of us who want a Meltan Box will queue up to get the box from him." He later added: "But even before I got to know of these friends, there were also people who would do meet-ups at shopping malls and give Meltan Boxes to people for free. I learnt about these meet-ups through a Telegram chatgroup."

Altogether, this culture of teaching, learning from, and sharing with one another helped make the game accessible for Trainers, even if they were initially unfamiliar with the game's interface of their mobile devices. Further, Trainers were keen to help one another as it made them feel like a useful member of the community. Crucially, this process helped solidify the ties between players that have, in some cases, translated into wider benefits. For instance, Lin and Chan, aged 53 and 83 years respectively, regularly meet to play Pokémon GO. When I accompanied them to the Pokémon GO Safari Event, I noticed that Lin was constantly keeping a lookout for Chan, who was wandering around on his own. When I asked him why, Lin shared that he had checked in on Chan the week before because Chan had not "come down to play Pokémon" for a number of days. When he did so, Chan, who suffers from low blood sugar levels, had told him that he had been absent because he was not feeling well; his blood sugar levels had taken a dip. The friendships that Pokémon GO fosters have the potential to be part of a wider network of support that older Singaporeans can rely on.

Conclusion

Pokémon GO offers us a way of reconceptualising the role of technology and especially mobile games in active aging. The primary demographic of Pokémon GO Trainers in Singapore – mainly middle-aged and older folks – also forces us to rethink our underlying assumptions about the relationships between older people and technology, and the roles that technology can play in their lives.

Sources:

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