

Games as Spatial Narratives: *Pokémon GO* Fanfiction and the Narrativization of Real-Life Gaming Experience

by

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Spatial narratives are narratives that utilize physical spaces and landscapes as their main reference point, using them to advance the plot of the narrative. Space can function as a key factor, enabling certain situations and events to occur—such as conflicts between characters that would otherwise be impossible or would, at least, unfold differently. This understanding of space as being “related to the possibilities of action to achieve certain goals” (Marques et al. 105) is referred to as strategic space. At the same time, landscapes may evoke powerful emotions in both the characters and the readers of the narrative. This in turn is referred to as emotional space, a term which is “is characterized by an experience of space associated with reactions of affective nature by evoking powerful emotions” (105). Such narratives have long existed and have been expressed through various media, employing different settings as points of reference, and constitute products of the enduringly fertile imagination of writers—or, more broadly, creators—who have sought to tell their stories in this way. It is no surprise that gaming, for some years now has been viewed as an important source for imaginary creation, with game fans creating their own stories and plotlines based on the games’ events. This is particularly evident in spatial narratives, where fans use established game worldbuilding to create their own stories. One of the most interesting cases of gaming enabling the creation of spatial narratives has been Niantic Inc.’s *Pokémon GO*. Released in 2016, *Pokémon GO* has enabled the creation of spatial narratives through its use of augmented reality technology, which blurs the boundary between physical and virtual space. This is particularly evident within the Pokémon community, or fandom, where such narratives take the form of fictional works or accounts of players’ gaming experiences. Thus, taking *Pokémon GO* as our point of reference, we realize that video games and gaming experiences can be viewed as spatial narratives that facilitate the creation of both strategic and emotional spaces.

Game worldbuilding provides valuable information that may be used strategically by numerous fans wishing to create their own narratives and elucidate certain points of their stories’ plots. Fanfiction is, as the name suggests, the creation of fictional content by fans of a specific cultural product. This may range from books to movies to, more recently, games. In their works, fans

keep several pieces of the original work that inspired them and use them as a foundation for their own creative projects. This practice is rather frequent in fan dominated spaces, also known as fandoms, where, as Thomas Brownen argues, “fans seem to enjoy flaunting the artificiality and surreality of their stories while also continuing to be engaged and immersed in the fictional worlds they help to flesh out and concretize” (9). Particular attention is thus paid to the world and the setting developed in the original work, in our case the game, as this can set some limits and define the actions that are to take place. This means that fans are also engaged with how the game’s landscapes enable specific events, such as particular terrains enhancing certain Pokémon types’ stats during battles in those environments. *Pokémon GO* shares some general spatial characteristics with other games in the Pokémon franchise, but also features some of its own particularities and showcases some additions that are taken into consideration by fans and expressed in their works. “Pokémon Go Adventures,” a piece of fanfiction first uploaded in 2016 by the user BonesxBreak, makes exemplary use of setting as strategic space, highlighting the limitations and freedoms it affords characters within that specific environment. In the first chapter of the story the image of “[j]agged rock[s], large boulders and mini mountains [being] scattered on either side of the field” is portrayed, an environment “ideal for ground type [Pokémon] who like to burrow” (BonesxBreak). This illustrates how mountainous terrain can benefit certain Pokémon and enable specific attacks, thereby clarifying how the action sequence unfolds. The strategic use of space intensifies the action, making the narration more vivid, especially at crucial moments. An exemplary use of strategic space would be the visual and auditory imagery of a Pokémon digging into the ground with such force that the opposing trainer could hear it “roaring thunderously underground” and “feel the ground vibrating beneath her feet,” creating tension and engaging the readers in the fight as well as making them wonder about who would be the one to pull the next blow (BonesxBreak).

In another 2016-uploaded work, “Boundless Journey,” the author, Kisuru, generates suspense leading to the climax of the story through the strategic positioning of the Pokémon, a Persian. As the Pokémon “[darts] around cars in the street,” the “[s]werving cars” act as obstacles for the protagonist, who is in pursuit. Thus, it becomes obvious that the very same space may also take an emotional function in the hands of fanfiction writers who are interesting in exploring more sentimental tropes through their works, occasionally relying on using space symbolically as well. In fact, as Greta Attademo argues, two types of space exist, one of which she names “empathetic [space]” which is of high significance in the story and particularly affects characters, oftentimes positively (29). I would claim that while the integration of emotional

space harmonizes with the characters and the plotline followed, the effect on the characters is not necessarily, fully positive, as demonstrated in “Boundless Journey.” The Persian, right after the description used in the previous paragraph, reaches the graveyard. Spark, the protagonist, is taken aback upon touching “[something] sleek and slippery. Bronze,” which he later identifies, in shock, as a grave marker. At the same time, the Persian displays mildly hostile behavior while keeping its head “close to another grave marker” (Kisuru). The usage of such an emotionally charged setting is enough to elicit reactions from the readers and highlight the characters’ mournful feelings. However, it is true that emotional and symbolic space have a positive effect and are present in the particular piece. This is especially true with the mention of the flower shop and flowers in general, which act as a catalyst in the end of the story, acting “like a bundle of innocence and remembrance” of the Persian’s deceased trainer. The emotions and the feeling of redemption are further intensified through the imagery of “the Persian sniff[ing] [the flowers],” which showcases its acceptance of Spark (Kisuru). Interestingly enough, “[t]his story thematically relates to the *Pokémon GO*’s Team Instinct narrative because it is the Persian’s instinct that urged it to travel so far ‘to say goodbye for one final time’ to its trainer” (Delioglanis 271). This story is connected to the original lore of the game and all the original material *Pokémon GO* offers for creative employment.

In fact, fanfiction and other types of fan-created content are not the sole application of gaming-turned-into-spatial narrative. Instead, the gaming experience of every player turns into a personal spatial narrative. That is, the player’s own physical reality merges with the stimuli provided by the game to create a new world bridging fiction with non-fiction. The game itself utilizes augmented reality technology and is heavily based on GPS technology, thus rendering the game experience personalized for every user, as no two players will have the exact same gaming experiences, given that they will move to different areas and behave differently. This claim is further supported by Sebastian Domsch who explains that “maps are not static in what they present, but respond dynamically to the actions of the player, especially [their] spatial exploration” (119). This is especially true for *Pokémon GO*, where the map is actually limited to the areas the player traverses in real life. Moreover, the areas which the player approaches have an important significance, given that more heavily-populated areas are more likely to offer more game features, such as more Pokémon to catch. Lastly, there are Pokémon that only spawn in specific regions, such as the Pokémon Sigilyph which only spawns in Egypt and Greece. This shows that players from these two countries will be offered some opportunities that other players will not. All these facts showcase how augmented reality games, like *Pokémon Go*,

may also turn everyday real life into a personalized narrative. Real space and imaginative space merge through the app and, much like fanfiction does, the game's own narrative and features act as the foundation for the creation of a personal, real-life narrative.

All the aforementioned claims, and particularly this final one, has inspired me to produce a visual representation of the concepts discussed in the form of a drawing. This comic-style representation shows a figure, the Player, playing *Pokémon GO* on her mobile phone. The people around the Player move as usual, each one colored differently to indicate the different personalities and different lives. All characters, even the Player, are faceless, indicating that, like ordinary people, their multifaceted nature cannot be captured by fixed features. The background is not anything out of the ordinary either, being merely a sidewalk by a wall. The Player is engaged in a virtual fight trying to capture a Jigglypuff, which she seems to succeed in. The last, larger image is pretty similar to the first one, only this time we are presented with the “effect” of the augmented reality nature of the game, or rather a new reality is showcased, utilizing both elements of what seems to be the physical reality of the figures as well as the game's features. It is only the Player who can comprehend this hybrid reality to its fullest; it is her own mental creation after all. The drawing aims at highlighting the main feature of the game, that is the use of augmented reality. However, it also depicts the concept of spatial narrativization, especially how gaming may transform everyday life into personal spatial narratives. The Player herself is an ordinary person, and her distinctive point, that is the Pokémon trainer hat, only appears in the final comic strip, as an outcome of her immersion into the game, or rather of the merging of the two worlds: the physical and the virtual. The Player's reality is now enhanced, since the game's elements are added in the physical environment. Thus, multiple aspects are combined in this personal narrative that is created at that very moment. The familiar places that the Player has walked by throughout her lifetime now gain a strategic significance, allowing her to make progress in her journey as a Pokémon trainer. It is exactly this familiarity of the physical space that also leads the Player to an even greater, deeper emotional reaction; an odd feeling of nostalgia of past memories made in the very same space, mixed with newfound excitement over the virtual achievements she now accomplishes. Thus, the use of emotional space is also present. Yet, in the end, it all returns to the narrativization of everyday life, as the Player's stroll around the town has now acquired an additional goal to accomplish. It is not just another stroll; it is the Player actively and purposefully taking further steps toward advancing in their progress and fulfilling their—perhaps life-long—goal: to become a Pokémon Master.

All things considered, games can very well constitute spatial narratives, acting as an inspiration for imaginative creation. The narratives created may take the form of published content, drawing on information already provided by the game—here, the bridging effect *Pokémon GO* offers between physical and virtual reality—to help players advance the plotline, using the game as a reference. In addition to supporting plot development, space may be employed to elicit powerful emotional reactions, underscore key aspects of the original work—the game itself—and impart a more literary and affective dimension. Yet, the very experience of playing the game may narrativize the player’s own life through the technologies it employs. The use of augmented reality presents the viewers with a new, but not unfamiliar reality, giving them the opportunity to create their own Pokémon narrative by turning their own setting into the game’s background. It is this element of gaming that is likely to open new pathways, as it offers the chance to create innovative and more interactive literary narratives.

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