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RTA101 / Section (111): Introduction to Media Theory
Midterm Paper - Analysis of Pokemon Go

The Pokemon Go phenomenon is one of the largest digital-cultural movements seen since the beginning of the digital age, and the very existence of this smart phone game is changing the way we interact and connect with one another on a number of levels. The reasons behind its wild success and popularity can be examined under the scope of media theory to help us determine why its become such a wide-scale, revolutionary movement. Using popular media theories such as Marshall McLuhan's the medium is the message and the global village, as well as Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding, we can narrow and determine the major key factors behind the viral success of Pokemon Go. When examining McLuhan's theory that the medium is the message we can begin to look past the content of the game itself and measure the magnitude of the technology itself - the mapping and augmented reality engines that the game uses are unique tools that have never seen such revolutionary use before. In McLuhan's theory of the global village, we can begin to examine how society's interconnectivity and heavy focus on social media and share-ability allowed the game to flourish the way it has. Hall's theory of encoding/decoding also helps us understand how the players interact and decode meaning from the game itself. Players who are familiar with the Pokemon brand will instantly identify with the game and its principles, and the fact that the brand has already achieved world-wide success prior to Pokemon Go greatly increases its popularity through its appeal to preferred readers.

Canadian professor and philosopher Marshall McLuhan first put forth the idea that the 'medium is the message'. Within the context of Pokemon Go, this is simply to say that the platform and augmented reality technology has a much larger impact on the fundamental nature of society than any message or content being delivered through the game (Tremblay, 564). While the game itself is new and exciting, the primary focus should be on the technology that makes the game possible. When we look at the scale of Pokemon Go's success, it seems as if overnight it took the world by storm. It surpassed social media giants such as Twitter and Facebook in active users within a few weeks of its release (Perez, techcrunch.com). The augmented reality technology overlays the real world captured through the players camera with digitally generated images that appear in specific or random locations. Even local businesses set up 'lure modules', a purchasable in-game item that attracts Pokemon and monsters to the location, which in turn attracts real life players looking to capture them and driving up business. While the target demographic of the game is obviously teenagers and young adults, it has irrevocably changed our social landscape as a whole. Instead of sitting inside playing video games, players are forced out into the real world to explore, socialize, and interact with others in order to meet in-game objectives. People of all ages who would otherwise never be exposed to Pokemon and augmented reality now see it on every media source around the world. This phenomenon can aggressively push companies to of all brands to invest heavily in augmented reality technologies. Perhaps in the future women who don't have the patience to line up for a fitting room at a clothing store can opt for an augmented reality fitting session. The possibilities for this technology are endless, but improvement and innovation are rarely driven by science

itself and almost always by market demand (Lamantia, uxmmatters.com) This ties in well with McLuhan's theory because as we examine the platform of the game, the focus becomes increasingly on the technology and its potential, and much less on the content. In relation to his theory, McLuhan once stated that "it is all too typical that the content of any medium blinds us to the character of that medium". The new and exciting nature of the game has blinded many of us to the true character of the medium and its potential to create even more change moving forward (Yu, fortune.com).

In another one of McLuhan's theories, before the existence of the world wide web, he predicts a 'global village': the world interconnected by a central electronic nervous system. This idea was revolutionary for its time as it highlighted the rapid integration of technology into society. The idea of a global village is highly relevant to Pokemon Go's success due to its share-ability through social media and the internet. The first time most people heard about the game was most likely through a social media post with screenshots of Pokemon on the streets or sitting next to friends. Jon Michaeli, marketing and business director at EVP says "it's critical to create shareable moments that your users will want to spread to their friends and extended network. That's where the concept of surprise and delight comes in - providing unexpected pleasant experiences that our users want to share, and hence market our app for us." (Mayer, techsauce.com). The developers of Pokemon Go intentionally capitalized on the idea of using shareable moments as their primary method of marketing. User created content such as pictures, videos, internet memes, and various other types of social media posts made sure that the game was on everyone's lips regardless of whether or not they

actually play it. This is true of many things that go viral; something that is unique, easily accessible, and sharable through social media will quickly gain traction and shift into the mainstream. This draws a lot of parallels to past phenomena. In the 1950s when rock and roll was first emerging, parents would disallow their children and teenagers from listening to it as it was rebellious and unfamiliar. However, children and teenagers were able to use Sony's new pocket-sized radios in order to listen to rock and roll music. In turn this drove up business exponentially and served as a catalyst for manufacturers to improve the quality of this product, quickly shifting it into the mainstream for all (Patel, zainpatel.com)

Jamaican cultural-theorist Stuart Hall first introduced reception theory and the encoding/decoding model. Reception theory focuses on how the recipient of a message receives and gives meaning to that message. Encoding is how the sender of the message encodes the message with meaning, while decoding is how the recipient of the message takes meaning from it (Chandler, visual-memory.co.uk) In Pokemon Go, the encoder is the game developer while the decoder is the player. Each individual player will decode different meanings from the game and develop their own unique strategies to negotiate with it. This is because the game is rather ambiguous to the average player in the sense that there's no formal tutorial or guide that tells the player how to play. For many, asking simple questions to fellow players about the game is just as important as completing objectives and catching the Pokemon themselves. From the sharing of this information, a gaming experience with a sense of community more than anything that has been seen in recent times arose. However any individual player's

experience will vary greatly depending on where they play, when they play, and whom they play with. Someone who is familiar with the Pokemon brand and its basic principles may become an instant expert on the game despite never playing it before. Under Hall's encoding model this can be considered a preferred reader; someone who understands and identifies with the game and its principles. In general this is most likely to occur when the encoder and decoder share a common background. In this case that shared background is the Pokemon brand itself; a brand that has seen world-wide success prior to Pokemon Go, and resonates with a lot of teenagers and young adults who recognize the brand from earlier years (Ross, massivelyoverpowered.com)

Examining these theories helped us to narrow down and determine the key factors behind the viral success of Pokemon Go. Each theory lends itself to an important reason behind the achievement and progress of the game. The mapping and augmented reality technology is something that will lead future innovations moving forward, technologies ultimately brought to the forefront of society by the game. The share-ability through social media and the internet propelled Pokemon Go to its success with little to no marketing by the developer itself. The Pokemon brand helped to capture millions of players around the world who already identified with the brand from previous interactions with it. Overall, each theory stands up well to the most modern example of a media phenomenon. The principles that these theorists put forward and predicted are still relevant in the most advanced digital age the world has seen.

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