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The Game *Pokemon Go* as a Crosscultural Phenomenon

The gaming culture of modern childhood takes place not only in real space, but in a virtual one too. These two components (two planes of development) are often viewed in isolation from one another. This study investigates the completely new phenomenon of augmented reality gaming through the lens of Pokemon Go, *and it describes how the game has been able to transcend social, physical, and virtual spaces. We focus on the most active group of users of this*

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mobile app, namely teenagers. We describe how the game satisfies the psychological needs of this age group. We attempt to understand the cross-cultural phenomenon of this game and the course of development these new forms of activity by modern teenagers may take in the future.

Introduction

Computer games have always been popular among teenagers and adolescents. This virtual activity has been studied both from the point of view of the problems of virtual reality and the risks associated with addictive behavior and aggression as well as from the point of view of the opportunities that this environment offers for socialization. The development of mobile technologies, the expansion of Internet bandwidth and data transfer rates, the large number of modules that are embedded in even the most basic smartphone models have together created an infrastructure that has allowed the emergence of a completely new genre of computer games based on augmented reality. The first mobile multiplayer role-playing gaming app in the augmented reality space that is based on physical location is *Pokemon Go*, which was released on the world market in July 2016.

The game has become a phenomenon for several reasons:

1. The app represents a leap forward in interactive game technology.
2. It is the first game to implement augmented reality on mobile devices.
3. The app has been responsive to the needs of various cultures.
4. The game was the first to act as an integrator of social, physical, and virtual spaces.

Pokemon Go has been the most popular with a primarily teenage audience. Despite the fact that many of us have not played the game, it is impossible not to notice young people standing stock still with their phones and performing "magic actions" on city streets. This phenomenon runs counter to the idea of a teenager as an inert person with no desire to go outside

and who spends a lot of time in front of the computer screen. We are dealing with a new phenomenon that is changing how people spend their leisure time and stimulating the creation of a new subculture based on a new kind of interaction. At the same time, the popularity of the game is evidence that the developers have hit the target. The game meets the needs of modern adolescents, and this is the secret of its popularity. This is the value of this material as a subject of investigation. An analysis of the app allows us to identify the special needs of modern adolescents.

Computer games as a research field

Computer games have been evolving over the last half-century. The founding father is considered to be physicist William Higinbotham, who created the first computer game *Tennis for Two* in 1958 (Kent 2010). In 1961, students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology created the game *Spacewar!*, which was subsequently modified to allow the player to play not against the computer, but with another user. In 1991, the first online game, *Ultima Online*, was released, which forced developers to rethink computer games. A key feature of the previous generation games is the centrality of the player, because these games unfold depending on the actions that are taken by the individual. In the new generation of massively multiplayer games, gameplay unfolds depending on the game reality, which is shaped by thousands of users simultaneously (Kim 2002; Park et al. 2002).

The advent of computer games has attracted the attention of researchers from various disciplines, including psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, etc. Thus, the growing interest of the social sciences in this phenomenon is clearly illustrated by statistics about the number of articles on games in the field of psychology based on data from the Web of Science (Figure 1).[1]

Nevertheless, researchers have not reached a consensus about the benefits and harms of online games. On the one hand, some researchers have concluded that online games that contain elements of violence lead players to reproduce aggressive behavior in real life (Camagey et al. 2007) and desensitize them to asocial
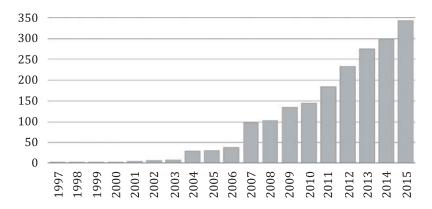
Figure 1. **Number of Published Articles Per Year on the Topic of Online Games According to the Web of Science**

behavior (Bushman et al. 2010). Besides aggression, commentators have noted that players are liable to becoming addicted to computer games. As a consequence of addiction, adolescents may have poor academic performance (Hauge and Gentile 2003), exhibit increased levels of irritability, and become socially isolated (Griffiths and Davies, 2005). On the other hand, a number of studies have shown that online games are effective for socializing teenagers and expanding their social circle (Harris 2001). Each game genre has its own particular educational effect. For example, multiplayer online games facilitate the development of social communication skills, and simulators can stimulate the desire to learn about the natural sciences (Egenfeldt-Nielsen 2006).

It should be noted that modern online games feature a diverse range of plots and genres. Thus, in role-playing games the user controls a character that he or she has chosen. This character sports a number of characteristics and abilities that can be developed as the game unfolds. Simulation games (or simulators) simulate the management of a certain process. The player is given the opportunity to participate in a race in a sports car or to take the helm of an airplane. Shooters also constitute another genre of games. In these, players can use a variety of strategies to

destroy their opponents or capture various goals. All of these genres of online games are characterized by the fact that the player's actions never exit the given virtual reality.

However, with the advent of augmented reality games, the gameplay becomes part of the material world. The online game *Pokemon Go* that has been released for smartphones has become especially popular. It gained 25 million users just a week after the game's official release.[2] After the game was released, reports began to circulate in the media about the dangers associated with the game and emerging cases of addiction. However, commentators also commented on a number of positive aspects of the game. The app forced players to go outside, become reacquainted with the cultural sights of the city, or to learn new routes.[3] Moreover, the fact that gameplay requires the player to constantly move around to achieve game objectives necessitates players to increase their levels of physical activity. The game has opened up a new field for communication and socialization. The app has a clearly social character. In this article, we will focus on the positive implications of the popularity of *Pokemon Go* among modern teenagers, as well as on the role of this game in adolescent communication, self-determination, and leisure practices.

Pokemon Go gameplay from the player's point of view

The game *Pokemon Go* can only be played on mobile phones. The app is listed in the Apple App Store and Google Play marketplaces of more than 100 countries around the world.[4] The game has not yet been officially released in Russia, but players have found a way of installing the game unofficially by using special software and user accounts from other countries where the app is already available.[5]

After downloading the game and launching the app, the user selects a character (a guy or girl) to play as, adjusts the character's appearance, chooses one of the three teams to join, and explores the city in search of Pokemon. It is worth noting that the appearance of the characters is culturally neutral. The dress code is sporty, and there are no obvious annoying elements. The

game *Pokemon Go* is location-based, so players literally walk around the city and observe their character on an interactive smartphone map. Pokemon (creatures with supernatural powers from the animated series of the same name) appear at set intervals on the screen and in certain places. The game allows you to use your phone's camera to design an augmented reality environment in which fabulous characters appear in real time.

The map contains two types of objects: PokeStops where you can collect balls to capture Pokemon and other items and PokeGyms where Pokemon from different teams can fight with each other. These objects are frequently located in public places, near attractions, and in parks where players can gather. The game is designed in such a way that the number of bonuses that you can receive and the speed by which you progress through the game (by leveling up your character) both depend on the amount of time spent, distance traveled, and number of activities performed in the game.

Players are increasingly seeking out companions to catch Pokemon with on social networks and instant messengers.[6] Players are meeting up to compete with each other at PokeGyms. To make themselves quickly identifiable to their fellow team members in places where there might be many others, players can purchase thematic team accessories for a symbolic price, including key chains, T-shirts, and stickers.

The psychological profile of teenagers

According to the Russian school of psychology, teenagers mainly participate in activities where they can engage in intimate and personal communication. This type of socialization acts as "a special activity practiced by teenagers in groups. It allows teenagers to achieve self-affirmation within this group and to implement the norms of adult relationships" (D.B. Elkonin 1989, p. 18). Activities where participants can win social esteem and recognition are especially important. Teenagers try to identify and decipher signals to understand how they appear in the eyes of others when they socialize. This process of simultaneous

reflection and observation that teenagers engage in to evaluate themselves in terms of how they believe others perceive them is an important element in identity building. Erik Erikson believes that this is one of the key processes of this life stage (Erikson 1996). When asking themselves the question "Who am I?," teenagers are prone to finding answers to this question in even the most insignificant signs and events. At the same time, the process of identity formation requires constant differentiation, and it becomes more and more meaningful as one's circle of significant persons grows larger.

Testing oneself plays an important role in the psychology of growing up. This process represents a unique mechanism by which subject formation (sub"ektivatsiya) takes place. When they test themselves by taking action, teenagers perceive the action itself to constitute a condition of self-perception and a way of experimenting with themselves (Polivanova 1996). When considered by themselves, these attempts at action provide the necessary test area for safe experimentation and, therefore, constitute a way of living life to the fullest during this crisis period.

Now let us examine the mechanism behind the game *Pokemon Go* and then try to answer the question: Why is this game attractive to modern teenagers?

The computer game as a means of communication

In this case, we can examine *Pokemon Go* as a communication tool or as a factor that acts as a linchpin to communication. The game is predicated on collective participation. Players must pool together to achieve victory at a PokeGym, search for Pokemon, and train them. The online game provides a framework for the development of wide-reaching social ties (Konovalova 2016), which promotes active online communication between players. Communication goes beyond the game itself. Participants create groups and discussion forums on social networks (VKontakte and Facebook) and chat rooms in instant messenger apps (WhatsApp, Viber, and Telegram) where they discuss the game itself and

arrange meetings where they can play the game together and hang out.

However, there is a feature in particular that distinguishes *Pokemon Go* from a number of other existing online games. Given the fact that the game is location-based and that the players can literally see each other, it is natural that game communications have transcended the online world and entered the offline space. Virtual space as a rule implies the complete or partial anonymity of the players as well as freedom of expression and behavior. However, when players are physically co-present, communication is taken to a whole new level: anonymity disappears, text messages are replaced by personal conversations, and players are able to spend quality time together. The game provides youth with a new way of spending time with friends as well as of making new acquaintances, because the game itself provides the excuse to do this. It even requires players to make new friends and to join up with others. Online communication has influenced the everyday behaviors of modern teenagers to such an extent that socializing in the courtyard with one's neighbors has become a rare phenomenon. Young people now may not know the people who live in the same apartment building or in neighboring buildings. This is a feature of the urban lifestyle (Virt 2005). However, *Pokemon Go* has engendered the formation of entire groups based on a shared interest in the game. Teenagers are getting to know and communicate with their peers, including other players at school, neighbors, friends at the playground, and in the same apartment building, thanks to this game. The list of places that can be visited in the game is expanding, because the game's concept requires the player to actively move around the city, play in new places where Pokemon gather, as well as to catch them at PokeGyms. Thus, the game perfectly satisfies the needs of teenagers. It provides a platform for intimate personal communication. In addition, *Pokemon Go* has supported the trend of the convergence of online and offline communications that is so characteristic of the current situation (Polivanova and Koroleva 2016).

The game as a way of testing oneself

Pokemon Go allows teenagers to answer two key questions: "Who am I?" by identifying with their character in the game and "Can I do this?" by completing challenges and winning at PokeGyms (catching rare Pokemon or items).

The teenager is focused on testing himself in various ways, including intellectually, socially, personally, and interpersonally. The game in this case provides these opportunities, because it facilitates communication, cooperation, and at times the use of dexterity and cunning. Teenagers test themselves many times while playing *Pokemon Go*. It provides a safe space to do so, because teenagers can test themselves without risking any serious repercussions. It turns out that that teenagers do want to test themselves. They do so in order to answer the questions "Who am I?" and "What am I capable of doing?"

This is how the young person acquires experience at taking actions, and since testing oneself does not radically change the situation in any way, the teenager is insulated from making any possible mistakes with permanent consequences. The game provides a controlled imaginary situation where teenagers can feel what it is like to take responsibility for their own actions. Thus, teenagers can resolve conflicts in the game precisely in such a way that in real life and under real conditions would be impossible (Goryacheva 2008).

Virtual badges in the game

The teenager tries to understand who he is by identifying with the character in the game, who has clear character traits. Badges are virtual awards that the player can use to visually communicate achievements, knowledge, skills, and strengths that have been acquired in the game. The level that the player reaches represents an iconic space of teenage subculture. Badges provide a way for the teenager to show others who he is and what he has achieved. These virtual badges can be compared with the badges in the boy scout movement that is popular in the United States.

Identification with the game and obtaining high achievements in it allow players to acquire status on a team composed of peers: since the norms and values of the youth subculture are formed within groups, they are mandatory to master and provide a way for teenagers to affirm themselves.

The teenager is able to develop each link in his self-consciousness through these symbolic systems. In this character game, clothing, shoes, and appearance are also important criteria. Teenagers can also explore their sexual identification when choosing the gender of their characters.

Parasocial relations

Teenagers tend to dive into the world of fantastic imagery to compensate for their dissatisfaction with their position in the system of relationships (Fridman and Kulagina, 1991, p. 33). *Pokemon Go* features Pokemon, which are fictional animated characters that are imposed on the map of the real world through the technology of augmented reality. They bring the parasocial relationship that exists between the player and the game character to a new level. We can talk about a parasocial presence, which is a phenomenon that allows an individual or group to immerse themselves in the media space while overcoming spatial limitations, which gives rise to a sense of personal involvement, consent, and participation (UNESCO 2011). This game has strengthened the effects of social interaction, giving them a larger scale, dynamism, and influence. According to UNESCO, these trends have colossal educational potential.

Conclusion

Pokemon Go has revolutionized computer software and mobile apps by allowing players to interact in multiple spaces at the same time. For the first time, the social, physical, and virtual spaces have become intertwined. Augmented reality is no longer just science fiction. The potential of this technology for modern children and teenagers beyond simple entertainment should be the subject of future analysis and

research. At the same time, we can say that the game already quite accurately satisfies the psychological needs of teenagers. The app facilitates the socialization of teenagers. It acts as a binding factor that ties them together. Unlike typical computer games, the fact that the players are physically present together means that they can no longer be anonymous. Players will be more likely to engage in live communication during the game, including in new environments and new places. The game is an accessible and safe way of testing oneself. It provides the teenager with a way of understanding who he is and what he is capable of while insulating himself from the consequences of making mistakes. The virtual badges in the game allow you to record your own success, visualize it, compare yourself with others and achieve status on a team, thereby allowing you to form your own identity. The status that teenagers achieve in the game provide them with a way to show others who they are and what they have achieved. A strong parasocial presence makes the game popular for teenagers and valuable for education.

Notes

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2. SurveyMonkey Intelligence Blog. "Has *Pokemon GO* peaked? The data say 'Yes.'" https://www.surveymonkey.com/business/intelligence/peak-pokemon-go.

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