Monsters in Our World: Narrative Transportation in Pokémon Go’S Mixed Reality

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How does the experience of narrative transportation differ when brand stories are emplaced in the physical world amidst a nexus of spatial and social relations, instead of a separate imaginary story world? We draw on qualitative data from the case of Pokémon GO to answer this question.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Storytelling is a central part of the consumption experience (van Laer et al. 2014). Traditionally, consumers are exposed to brand stories through advertisements (e.g., Phillips and McQuarrie 2010) and social media (e.g., van Laer and de Ruyter 2010). Recent innovations in augmented reality (Scholz and Smith 2016) and geo-media (Lapenta 2011) have provided marketers with additional opportunities to tell their brand stories: ones that are emplaced in consumers’ everyday environments. For example, transit riders might find themselves in the presence of zombies as part of an augmented reality campaign to promote the TV show The Walking Dead.

While emerging spatial media offer tremendous potential for telling brand stories, the ways in which consumers respond to these geo-mediated narratives are little understood. Previous research has introduced narrative transportation theory (Green and Brock 2002) to explore how consumers are drawn into a narrative and enjoy a story. However, as we will describe below, central assumptions of narrative transportation theory are called into question when the story is told through a nexus of GPS-enabled mobile devices, location-based content, and augmented reality technologies that create multiple realities through “the subjective coming together in time and space of material and virtual experiences” (Graham, Zook and Boulton 2012, p. 465).

Pokémon GO is a well-known story situated in this type of mixed reality. In this research, we explore the mechanics of narrative transportation when a story is told and experienced through geo-media that create a mixed reality. We present findings from a qualitative study on Pokémon GO and contribute understanding about narrative transportation in the context of this new storytelling approach.

Narrative Transportation

The role of stories in consumer behavior has frequently been explored through the concept of narrative transportation (Gerrig 1993; Green and Brock 2002), which describes the process of getting lost in a story. This detachment from reality and immersion in a narrative world has been shown to affect consumers’ attitudes and intentions (van Laer 2014), as well as their enjoyment and engagement with a story (Green, Brock and Kaufman 2004).

Previous research has predominantly explored narrative transportation in the context of audio and/or visual media, while interactive media such as computer games have received comparatively less attention (Green and Jenkins 2014). Some studies have explored narrative transportation in completely virtual environments such as computer games (Elson et al. 2014) and virtual reality (Ahn, Le and Bailenson 2013), but no study, to our knowledge, has thus far examined narrative transportation in the context of mixed realities that emplaces the story in the physical environment of the story receiver.

Geo-mediated stories are similar to stories told via digital games and virtual environments by virtue of their highly interactive and social nature (Biocca 2002). However, the glaring difference is that geo-mediated stories are emplaced in the physical environment of the receiver. Unlike digital games or virtual environments where the story is told on digital screens or in self-contained heads-up displays, respectively, geo-mediated stories unfold in the everyday spaces of consumers.

The emplacement of story content in consumers’ physical surroundings is at odds with core assumptions of narrative transportation theory, which posit the story world as entirely separate from the physical and social reality of everyday life (van Laer et al. 2014). Furthermore, the act of transporting is typically described as creating a narrative in the story receiver’s head. While this emphasizes the agency of the story receiver, it also characterizes the task of narrative transportation as a purely cognitive and emotive process of creating mental imagery associated with the story’s text. The paradox of geo-mediated storytelling is thus that the world of origin, which is supposed to be left behind through a cognitive process, is exactly the same place where the story unfolds, and where story receivers create a narrative while being embodied in the mixed reality of the story-world/world-of-origin hybrid.

Given the emplaced nature of stories told via geo-media, and the embodied nature of how these stories are consumed, our research aims to explore how narrative transportation is experienced in mixed realities. In particular, we are interested in how story elements such as characters and plot lines are experienced as “real”, and more generally how the story world becomes stabilized in the physical world and accepted as part of everyday life.

Conceptual Lens: Mixed Realities

Mixed realities describe hybridized experiences in which virtual content is inexorably linked with physical materialities through a mutual constitution of media, content and space (Farman 2012; Graham et al. 2012). Human geographers and communications scholars have suggested “geo-media” (Lapenta 2011) and “spatial media” (Leszczynski 2015) as terms that describe the nexus of location-aware devices, geo-coded content, and augmented reality technologies that gives rise to mixed realities, in - for example - large-scale games such as Pokémon GO and Ingress that constantly interweave the story of the game with the actuality of the physical world where the game is played (Chess 2014).

Mixed realities research thus recognizes the important role of (narrative) content, for example, when exploring how “code blends content and place” (Graham et al. 2012, p. 468). In particular, previous mixed realities research has detailed how geo-mediated content produces unstable representations of space that are always ‘of-the-moment’ and remade through the embodied, social, and technological practices of those that produce these mixed realities. Content shapes the meaning of certain places, for example, when global infrastructure is made invisible in Ingress, and patterns of social relations, for example, when Ingress players need to interact with strangers to achieve certain game-related goals (Chess 2014).

Context & Methods

We investigate geo-mediated narrative transportation in the context of Pokémon GO. Pokémon is a narrative brand centered around the adventures of Ash — the Pokémon trainer — and an assortment of monsters. The entire Pokémon experience — collecting, training, and battling against other Pokémon — has been confined to this fictional world, until the release of Pokémon GO in July 2016. Pokémon GO uses geo-location technology to merge consumers’ real-world environments (e.g., the city they are walking through) with game-relevant content such as landmarks (i.e., “Pokéstops”), activ-
ity zones (i.e., “gyms”), and most crucially brand story characters (i.e., Pokémons). It allows consumers to take on the role of Ash, the trainer, and live out the Pokémon experience in real life.

We study narrative transportation in the context of Pokémon GO through unstructured, in-depth interviews. We interviewed 13 respondents in August and September, 2016, and focused our discussion, broadly, on understanding consumer experience with Pokémon GO. The interviews lasted, on average, 60-90 minutes, and were transcribed, coded, and analyzed. It was through the iterative coding and analysis process that we came to focus analytically on narrative transportation. To further inform our understanding of the phenomenon and data, we also actively played the game and read media coverage.

Findings

Geo-media enable storytellers to emplace narratives in the physical world amidst a nexus of spatial and social relations. Under these conditions, transportation morphs from being a mental journey in an imaginary, external world into a joint cognitive and embodied process that interacts with the lifeworld of the consumer. In our findings, which are visually represented in Figure 1, we explore the experience of narrative transportation with geo-media, along with the factors that support it.

Dual-Move Narrative Transportation

Geo-media enable a form of dual-move transportation: the narrative moves into the physical lifeworld of the consumer, just as the consumer moves into the story world. We find that consumers speak of story world elements and physical world entities interchangeably as if they co-exist with each other in the same reality. They visit story world Pokéstops and Pokémon gyms, just as they would visit bus stops or brick-and-mortar gyms (Quote 1.1). They imbue the Pokémon monsters with agentic qualities, describing how they live out in the world as independent entities that possess the will and ability to evade capture (Quote 1.2). Consumers are deeply immersed in the story and internalize the role of Pokémon trainers as they go on organized day long ‘hunts,’ as well as plan their schedule and travel routes around their participation in the narrative.

These attitudes and behaviors provide compelling evidence that consumers experience transportation into the Pokémon story world, even as it is integrated in their own physical world. This dual move stands in contrast to traditional conceptualizations of narrative transportation in which the consumer, only, is cognitively transplanted into a separate, imaginary world. The question with transportation through geo-media becomes: how do stories come to be stabilized in the physical world and accepted as a part of everyday life?

Narrative Emplacement in the Physical World

Geo-media facilitated stories are spatialized. The characters are in one’s home and the plot plays out around the consumer amidst day-to-day activities. These are not the ethereal worlds of fictional books and movies. We find that perceptions of, and movement through, space is shaped by this location-based story content (Quote 2.1). Consumers seek out and express excitement about areas that feature a high concentration of Pokéstops, or that are rumored to be home to rare Pokémon. They also make pilgrimages to new places and move deliberately (e.g. zig-zagging, travelling in loops, etc.) through space as a result of this narrative content. The impact of locative content on space is represented by the dotted arrow pointing towards ‘space’ in Figure 1.

Consumers also engage in efforts to cognitively validate the status of the emplaced narrative in the physical world (solid arrow pointing away from ‘space’ in Figure 1). They identify pre-existing parallels between story content and the physical space in which it is embedded, helping to bolster perceived story verisimilitude. For example, they search for, and express delight about, instances in which Pokémon characters appear to fit realistically in the spatial environment (e.g. when they are sitting on a sofa) (Quote 2.2). Consumers even engage in more imaginative sensemaking to help construct the vision of a hybridized reality. For example, they draw on their knowledge of the physical world to explain aspects of the story world, such as the localized presence of Pokémon characters in certain places, which they attribute to the existence of nests, a concept not integrated into Pokémon GO. In doing so, consumers act in co-creative capacity to help elaborate on the ontology of the story world, and make it seem more plausible. In both examples, the fact that the narrative content adheres to the properties of the physical world helps to spatially validate the story world for consumers.

Social Story Experiences

Geo-media embeds stories in the physical world, and that means those stories often have bearing on social relations or are intertwined with those relations. Due to the public and distributed nature of the story world, consumers regularly report interacting with strangers also immersed in the Pokémon GO narrative. Yet, consumers’ most consistent and profound social experiences are with those they already know: co-workers playing with each other outside of office hours; old friendships, forged over past Pokémon games, being awakened through play after periods of dormancy; close friends altering the rhythm and routines of their relationships with Pokémon-related trips (Quote 3.1). In this way, the story narrative structures social relations, providing people with a reason to be together as well as a social script to follow.

In turn, these social relations validate the locative content and make it seem more real and appealing. Acquaintances and strangers, alike, talk about story world elements, visit Pokéstops and hunt Pokémon, and share pictures of their captures; they are creating shared knowledge, participating in rituals, and enacting norms and values. In short, they are constructing a culture that recognizes the existence of a hybridized narrative-physical reality. In this culture, some consumers even project social qualities on to the story world characters themselves, imagining that Pokémon have social relations with humans, pets, and other Pokémon (Quote 3.2). Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that geo-media storytelling can have powerful impact on social relations and the experience of narrative transportation.

Validated Imagery & Embodied Transportation Practices

Prior work on narrative transportation highlights the importance of story elements such as character and plot, and those cannot be underestimated in the context of geo-media either. Yet, as previously noted, the emplaced nature of geo-mediated stories in the real world also necessitates that these story elements be validated both spatially and socially through, for example, thoughtful integration into the surrounding context and social relations. Consumers, as story interpreters and co-creators, play a critical role in this process, imagining and discussing undeveloped aspects of the story (e.g. the existence of Pokémon nests and relations between Pokémon monsters and pets).

Another way that transportation differs with geo-media is that it is an embodied practice: the story character’s body and the consumer’s body are one and the same, travelling around the hybridized physical-story world. If a consumer wants to experience a particular narrative thread, he or she needs to physically access it. And some aspects of a story – those set in an ocean or in a foreign country – can be physically, socially, monetarily hard to access (Quote 4.1). It is not as simple as turning the page or pressing play. Consumers
go on hunts that leave them hot and sweaty, they get lost, and they avoid particular places because embodied narrative transportation is accompanied by real and felt risks (Quote 4.2).

**Discussion**

In this research, we explored how to conceptualize narrative transportation when a story is told using geo-media, creating a mixed reality through emplacing a story world within the story receiver’s world of lived experience. We have found that narrative transportation, in this case, involves more than just creating mental imagery to access a separate world. It involves embodied practices and mental acts of validation that create and stabilize a mixed reality in which the story world “feels real” as it is seamlessly emplaced in the physical world. Narrative transportation in mixed reality thus requires researchers and marketers to rethink the environment in which a story is consumed, as well as how the story is produced.

Narrative transportation research, due to its focus on laboratory studies, typically downplays the role of the environment. If considered at all, the environment is conceptualized as a locus of distraction, for example when a crying baby in a movie theater attracts attention to the real world, rather than the story world, and thus makes transportation difficult or impossible (Green et al. 2004). However, even in more traditional media, the environment can cross-fertilize mental imagery, for example when someone reads *Heart of Darkness*, a story set on a boat traversing the Congo River, next to a bubbling stream. This type of environmental propping of mental imagery (Kuzmičová 2015), while typically ignored in narrative transportation research, becomes especially important for people and brands who wish to use geo-media to tell their stories.

**REFERENCES**


