

Bachelor thesis

Gotta Lure 'Em All!

The commodification of physical encounters and social connections in Pokémon GO



Bachelor thesis

Fleur Stiels

f.stiels@students.uu.nl

6912621

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Supervisor: Jasper van Vught

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Abstract

This bachelor thesis studies how Niantic's location-based game Pokémon GO commodifies physical encounters and social connections of players, which can be viewed as free labour, or so-called playbour. Theories on commodification, playbour, surveillance capitalism, the social side of gaming and pervasive games are used to explain how Niantic can profit off social activity of players in the game. Methods used to research this phenomenon were inspired by Van Dijk's platform analysis and included Stanfill's discursive interface analysis and Anderson's autoethnography. This thesis is divided into three levels of analysis; it will start with providing an overview of the service Niantic offers at (small) businesses of sponsoring PokéStops and its revenue model. Then it shows different types of affordances in the game's interface that stimulate players to meet and play at physical locations. These affordances include features in the game that attract players to stay longer at specific locations or to visit locations with a great number of players. Finally, by conducting an autoethnography, the author shows her personal findings, as a Pokémon GO player, on the play experience of the game after becoming aware of the commodification of physical encounters and social connections. It is argued that the game does in fact stimulate players to play at physical places in order to profit off their social interaction. However, even though this form of commodification can be negatively labelled as playbour, it is still the responsibility of the players how to act on it. Besides that, it is argued that the commodification of players' social activity can entail extra social options for players, creating more opportunities for players to have physical encounters and enjoy social connections.

Keywords: Pokémon GO, commodification, playbour, surveillance capitalism, social side of gaming, pervasive games, location-based games

Introduction

The end of summer is near when I join my friends in September 2019 on a walk in Eindhoven's Stadswandelpark during a Pokémon GO Community Day. We believe we are actually dedicated players of the game, since many of our other friends have stopped playing Pokémon GO after its glory days in the summer of 2016. Little did we know that the combination of a sunny Sunday afternoon, a special Community Day and a big park would lure an enormous number of other Pokémon GO fans to this location to catch Pokémon and battle in Gyms. Hundreds of people join us on our mission to 'catch 'em all', even years after the hype of the game is over. Me and my friends are not only surprised by the number of players present that day, but also by the sense of community that enriches the Stadswandelpark. People we've never met ask us to join their Gym battle or would like to know how many Pokémon we've already caught that day. We not only enjoy the presence of our own group of friends but are sincerely pleased with the feeling of belonging to this Pokémon GO community and being invited into other players' experiences of the game. That day I realised how games like Pokémon GO give players the opportunities to meet and connect with one another in actual physical spaces. I found the act of bringing players together, whether it was being done intentionally or not, to seem like an act of kindness. But it also made me wonder why Pokémon GO would actually do this. Did I experience being part of a community because Pokémon GO genuinely wants to bring people together or is there some hidden agenda which I, and many other players, didn't know about?

Since the release of the location-based mobile game Pokémon GO¹ in 2016 the game gained a vast popularity attracting millions of players worldwide. The game was a big crowd-pleaser and even though many people have stopped playing the game after the hype was over, Pokémon GO still has millions of players nowadays: from 63 million active players in Western Europe to the astonishing amount of 311 million active players in Asia².

¹ Niantic Labs, Pokémon GO. [Video game]. (2016; The Pokémon Company).

² Statista Research Department. 2020. *Number of active users of Pokémon Go worldwide from 2016 to 2020, by region*.

In the past four years Pokémon GO has developed into a game that stimulates social interaction in the offline world. It appears one of Pokémon GO's goals is to bring people together to experience the social side of gaming. On the Niantic Labs website it is stated that the company is "...working to empower millions of people to come together, create community, and help care for the world."³.

However, a quick Google search shows that there appears to be an important reason for Niantic Labs to lure as many players as possible to physical locations: for every daily unique visit at one of many sponsored locations, Niantic earns money⁴. Aforementioned sponsored locations are often popular food chains like McDonald's or Starbucks, which are spending approximately \$0.15-50 per daily unique visitor to Niantic⁵. Furthermore, (small) business owners can get a subscription at Niantic in order to receive a sponsored PokéStop at their location to drive location awareness and foot traffic⁶.

Texts have already been published on the topic of Pokémon GO and free labour, or so-called playbour. In her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* Shoshana Zuboff describes the process of the development of the game and the fact that 'surveillance capitalism' has always been at the core of the game's production⁷. She even calls Pokémon GO a "prototype of a behavioral-futures-market-dominated society"⁸; a game that has always focused on behavioural modification and how to profit off of this. Other authors, like Dal Yong Jin and Jordan Frith, presented papers in which they discuss the ways the game results "in the expansion of a new kind of capitalism"⁹ and how the game "profits off these location-based gamers and their spatial behaviour"¹⁰.

All these authors focus on one aspect of the game: how the game profits off the player's spatial activity and behaviour in the game, by moving through physical game spaces and visiting real-life locations. However, in order to clarify how Pokémon GO commodifies not only physical movement, but also physical encounters and social

³ Niantic Labs. 2020. *Real World Impact*.

⁴ Swanner, Nate. 2017. *The Unique Way Pokémon Go Makes Money*. Dice.

⁵ Swanner. 2017.

⁶ Niantic Labs. 2020. *Sponsored Locations for Business*.

⁷ Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for the Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books.

⁸ Zuboff. 2019, 358.

⁹ Jin, Dal Yong. 2017. *Critical interpretation of the Pokémon GO phenomenon: The intensification of new capitalism and free labor*. *Mobile Media & Communication*. 57.

¹⁰ Frith, Jordan. 2016. *The digital "lure": Small businesses and Pokémon Go*. *Mobile Media & Communication*. 51–54.

connections it is valuable to first take a more detailed look into how Niantic offers the option for sponsored PokéStops and look into its revenue model. This will provide a context to better understand how exactly the game itself is designed to get players to visit these physical locations and create social connections with other players, the so-called 'social side' of the game. In addition, it would be very interesting to see if the knowledge of 'being commodified' would change a player's experience of playing the game. By looking into these aspects of the game, I believe my thesis will contribute to the debate on Pokémon GO and themes like playbour, surveillance capitalism, the social side of gaming and pervasive games. Therefore, I would like to answer the following research question:

How does the location-based game Pokémon GO commodify physical encounters and social connections of players of the game?

To be able to answer this research question, I want to answer the following sub questions:

- How does Pokémon GO earn money by offering sponsored locations?
- What features are implemented into the game to stimulate players to meet and play at physical spaces?
- What does the commodification of the player's physical encounters and social connections mean for the play experience?

Before answering these questions in the analysis, I will first describe the theoretical framework and reflect on the methods used for this thesis.

Theoretical framework

Commodification in relation to the digital economy and playbour in Pokémon GO

One important element to get to understand is commodification and how it is being manifested in a game like Pokémon GO. To understand how commodification takes place, I will be using the theory of commodification in relation to the digital economy as described by Terranova in *Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy*. Terranova states that "the new digital economy that is run by "free labor" consumes culture by embracing productive activities while simultaneously exploiting them"¹¹. This means that such productive activities are mostly pleurably embraced by users but at the same time shamelessly exploited, often without the users even knowing. Terranova names digital activities like building websites, reading and participating in mailing lists and modifying software packages. However, this form of free exploitation can be found in the gaming industry as well. A connection with playbour is then easily made. Kücklich, in *Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry*¹², describes playbour as a problem for gamers nowadays where leisure is being commodified by the games industry. Users (in this case gamers) take part in playbour by voluntarily and unwaged carrying out actions proposed by the game. When looking at Pokémon GO in relation to playbour, acts such as visiting locations or executing small repetitive tasks in order to earn digital currency are perfect examples of playbour.

In 2017 Dal Yong Jin published a paper on Pokémon GO with the statement: "Pokémon GO players create value in the process of their consumption by touching the smartphone screen to catch monsters with no monetary reward, resulting in the expansion of a new kind of capitalism."¹³. In addition, in a 2016 paper Jordan Frith focuses on how small businesses can 'lure' players to individual places in order to profit off these location-based gamers and their spatial behaviour¹⁴. Both publications focus on the monetary side of Pokémon GO and how companies, like Niantic Labs and other businesses, can profit off players by the commodification of location/data information or by the commodification of players moving through physical game spaces.

¹¹ Terranova, Tiziana. 2000. *Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy*. 35.

¹² Kücklich, Julian. 2005. *Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry*. Fibreculture Journal.

¹³ Jin. 2017, 57.

¹⁴ Frith. 2016, 51–54.

The act of commodifying players movement through physical spaces isn't a new phenomenon. In the publication *Digital cartographies as playful practices*¹⁵ Sybille Lammes names the location-based platform Layar as an example of putting commercially driven elements on a gaming map, resulting in maps transforming into ideological products being able to "change a player's socio-spatial identity by offering playful tools for selecting locations in your vicinity that are considered of social interest to you by others"¹⁶.

Surveillance capitalism in a game like Pokémon GO

Taking it one step further, one could even think of Pokémon GO as an example of surveillance capitalism. In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for the Future at the New Frontier of Power*¹⁷ Shoshana Zuboff analyses the development of Pokémon GO extensively. Surveillance capitalism addresses the process of commodifying personal data with the core purpose of profit-making and Zuboff states that "surveillance capitalists discovered that the most-predictive behavioral data come from intervening in the state of play in order to nudge, coax, tune, and herd behaviour toward profitable outcomes"¹⁸. This is a phenomenon she calls "instrumentarianism"¹⁹ and, focused on Pokémon GO, explains as follows: "...the gentle herding of innocent Pokémon Go players to eat, drink, and purchase in the restaurants, bars, fast-food joints, and shops that pay to play in its behavioural futures markets..."²⁰. Nudging players into a certain direction and luring them to specific locations for profit-making is not only a form of playbour, but can even classify as "the methodology of choice to change individual behaviour"²¹. It seems that by trying to change players' behaviour, Pokémon GO can stimulate players' activities in the game and commodify their actions.

¹⁵ Lammes, Sybille. 2015. *Digital cartographies as playful practices*. In *Playful identities: The ludification of digital media cultures*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 199-210.

¹⁶ Lammes. 2015, 204.

¹⁷ Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for the Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books.

¹⁸ Zuboff. 2019, 15.

¹⁹ Zuboff. 2019, 15.

²⁰ Zuboff. 2019, 15.

²¹ Zuboff. 2019, 296.

The social side of gaming

The so-called social side of the game, which in this thesis is defined as physical encounters and social connections, not only offers players the chance to enjoy the game itself, but enhances the enjoyment of social interaction between players as well. To further understand this social side of gaming, I will first determine what I mean by physical encounters and social connections.

Physical encounters are (accidental) meetings between persons, in this case Pokémon GO players, facilitated by places in the offline real-life world where these persons are able to meet. This act of bringing people together (while playing a game) is a valuable factor in promoting offline interaction. As Caon, Mugellini and Abou Khaled stated in a 2013 research to promote offline interaction: "...bringing the human-human interaction back to the physical world assumed a growing importance and it determined the birth of a scientific community focused on the promotion of technology aiming at fostering social offline interaction."²²

By offering both places and chances that facilitate physical encounters, the meeting of Pokémon GO players can lead to the creation of social connections: the emergence of a social bond between people with the same interests, created by human-to-human interaction. This definition is in line with the definition Bel, Smolders, Ijsselsteijn and De Kort provided for explaining 'social connectedness': "We define social connectedness as a short-term experience of belonging and relatedness, based on quantitative and qualitative social appraisals, and relationship salience"²³. The feeling of belonging to like-minded people with shared interests and thereby creating any form of relationship is what many gamers have often expressed as an important element in games. This was also concluded by Ducheneaut and Moore in a research in 2004 to the social side of gaming:

...what makes a difference for many players is the shared experience, the collaborative nature of most activities and, most importantly, the reward of being socialized into a community of gamers and acquiring a

²² Caon, Maurizio, Mugellini, Elena & Abou Khaled, Omar. 2013. *A pervasive game to promote social offline interaction*. Adjunct Publication of the 2013 ACM Conference on Ubiquitous Computing. 1382.

²³ Bel, Daniel, Smolders, Karin, Ijsselsteijn, Wijnand & De Kort, Yvonne. 2009. *Social connectedness: Concept and measurement*. 67.

reputation within it. [...] These shared experiences, in turn, can greatly increase the appeal and longevity of the game²⁴

In short, physical encounters and social connections can be seen as meeting and playing with others at physical spaces. The link to pervasive games is then quite obvious. In *Pervasive Games: Bringing Computer Entertainment Back to the Real World*²⁵ Magerkurth et al. state that pervasive games are combining "...physical movement and social interaction into games while still utilizing the benefits of computing and graphical systems."²⁶. Therefore "pervasive games [...] integrate the physical and social aspects of the real world."²⁷. Thus, pervasive games combine the imaginative, digital gaming world with real life locations and offline encounters with other players, creating social environments for players to interact with. Magerkurth et al.'s definition corresponds with Montola's definition as mentioned in *Exploring the Edge of the Magic Circle: Defining Pervasive Games*²⁸. Here Montola states that pervasive games include elements like spatial expansion, temporal expansion and social expansion, with the latter being the most important type²⁹. He relates this to Johan Huizinga's Magic Circle³⁰ and the social roles players take on while playing a game. Huizinga states that when playing a game there are several rules regarding the game itself, players that are participating and the gaming world. When playing a pervasive game, these rules seem to fade, since real life locations and persons, and therefore in theory the whole world, can become your playground.

Pokémon GO is a perfect example of turning the real-life world into a player's playground and creating opportunities for physical encounters to occur and social connections to be made. Looking at Pokémon GO and the Magic Circle, not only do the game's rules change the meaning of actions in the game (creating social connections) but also the commodification of these actions. The visiting of places and

²⁴ Ducheneaut, Nicolas & Moore, Robert. 2004. *The Social Side of Gaming: A Study of Interaction Patterns in a Massively Multiplayer Online Game*. Proceedings of the ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work, CSCW. 360.

²⁵ Magerkurth, et al. 2005. *Pervasive Games: Bringing Computer Entertainment Back to the Real World*. Human Interface Technology Laboratory, Christchurch, New Zealand, 2.

²⁶ Magerkurth, et al. 2005.

²⁷ Magerkurth et al. 2005, 2.

²⁸ Montola, Markus. 2005. *Exploring the Edge of the Magic Circle: Defining Pervasive Games*. Game Research Lab, University of Tampere.

²⁹ Montola. 2005, 12.

³⁰ Huizinga, Johan. 1955. *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, trans. by R.F.C. Hull, Boston: Beacon [1938].

the interaction players have with each other suddenly become a tool for making money and are not just rules or actions in a game environment anymore.

Method and corpus

In order to answer the research questions and sub questions presented in this thesis, I will use a method inspired by what José van Dijck describes as a platform analysis in her publication *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*³¹. Van Dijck's multi-layered model shows that techno-cultural components and socio-economic elements of a platform are all linked together, since a platform can be seen as a distinct microsystem. Because the sub questions presented in this thesis are focused on elements ranging from financial components to design and user components, utilizing a method that is inspired by Van Dijck's model is well-suited. Van Dijck describes a platform in six elements; business models, ownership, content, users/usage, technology and ownership. However, in essence, these six elements can be brought back to three essential elements: business models, interface and users. These three elements fit seamlessly with the themes of my three sub questions.

Since Van Dijck doesn't explain in methodological detail how to conduct a platform analysis, I decided to combine several methods to research each of the three elements.

Firstly, to take a more in-depth look into how the service of sponsored locations works (business model), I will combine findings of reports and statistics available on the revenue model(s) of the game, specifically on sponsored locations. I will utilize public information Niantic shares about the service of sponsored PokéStops and revenue and usage statistics gathered by independent research agencies. By diving into this available information and statistics I will outline an accurate overview of Pokémon GO's current cash flows, particularly focused on sponsored PokéStops and have a better understanding of how sponsored locations are at the core of the game's plan to lure players to specific places.

Secondly, in order to research the interface element of the platform analysis and therefore be able to clarify what features are implemented into the game to stimulate players to meet and play at physical spaces, I will conduct a discursive interface analysis as described by Mel Stanfill in *The interface as discourse: The production of norms through web design*³². When doing a discursive interface

³¹ Dijck, José van. 2013. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Chapter 2: Disassembling Platforms, Reassembling Sociality. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 24-44.

³² Stanfill, Mel. 2015. *The interface as discourse: The production of norms through web design*. *New Media & Society*, 1059–1074.

analysis, I will analyse the interface of Pokémon GO by looking for elements which Stanfill describes as "affordances"³³: functions, labels, design elements and other elements that form the game Pokémon GO. These affordances can be categorized in three types of affordances:

- Functional affordances: functionalities in the game, gameplay
- Cognitive affordances: the use of labels, names or signs
- Sensory affordances: visibility, readability and audibility of elements in the game.

By looking for these affordances in the game and analyse why Pokémon GO presents these elements like this, I will be able to detect which features Pokémon GO implements into the game to encourage players to meet and play at physical locations.

And thirdly, to be able to comprehend what the commodification of the player's physical encounters and social connections means for the play experience (users), I will add elements of an autoethnography to document my experiences as a player of Pokémon GO. In *Analytic Autoethnography*³⁴ Leon Anderson describes an analytic autoethnography as "...ethnographic work in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena"³⁵. Leon describes five important key features when conducting an autoethnography, of which three are most important for this research. Firstly, I, as a researcher, will be a complete member of the world that is researched³⁶, in this case the game Pokémon GO. Secondly, I will need to use analytic reflexivity, by which Anderson refers to the researcher's awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and hence their effect upon it³⁷. And thirdly, the narrative visibility of the researcher's self. This means that my own experiences as a researcher will be visible in my research to help illustrate analytic insights³⁸. To be able to conduct this form of an autoethnography I will use fieldnotes as described by Nicholas Wolfiger in *On writing fieldnotes: collection strategies and*

³³ Stanfill. 2015, 1061.

³⁴ Anderson, Leon. 2006. *Analytic Autoethnography*. Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 35 (4): 373-395.

³⁵ Anderson. 2006, 375.

³⁶ Anderson. 2006, 379.

³⁷ Anderson. 2006, 382.

³⁸ Anderson. 2006, 384.

*background expectancies*³⁹. By using the strategy Wolfinger describes as "comprehensive note taking"⁴⁰ I will systematically record observations and experiences based on a set of questions I ask while playing Pokémon GO. I will describe several (socially interactive) situations and ask what my role is in this situation, what kind of interaction I have with other players, how I experience this form of interaction and if the knowledge of Niantic profiting off this interaction changes my experience of the situation.

By combining these three elements of the platform analysis, I will be able to get a clear overview of several different components of the game that, at first glance, might seem to be linked to each other, but actually are. It is as Van Dijk states: "...the model's explanatory power lies not in these single elements, but in the connections between them"⁴¹.

For this research I will analyse the most current version of the Pokémon GO game: version 0.175.3-A.

³⁹ Wolfinger, Nicholas H. 2002. *On writing fieldnotes: collection strategies and background expectancies*. Qualitative Research, Vol. 2, nr.: 85-95

⁴⁰ Wolfinger. 2002, 90.

⁴¹ Dijk, van. 2013, 17.

Analysis

How Niantic Earns money by offering sponsored locations in Pokémon GO

The use of location-based game spaces like PokéStops form the core of Pokémon GO. These locations are the most important tools for Niantic to not only lure as many players as possible, but also to earn money while doing so. Since PokéStops are so important in manifesting playbour in Pokémon GO, it is important to look more into how the sponsoring of PokéStops works.

PokéStops and the act of luring

People who believe Pokémon GO's popularity was over after its successful summer of 2016 are quite wrong. In fact, 2019 has been the most lucrative year for the game since its release: the game earned a stunning \$894 million that year alone⁴². To date, Niantic has approximately pulled in more than \$3.1 billion on the game⁴³. Numbers that high make people wonder how the game is able to earn that much money since the app is free to download and play.

One of the game's many money-earning methods stands out: the sponsored locations. To me, personally, this came as a surprise: (small) businesses can actually pay Niantic in exchange for a sponsored PokéStop in order to attract more players to their location. It actually is a cunning way of creating what seems to be a win-win situation: players get to visit more special locations while businesses get the change to increase their foot traffic. Big companies like Starbucks already make use of the subscription Niantic offers, but the Niantic states that the early access beta program for small and medium business is coming to the US in the winter of 2020⁴⁴. Businesses can pay a monthly fee of \$30 or \$60, depending on what type of subscription this business wants⁴⁵. Niantic states that by getting a sponsored location a business "drives location awareness through in-game locations that make it more fun to visit your business"⁴⁶. These businesses will be able to share in-game promotions (which Niantic

⁴² Chapple, Craig. 2020. *Pokémon GO Has Best Year Ever in 2019, Catching Nearly \$900 Million in Player Spending*. Sensor Tower.

⁴³ Chapple. 2020.

⁴⁴ Niantic Labs. 2020. *Sponsored locations for business*.

⁴⁵ Niantic Labs. 2020.

⁴⁶ Niantic Labs. 2020.

describes as a virtual billboard) and to schedule mini-games to increase game activity at the location, like special Raid Battles⁴⁷. According to an online survey of 500 game-playing US respondents by Slant Marketing "71% of Pokémon GO players have visited a business simply because there was a PokéStop or Gym near the location"⁴⁸. In other words: instead of Pokémon, players are now being lured to specific locations.

While this might sound *alluring* (pun intended) to businesses, one should always be cautious whether to believe this might actually be as profitable as Niantic declares it to be. The (seemingly appealing) results which Slant Marketing released were published in 2016, just a few months after the release and amidst the hyper popularity of the game. And yes, while the game might still be popular, those numbers will definitely change when Niantic offers the early access beta program in 2020's winter. During a keynote speech at Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Niantic CEO John Hanke stated that Pokémon GO has driven "500 million visits to stores partnering with the game"⁴⁹, indicating that all these players visited the actual nearby facility as well. In a Forbes article, author Paul Tassi rightfully questions this statement by saying that players do not actually have to be inside a store or restaurant to 'visit' a PokéStop. Tassi goes on to say: "That's why it feels like companies are getting the short end of the stick in this equation, because simply being a PokéStop does not really add as much value as Niantic is implying here"⁵⁰.

And what does this actually mean for the players? Sure, it might sound great for them, since more locations to meet and more opportunities to catch rare Pokémon are created. But in the meantime, those players are participating in what Kücklich described as playbour: voluntarily and unwaged carrying out actions proposed by the game in order to earn digital currency or receive virtual goods⁵¹. As described in the theoretical framework, Zuboff even depicts this type of free labor as surveillance capitalism and states the following regarding Pokémon GO:

Pokémon Go takes these capabilities in a wholly new direction, running game players through the real world, but not for the sake of the game they

⁴⁷ Kumparak, Greg. 2019. *Niantic will soon let small businesses pay to have a Pokémon GO Pokéstop*. TechCrunch.

⁴⁸ Kim, Larry. 2016. *9 Need-to-Know Facts on How Pokemon Go Players Engage with Businesses*. INC.

⁴⁹ Tassi, Paul. 2017. *'Pokémon GO' Has Almost Certainly Not 'Driven 500 Million Visits' To Sponsored Stores*. Forbes.

⁵⁰ Tassi. 2016.

⁵¹ Kücklich. 2005.

think are playing. Hanke's unique genius is to point the game's behavior-modification efforts toward a target that occupies an unexplored zone beyond the boundaries of players' awareness. It aims to shape behavior in an even larger game of surveillance capitalism⁵²

PokéStops are the most important tools for Niantic to attract many players to a location, leading to physical encounters and perhaps even social connections. By creating new PokéStops and luring players to these locations, Niantic not only earns money by the businesses who got a subscription, but also by players' unique daily visits to these locations⁵³. It is necessary to look into how the game moves players to these locations, in order to understand if and how players' experiences change after becoming aware of Niantic profiting off their in-game activity.

Stimulating players to meet and play at physical spaces

A key functional affordance of Pokémon GO is to actually move through physical spaces. One could play the game from home, but would miss out on many Pokémon, items from PokéStops and special Raids or Gyms. Many of the game's design choices are based on meeting others in order to receive more XP or special bonuses.

Features designed to lure players, not Pokémon

The first, and most obvious, way of luring players to locations is the placement of PokéStops, a functional affordance which can be found throughout the ever-expanding game map. Here players can receive items like Poké Balls, eggs, potions or gifts. These PokéStops are mostly located at monuments, street art, or restaurants or shops (albeit sponsored). Once arrived at a PokéStop, players can spin its image in the game in order to receive items. Another option when visiting a PokéStop is to install a PokéStop module at that location, a so-called 'lure'. By doing so, you can activate a feature that lures more and special Pokémon to that PokéStop for thirty minutes, noticeable for all players. Thus, when someone else would place a lure at a PokéStop

⁵² Zuboff. 2019, 296.

⁵³ Swanner. 2017.

near my location, I could also go there to take advantage of the other player's lure instalment. To name such feature a 'lure' is cleverly done by Niantic, since it not only lures Pokémon to that locations, but other players as well. This type of cognitive affordance affords not only opportunities to receive items, but to meet other players as well. This is the first example of players' physical encounters of the game creating an opportunity for players to have social interaction with each other, since the lure can cause players to stay at a specific location for a longer period of time in the presence of other players.

Another way of getting players to certain locations is the placement of bigger PokéStops, called Gyms. These are often located at public crowded spaces like train stations, public squares or shopping malls. Players can place one of their Pokémon in the Gym if it is occupied by their team at that time; Team Instinct, Team Mystic or Team Valor. By using these types of cognitive affordances and naming several teams different names, players can experience the feeling of actually belonging to the team of their choosing. After placing a Pokémon, other players can then battle your Pokémon in order to try and take over the Gym. The player that is able to keep their Pokémon in that Gym for at least 24 hours will earn Pokécoins, the currency with which you can pay for more Poké Balls, clothing to customize your avatar and other special items. By designing the Gyms as great, visually attracting places with moving Pokémon on top, these locations immediately become attractive elements on the game map; a great example of a sensory affordance that attracts attention of the user by its evident visibility. By clearly differentiating the different teams, the game affords players to have two types of interaction with other players: either battle them when they are on the opposite team, or join them when they are on the same team. Each type of interaction contributes to the way players can socially connect with each other. Since the players that are currently battling at a Gym can see other players' avatars in the game, it provides the opportunity to look for these players in real-life and interact with them, albeit cheering for players on the same team or playfully roaring at opponents.

In July 2017 Raid Battles, or Raids, were introduced. Raid Battles consist of a group of players gathering to confront an over-levelled Pokémon located in a Gym. If the Pokémon is defeated, the players get the chance to catch it. To show the difficulty of a Raid, the game uses 'signs' as cognitive affordances. Therefore, the intensity of the Raid is indicated by stars; more stars indicate that you need more players to defeat the

Pokémon. For example, a three-star-Raid can easily be joined with three players, while you would need to be with at least six persons, depending on the players' levels, in order to defeat a Pokémon at a five-star-Raid. The harder to defeat the Pokémon, the rarer it is, and the more players you would need in order to even win. An interesting observation is that five-star-Raids were more frequently presented than lower star Raids. This means that the game deliberately creates occasions where more players are needed, creating scenarios where more players need to be present at the same time. This shows how the game deliberately provides opportunities for players to have physical encounters at these Raids, which often happens. By visually showing the other players' avatars helping you defeat the over-levelled Pokémon in the game, the game affords connectedness with other players, both in the game and in the real world.

Zuboff quotes Niantic's CEO in her book when speaking of behaviour modification to lure players to locations like PokéStops, Gyms and Raid Battles:

If you want to turn the world into your game board, the places you want people to interact with have to have certain characteristics.... There should be a reason for the player to go there.... The game is enabling them and nudging you to have those interactions⁵⁴

This quote confirms the aforementioned findings that the game deliberately designed features and locations in order to get players to meet and play at physical spaces. Creating opportunities for players to have physical encounters at PokéStops that are equipped with lures, to socially connect with others while waiting for a Gym Battle to start or to have interaction with other players while battling a special Pokémon at a Raid together.

Celebrating the community during Community Days

A big cognitive affordance featured in the game is the naming of a special monthly event, the 'Community Day', which is hyped throughout the entire game at the day of the event. Since January 2018 Niantic started organising these so-called Community Days. On these days, players are able to encounter 'shiny' Pokémon for just a few hours and can take part in special Raid Battles. Since Niantic saw how much

⁵⁴ Zuboff. 2019, 295.

people liked to come together and play Pokémon GO in groups, they decided to dedicate one day a month to the community. This day is called Community Day for a reason: Niantic states that they started organising Community Days as opportunities for "trainers around the world to meet up at their local parks to make new friends and experience what it means to be a part of this special community"⁵⁵. And it's understandable. Statistics show how big of a hit Niantic's decision to organise Community Days has been: throughout 2018 we saw 31 Pokémon Go events, 12 Community Days, and four Raid Days (different types of one-off in-game events)⁵⁶.

As I stated in the introduction of this thesis, it felt wonderful to be joined by so many other devotees during a Community Day. Of course it is cunning of Niantic to, again, lure players during such days by promoting special types of Pokémon, increasing rewards such as XP and organising special Raids, which are mostly five-star-Raids, since Niantic knows many people will be present at crowded locations in order to attend high level Raid Battles. By adding these types of 'special' functional affordances during the event, the game actively invites players to engage more with the game during these Community Days. And the addition of new functional affordances during this event helps: joining a Raid Battle during a Community Day creates the perfect opportunity for meeting other players and getting invited to their personal in-game Raid group. By offering rare 'shiny' Pokémon with a different appearance, the game makes use of cognitive affordances that afford the feeling of wanting to add special Pokémon to your collection and actually take the time to play the game for three hours straight, often accompanied by friends who'd like to join during a Community Day as well.

Niantic claims that it organises Community Days are to celebrate the community and, by all means, their intention might truly be to foster engagement, yet it still feels like Pokémon GO is "imposing their will on unsuspecting human subjects who are their users"⁵⁷. As Zuboff states:

[Pokémon GO and Facebook] combine the components of economies of action and the techniques of tuning, herding, and conditioning in startling

⁵⁵ The Pokémon GO Team. 2018. *Introducing Pokémon GO Community Day!*

⁵⁶ Iqbal, Mansoor. 2020. *Pokémon GO Revenue and Usage Statistics (2020)*. Business of Apps.

⁵⁷ Zuboff. 2019, 282.

new ways that expose the Greeks secreted deep in the belly of the Trojan horse: the economic orientation obscured behind the veil of the digital⁵⁸

Thus, Zuboff states that Niantic's primary intention for creating the game was to induce players to change their behavior for beneficial outcomes. To some degree, I can understand where Zuboff is coming from. Yet, to comprehend what impact commodifying physical encounters and social connections could actually have on the play experience, I will look into my own experience as a player.

The play experience after becoming aware of the commodification of player's physical encounters and social connections

Right after finding out about the commodification of physical encounters and social connections in the game I documented my experience of playing the game during an autoethnography. After collecting field notes while playing the game for three weeks I was able to distinguish three types of players' experiences.

Is ignorance bliss?

As stated in my fieldnotes⁵⁹, I confronted my Pokémon GO friends with my findings about the game and the act of playbour. None of my friends were aware of this happening, but when finding out didn't really care. I wondered if this was because they didn't have enough information on the topic. After I dived into this topic and spiralled into this 'rabbit hole' of absorbing literature and all the statistics and author's opinions, my first thoughts were that I didn't want to play the game anymore.

...when I found out how Niantic was profiting off players' movement and social interactions at the start of my research, I didn't play the game for a few days because I felt somewhat 'betrayed'⁶⁰

However, after seeing my friends act so nonchalant on hearing my 'ground-breaking' news, I realized I maybe had been influenced too much by what literature told me to think. When actually playing the game, both my friends and I aren't occupied with how

⁵⁸ Zuboff. 2019, 282.

⁵⁹ Fieldnotes in appendix. 31-37.

⁶⁰ Fieldnotes in appendix. 34.

Niantic is making money, but instead focus on our own enjoyment of the game and the social connections we decide to create ourselves.

Players are in control of their actions

Part of my realisation that I shouldn't care that much on what Niantic is doing financially has to do with the understanding that we, as players, are still in control of our own actions, both in-game as in the real world.

I realized that, just like my friend's own initiative to talk to other players during the game, we all have a choice in doing what we do. Yes, Niantic might earn money by 'selling' PokéStops, but I'm still in control whether I actually visit a certain location and if I interact with other players or not⁶¹

Us players are responsible for our own actions, so we ourselves can decide to socially interact with other players or purchase goods or not at locations that are part of a subscription. Frith states in his article: "The pursuit of the digital can result in the increased sale of the physical, enacting a new form of commercialized hybridity"⁶². The use of the word 'can' is very important here, since it indicates that sponsored locations *could* influence players to make a purchase, but it doesn't mean that it is bound to happen. Sure, the game stimulates players to go to these places, but doesn't force players to act a certain way. The game can provide real-life spaces where physical encounters can happen and social connections can be made, but we still decide ourselves if we want to join these encounters and create these connections or not. Players still have freedom in deciding how they play the game and how to interact with real world elements like other players or physical locations.

Creating new social opportunities

The final, and maybe most interesting, realisation is that by offering businesses to 'place' their own PokéStop, Niantic is actually creating more physical spaces that can facilitate social connections. As I experienced myself when playing with other friends:

⁶¹ Fieldnotes in appendix. 34.

⁶² Frith. 2016, 53.

...while playing with friends and discussing this topic, they made me realize something as well: by creating sponsored locations Niantic actually offers more opportunities to create social connections. In my experience Raids have been the best way for players to join and interact, so if Niantic offers more locations (often Gyms where Raid Battles take place), the game is actually offering more moments to facilitate physical encounters⁶³

I didn't expect to have this experience after concluding my literary research. As I stated in the first part of my analysis, Niantic earning money by offering businesses to sponsor a location and by earning on players' unique daily visits is an act that can be frowned upon. However, when you are an actual player of the game you can either get frustrated by this happening or turn the tables. So why not accept it and, better yet, exploit these sponsored locations as a player by earning extra items and utilize these extra physical places to meet with friends and have physical encounters with strangers? Since physical spaces are valuable elements of pervasive games, we can accept that Niantic is commodifying our physical encounters so that we, as players, can receive more opportunities to create social connections. The game transforming real life locations into meeting spaces for players is an act we can allow. "While all human actions are real, those that happen within the contract of a game are given a special social meaning"⁶⁴. If it wasn't for Pokémon GO, me and my friends wouldn't go out as much together as we do now, hence the social connections we were able to form together thanks to Pokémon GO offering us this option.

⁶³ Fieldnotes in appendix. 36-37.

⁶⁴ Montola, Markus. 2009. *Games and Pervasive Games*. In *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design*. Burlington, MA: Morgan Kaufmann. 21.

Conclusion

As made clear in this thesis, Pokémon GO has unique ways of earning money. One of these ways that sparked discussion is the act of offering (small) businesses a subscription to get a sponsored PokéStop, this way luring players to their establishment. By many this has been framed as 'playbour': the commodification of players' activity and behaviour in the game without them knowing. In order to answer the research question 'how does the location-based game Pokémon GO commodify social connections and physical encounters of players in the game?' three elements of the game were researched.

By looking more into the service of offering sponsored locations, it was made clear how the business model of sponsored PokéStops is constructed. The subscription that Niantic will offer to (small) businesses in the winter of 2020 lies at the core of being able to commodify physical encounters of players.

Different types of affordances in the game that stimulate players to meet and play at physical locations were analysed. By designing 'lures' the game is able to lure not only Pokémon but also players to specific locations, creating opportunities for physical encounters. Special locations like Gyms are put into the game to attract more players to this location, especially when Raid Battles are happening at these Gyms. Niantic's initiative to start organising Community Days has been an enormous success, both for players and their enjoyment of the game as for Niantic's goal to attract many players to specific locations at the same time. These are perfect opportunities for players to have physical encounters and create social connections with one another.

In order to understand how this form of commodification and 'luring' could impact players' play experience of the game, I conducted an autoethnography by recording observations in the form of fieldnotes. This resulted in three types of experiences. Firstly, it resulted in me not wanting to play the game anymore, since I experienced a feeling of betrayal. By learning so much on the topic I had become too aware of the financial side of the game. However, it seemed that even though my Pokémon GO friends seemed aware of the commodification by Niantic, they weren't affected by the many opinions on this topic. It seemed the less players know, the more they can focus on just enjoying playing the game and creating social connections whenever they wanted to. Secondly, I realised that no matter how

Niantic was commodifying our social activity in the game, players are still in control of their own actions: we decide how we have physical encounters and create social connections. Pokémon GO can try and stimulate players to act a certain way or to go to certain physical spaces, but it is the players that elect their own activity. Thirdly, my friends made me realise that Niantic commodifying our social connections and physical encounters actually doesn't have to be that bad. Better yet, it enables us players to meet and interact at more physical locations. We can actually benefit by utilizing these extra locations for having physical encounters and creating social connections.

The outcomes of this research show that the game does stimulate people to go to certain locations and have interaction with each other, in order for Niantic to make money. However, even though this form of commodification can be negatively labelled as 'playbour', it is still the responsibility of the players how to act on it. Besides that, commodifying players' social activity can entail extra social options for players, creating more opportunities for players to have physical encounters and enjoy social connections.

By conducting this research on the commodification of social connections and physical encounters in Pokémon GO, this thesis can contribute to other research in the field of playbour, surveillance capitalism, the social side of gaming, pervasive games, and of course the game, Pokémon GO itself. Since this thesis was specifically focused on the commodification of physical encounters and social connections, it can provide new insights in how a location-based game can not only commodify the physical movement of players but also their ability to have social interactions with other players.

Since a substantial part of this research was based on my own findings as both researcher and Pokémon GO player these results are open for different interpretations. In addition, by conducting an autoethnography I based the results on my own experiences and findings and that of a handful of my Pokémon GO friends. It would be interesting to research the experience of players' social activity in the game by conducting a research with a greater number of people.

It is also wise to take into account that a mobile game like Pokémon GO is ever evolving and that already new features are planned to be integrated into the game.

To further research the ways Pokémon GO is commodifying physical encounters and social connections in a follow-up study, I would advise to conduct

an extended discourse analysis⁶⁵. This can provide more insights into what other players are saying about the commodification of their own actions and behaviour. Furthermore, conducting a comprehensive qualitative research on a large number of players, for example by conducting a survey or interviews, on the impact of their play experience on the game, can be valuable as well.

Researching my current favourite mobile game was an intriguing process. I came to learn a lot about sides of the game I wish I didn't know about, but that luckily didn't stop me from keep on playing and loving the wonderful world of Pokémon GO and its exquisite players.

⁶⁵ Jørgensen, M.W., & Phillips, L.J. 2002. *Discourse analysis as theory and method*. London: Sage.

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Appendix

Fieldnotes Pokémon GO

These notes were gathered over the course of three weeks while playing the game, from May 9th to June 1st 2020. Obviously, because of the Corona virus, meeting with others to play the game has been difficult. However, I have been able to collect clear field notes on various different situations, some of which I was able to actually meet other players.

Catching Pokémon

(Throughout May 9th to June 1st, playing with my friend at May 16th)

What is my role in this situation? At my current location I can try and catch several Pokémon by myself. In order to encounter more Pokémon I need to get out and go on a walk. It is quite an individual process, but one I often enjoy doing by myself. Pokémon GO frequently gives me a clear 'purpose' to go out and about.

What kind of interaction do I have with other players? Mostly none, since other players can't help me catch Pokémon. The act of catching Pokémon is designed to be an individual task. However, I do enjoy the company of other friends so I decide to meet up with a friend of mine to catch Pokémon individually 'together'. We each play our own game and have our own Pokémon to catch, but I enjoy being with someone who shares my enthusiasm for the game and can root for me when I try to catch a Pokémon with high CP (combat points).

How do I experience this form of interaction? As stated earlier, many times I don't experience interaction, since I can hunt down and catch Pokémon by myself. In fact, if you would like to, you could play Pokémon GO without ever interacting with others. Still, sometimes I like to be accompanied by someone during this process since it can give me more motivation to actually go out and play the game. At that moment I experience coming together as a pleasant event, but something that me and my friends have decided ourselves to do so. It doesn't feel like the game 'pushes' you to go out and play together to catch Pokémon.

Does me knowing that Niantic profits off this interaction change my experience of the situation? Well, I'm not sure if Niantic actually does profit off this type of interaction. As I stated before the act of catching Pokémon is an individual one which you yourself can decide to do with someone else, but the game itself isn't really motivating you to actually join others during this specific activity.

Digitally 'socializing' with 'friends'

(Throughout May 9th to June 1st)

What is my role in this situation? Currently I have 40 so-called 'friends' in the game. I use quotation marks since of all 40 people I'm friends with in-game I might know ten persons in real life, the other 30 I have never even met. These 'friends' are from all over the world, ranging from Japan to the United States. Since some achievements in the game are based on the number of friends you should obtain, I turned to Twitter in order to receive friend codes from random players. Therefore, I don't necessarily view these players as friends, merely as instruments in order to achieve a goal.

What kind of interaction do I have with other players? I can view all my friends' personalized avatars, which gives them all some sort of unique 'personality', if you will. As of interaction, it depends on the kind of 'friendship' I have with a particular player. If I only added this player as a friend in order to achieve a goal, then I will merely send them gifts (packages I obtained at a PokéStop) since it will give me XP (experience points). However, with my 'real life friends' I have more interaction. When I'm with one of these friends we have the option to trade Pokémon and battle one another, since you have to be physically next to another (within 100 meters) and therefore we often do so. However, we would have to be physically together to do so, which limits the opportunities to accomplish these actions when being apart.

How do I experience this form of interaction? Sending and accepting presents has transformed into a task and has therefore no meaning to me anymore. Other forms of interaction, based on mere digitally contact, are quite non-existent. I'm not able to have contact (be it textually or visually) with my friends within the game, which I wish we could. Sending short messages to another that can accompany the gifts you send or to congratulate them on catching a really cool Pokémon would make interacting with other players in the game more meaningful. Interacting when trading a Pokémon or

battling with a friend is quite a fun experience, however I would need to actually have to go and meet this friend in person. Besides that, I find it a shame that I can't see my friends in my digital game world. Sure, I can see their personalized avatar when looking at their profile, but it would be even cooler if I would play Pokémon GO with a friend and see their avatar walk besides me on the map or when activating augmented reality.

Does me knowing that Niantic profits off this interaction change my experience of the situation? I believe Niantic doesn't necessarily profits off these types of digital interactions either. You can send gifts you got for free at PokéStops (more on the sponsored PokéStops later) and battling or trading with other players doesn't involve going to specific Pokémon GO locations; we can do this just at someone's home without even visiting a (sponsored) location.

Visiting a PokéStop

(Throughout May 9th to June 1st, playing with my friend at May 16th)

What is my role in this situation? I can go to a PokéStop for several reasons: to spin the PokéStop in order to receive XP, items and gifts; to catch more Pokémon since they like to be around PokéStops more; to battle Team Rocket in order to catch a special Pokémon; and lastly to activate a lure of my own or to benefit from someone else's lure that lures more Pokémon to that location for 30 minutes. Mostly I go visit a PokéStop and be a quick visitor: just spin and go. When someone else's lure is active I tend to stay a bit longer at that location and always try to look for the person that installed the lure and if that person is still around.

What kind of interaction do I have with other players? It is quite funny and relatable to go to a PokéStop and see someone else at that location look at their phone: for some reason I immediately recognize another player. Not so much because of their looks, since there's a wide range of Pokémon GO players, but because of their fixation on their phone and the way they tap their phone: systematically and with a mix of both eagerness and automatism. And yes, I recognize these players since I'm mostly like that as well. When I actually come across another player at a PokéStop, three things can happen: we ignore each other, we smile at each other since we both know we're

playing the game or one of us actually starts a conversation. To be honest, that last option almost never happens when I'm playing by myself and I'm fine with that.

How do I experience this form of interaction? When I play the game by myself, I'm perfectly fine with being on my own and being in my own game world. An interesting observation is that whenever I go and play Pokémon GO with a friend of mine who is in a wheelchair and who is a very sociable person, he always immediately notices another player and actively greets this player. Whenever he does so, everyone reacts to his kindness with a smile or a quick chat in return. This friend taught me that being actively socially during playing the game can actually be very nice, but still I never do so when I play the game solo. I guess being with others motivates me to be more sociable with other players than when I'm playing on my own.

Does me knowing that Niantic profits off this interaction change my experience of the situation? To be honest, when I found out how Niantic was profiting off players' movement and social interactions at the start of my research, I didn't play the game for a few days because I felt somewhat 'betrayed'. I read all the literature on how they made money of my activity in the game and how the developers' intention was to only change behavior and earn money. However, when the aforementioned friend of mine asked me to go out and play, I immediately told him I would join him. I realized that, just like my friend's own initiative to talk to other players during the game, we all have a choice in doing what we do. Yes, Niantic might earn money by 'selling' PokéStops, but I'm still in control whether I actually visit a certain location and if I interact with other players or not.

Visiting a Gym

(Throughout May 9th to June 1st, playing with my friends at May 16th, May 21st and May 31st)

What is my role in this situation? When visiting a Gym, I start by looking which team is dominating the Gym at that moment. If it is in fact my team (Team Mystic) and I'm able to add a Pokémon of my own to the Gym, I do so in order to earn coins. If the team dominating the Gym isn't my team, I first look at the CP of the Pokémon defending the Gym. It then depends whether I'm by myself or with someone else what actions I take. If the CP of the Pokémon defending is low and I'm by myself, I decide

to attack the Gym on my own in order to try and defeat the Gym, after which I can take over the Gym. If I'm with others and the CP of the Pokémon defending the team are high (and others I'm playing with are on my team as well), we often decide to attack the Gym together, since together we have a better chance at defeating and take over the Gym.

What kind of interaction do I have with other players? Sometimes a funny thing happens: after defeating a Gym and taking over (whether I'm by myself or with others) and you're at a crowded place where many other players are playing at that moment, you can actually tell when other players are going back to the Gym to try and defeat my Pokémon defending that Gym. After defeating a Gym and leaving satisfied, it won't take long before the Gym on my map shows someone's battling there again. I always try to look and see actual players who are challenging my Pokémon at that time and when we spot each other, we mostly grin at each other, since we know that I myself might come back to defeat that other player again. This doesn't always happen, but when it does it sparks some sort of playful rivalry in me.

How do I experience this form of interaction? When defeating a Gym on my own my biggest goal is to actually earn coins. If someone else then immediately takes over my Gym I sometimes feel frustrated, but, as I stated before, it also sparks some rivalry in me which makes me accept the challenge and go and try to defeat that other player back again. When defeating a Gym together with friends, it feels more fun. We actually work together to defeat this Gym and when we do it gives me a feeling of solidarity. Of course here the main goal for everyone is to earn coins again, but it genuinely feels nicer to defeat a Gym together with your friends than being on your own, since we all put some team effort into it.

Does me knowing that Niantic profits off this interaction change my experience of the situation? I've come to learn that Gyms are often sponsored locations or great opportunities for becoming sponsored locations. I asked my Pokémon friends if they were actually aware of the whole 'sponsored locations commodification' and they all weren't. Some say they didn't care and others even found it handy, since getting a drink or a snack mid-gaming often feels like a pleasant treat and if Niantic offers more opportunities to get these treats: fine by them. I myself have now come to the

conclusion that I don't really care that much. Knowing Niantic might profit off me being at a Gym and socializing with others may have changed my opinion at first, but it hasn't changed a thing for how I actually play the game. I'm still able to play the game the way I did before knowing about the commodification. I'm worried about Niantic offer to (small) businesses which they describe as 'virtual billboards' though. I don't want Pokémon GO to be an obvious notice sign for local businesses. It has to feel like a game for the players in the first place.

Joining a Raid Battle

(Throughout May 9th to June 1st, playing with my friends at May 16th, May 21st and May 31st)

What is my role in this situation? I can join a Raid Battle by myself, by joining other players that are already present or by joining with a group of real-life friends. It depends on the difficulty level of the Raid whether I can defeat the Pokémon by myself or not.

What kind of interaction do I have with other players? Here I enjoy the presence of other players, since they enhance my chances of winning the Raid. When going to a Raid Battle with friends, we will also both get extra XP, boosting our friendship levels. This is why I prefer going to Raids with others, since your chance of winning is higher and you earn more XP. It also is quite a nice experience to achieve something together. When joining a Raid Battle with other players I don't know, I sometime may have interaction and sometime won't. It then depends on the initiative of the other players, since I won't talk to other players that quickly when I'm by myself.

How do I experience this form of interaction? Joining and winning a Raid with actual friends is fun. We discuss which Pokémon we can best choose to battle with and actually cheer for each other during the Raid. Even if I don't know any other players during the Raid, you still feel like you achieved something together. It often happens that other players start a conversation or even ask if you would like to join their Raid Battle group. This might have to do with the countdown after joining a Raid. After joining the game has a 2 minutes countdown, so other players have the change to enter the group. During this waiting time, other players often start a chat with me, especially during a Community Day and there are loads of them. Even though I won't start a

conversation myself that easily, I do enjoy interacting with other players and it seems like Raids are the perfect situation for interacting with others.

Does me knowing that Niantic profits off this interaction change my experience of the situation? As I stated before, I don't really care that much anymore. Since I still have my own responsibilities as a player and my own freedom to decide whether to interact with others or not, playing Pokémon GO hasn't changed for me. Of course now that I'm aware of how Pokémon GO earns money I recognize places that might be sponsored, but as long as I can play the game the way I want to, I'm happy. In addition, while playing with friends and discussing this topic, they made me realize something as well: by creating sponsored locations Niantic actually offers more opportunities to create social connections. In my experience Raids have been the best way for players to join and interact, so if Niantic offers more locations (often Gyms where Raid Battles take place), the game is actually offering more moments to facilitate physical encounters.