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What is This?
We play in public: The nature and context of portable gaming systems

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Abstract
Academic work on dedicated portable gaming devices has often assumed that these devices were prima facie convergent: providing a mobile experience equivalent to smartphones. What is fascinating in the period 2005–2011, however, is that two highly non-convergent portable game consoles – the Nintendo DS series (DS/DSi/DSiXL) and the Sony PlayStation Portable series (PSP/PSPgo) – existed in parallel to the emergent growth of a smartphone market which would go on to threaten the traditional macro-economic business model of games retail. This article argues that the concept of the ‘portable’ can be productively distinguished from ‘mobile’. Two game design case studies – of Pokémon HeartGold/Pokémon SoulSilver and Monster Hunter Freedom Unite are used to demonstrate the idiosyncratic relationships between game, platform and player. The design and play of these portable games are discussed, and the deep engagements they offer are explored in contrast to the design and play of mobile games.

Keywords
game design, mobile gaming, Monster Hunter, Nintendo DS, PlayStation Portable, Pokémon, portable gaming, public

Mobile, medium, maybe: Introduction
Nanaa Verhoeff (2010) proposes a nuanced model for the theorization of ‘consoles’ and technological gadgets, using the Nintendo DS as a suppositional model. Verhoeff suggests that before an analysis can get to a ‘material’ question of a media gadget, it has to go through both theoretical and historical questions. The article develops a reading of the ‘Nintendo DS as a time-bound piece of material screen technology’, which involves ‘a time-boundedness that compels a historical consideration’ and culminates in the ‘notion that this gadget can be seen as a still, a moment within the narrative flow of media development’ (Verhoeff, 2010: 282).
One of the difficulties of studying games is that the academic instinct to develop complex theoretical language has to somehow coalesce around a rapidly changing technological landscape that requires deep knowledge and involvement. As objects of study, videogame consoles require a very careful recognition of their timeliness, business models and conditions, and often very strange software environments. There are many ways in which academic discourse has productively highlighted the similarities between portable game consoles and other mobile devices such as smartphones. The purpose of this article, in the first place, is to make their distinctiveness just as productive, since their technological specificity demands strict attention. This notion is echoed in a series foreword for MIT Press’s Platform Studies series, of which only Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost’s Racing The Beam: The Atari Video Computer System has been published to date:

As important as scientific and engineering approaches are, and as significant as work by creative artists has been, there is also much to be learned from the sustained, intensive, humanistic study of digital media. We believe it is time for those of us in the humanities to seriously consider the lowest level of computing systems and to understand how these systems relate to culture and creativity. (Montfort and Bogost, 2009: vii)

Throughout Racing the Beam, Montfort and Bogost propose that game systems could potentially be studied along five layers; reception/operation, interface, form/function, code, and platform. While these delineations are certainly helpful in a holistic sense, it is Montfort and Bogost’s focus on a series of games as expressive of the Atari VCS that is the most useful outcome of their project. If Verhoeff’s use of history and theory was to abbreviate concepts around the idea of a ‘theoretical console’, Montfort and Bogost seek to use game history to understand what was expressed historically through the console. These two approaches to the technological platform of a game system propose different kinds of holism – though Montfort and Bogost seek a more historical model.

This article is interested in holistic analysis of a different kind; one which adequately accounts for portable game design in the years 2004–2011, with a view to discussing significant game design notions of the period. To this end, Montfort and Bogost’s call for specifics is exciting; a new humanistic enquiry that draws on the theoretical developments of software studies, game studies and other fields. Of key concern when examining gaming platforms is the balance of carefully addressing the material realities of production and use, while avoiding the sensibilities of technological determinism bound up with the study of new media and technology. Game systems are often highly diverse platforms, about which generalization is not only difficult, but also dangerous. More importantly, the period 2004–2011 represents a generation of hardware design and game design that while purporting to a deep convergence with other mobile devices, also significantly diverged. This divergence was marked in design, use, and business environment from the smartphones and tablets that would grow to threaten the game development ecosystem held by Sony and Nintendo.

The Nintendo DS and Sony PSP have been in competition since 2004 – they compete not only for gamers and their capital, but also for the attention of game publishers and developers. The Nintendo DS’s production environment was purposefully designed for companies to scale up from Game Boy Advance design and development. As a result, its technical specifications were considered somewhat low-end in 2004, and the system’s processor and small amount of RAM is far better suited to sprite-based 2D games and simple 3D environments. While this was useful for companies upgrading their production processes from the Game Boy Advance, it meant that design
and development on the platform would have to be done entirely separately from games made for home consoles.

The PSP, on the other hand, was built with the development environment of Sony’s home console PlayStation 2 in mind, with some significant barriers and changes, but nonetheless targeting developers who were seeking high-end portable releases. This was reflected in how Sony announced and promoted the PSP, with collages of new versions of popular game franchises Twisted Metal, Gran Turismo, Dynasty Warriors, Wipeout and others. The PSP was also meant to usher gamers into high-end media convergence, with music and film playback featuring heavily through the PSP’s proprietary Universal Media Disc (UMD) format, meant to complement DVDs. This feature was significant only in its marked unpopularity, and by 2007, UMD movies had all but ceased production. A 2009 iteration of the PSP, the PSPgo, removed the physical UMD drive altogether and required owners to use the PlayStation Network (a digital download service for Sony devices) to access games and films. This second attempt at shifting PSP gamers into a deeply convergent ecosystem was also only significant in its unpopularity.

By the end of 2011, both of these systems will be superseded by direct replacements. The Nintendo DS is being replaced by the Nintendo 3DS, featuring a glasses-free 3D screen, retaining the dual-screen design, adding connectivity options and improving its graphics capability. The Sony PSP is being replaced by the PSP2, featuring vastly improved processing power, more media playback options and 3G functionality. Commercially, both will have to respond to the overwhelming presence of Apple’s iOS devices (the iPhone and iPad) and to Google’s Android platform. While the systems are not built expressly for games, their presence has altered the business landscape for the more traditional publishers of games, not least because of the surfeit of simple games at very low prices.

We can consider this arrangement of material facts as a kind of narrative of media. Most importantly, games are objects of design and development with a variable degree of creative control – creative decisions are made alongside economic ones about which platforms to support, with what type of content, for what audience. These contexts are crucial to understanding how different games come to be developed for different systems, and when. Verhoeff discusses the technological gadget as a temporal object:

If the flux of technological change is a moving image, the gadget is a still of it ... The still is a fugitive moment in a longer, constantly changing moving environment. However, the moment of the gadget is as relevant as any moment in the longer history of media development and media change. It is significant, precisely, because of its temporal state. (Verhoeff, 2010: 281)

Verhoeff’s call to historical consideration is, as we will see, one of many voices alerting us to the complexities of talking in and around videogames, and especially those that are mobile, or portable. In fact, much of contemporary scholarship on games concerns itself with calibrating its sensitivity – with getting history ‘right’. While considering how to make sense of the technological moment, media archeologists Jussi Parikka and Jaakko Suominen warned scholars to pay attention to the continuities between media, and argue vociferously against the notion that the past has to be ‘practically forgotten’ (Parikka and Suominen, 2006). Bjorn Nansen, in turn, outlays the narrative of game studies and the broader turn to, and capacity of ‘technicity’, including a renewed focus on the bodies of gamers in mobile and motion games (Nansen, 2009). Game studies itself is constantly in a process of retelling its origin and relationship to history, as the preoccupation with heuristic, holistic academic method is now taking up much more of the theoretical language than the early
preoccupation with abstract textual reading which caused much of the later reactionary methodological arguments (Bogost, 2006, 2007; Flanagan, 2009; Juul, 2005).

The notion of the ‘mobile’ has flourished in what Montfort and Bogost called sustained, intensive, humanistic study. Thoroughgoing examinations of mobile screens, media, phones and life have multiplied our lines of enquiry. The concept of place has been remobilized as cityscapes merge with information technologies of all kinds, though their growth and change is always under negotiation and obscured by social changes in the use of both home and public spaces (Casey, 2001; Hjorth and Richardson, 2009; Wilken, 2008). Mobile gaming itself has been a natural fit for academics seeking to uncover some of the changes to our relationship to technology that have occurred in the last 15 years; play is a potent concept that lends sometimes deterministic discussions of technology a humanizing quality. This naturally reflects how the technologies of mobile and portable play come about, yet it is worth noting as we begin our examination that however true, it suits academic discourse very well to presume that mobile and portable games transform our relationship to space, place and cities.

The capacities for play for each platform are nuanced and distinct – even as types of games can often overlap. Their distinction from each other feeds expectations, behaviour and use of the platforms. When we talk notionally in a broad sense about haptics and mobility or the urban landscape and our sense of place, then it absolutely stands to reason that we can talk about mobile devices together, as an amorphous whole. In these discussions, Nintendo DS, the Sony PSP, the iPhone and Android phones can be – and arguably should be – discussed together. However, where we might want to discover how specific game types, forms and designs have operated, and how they might be theorized as a result, we need to radically draw down on the specific qualities of both the platform and the game. Hjorth and Richardson note that these portable gaming platforms often require ‘dedicated attentiveness’ rather than the ‘momentary glance’ associated with mobile gaming (Hjorth and Richardson, 2009: 31).

In the following two case studies, I wish to present a notion of ‘portable’ gaming that, by its nature, requires distance from the theory of the ‘mobile’. By separating ‘portable’ and ‘mobile’ in language terms, several critical moves are possible. First, we are more able to speak directly to the development arena – as portable game development and mobile game development have different design and development paradigms. In the period 2005–2011, in which a great deal of intellectual attention has been paid to the area, the nature and type of games on mobile platforms has grown and changed, as has the market environment which used to separate more broadly ‘mobile’ from ‘portable’. The Apple iPad, which shares the iOS development environment with the iPhone has introduced different and sometimes deeper games into the iOS market. In short, the mobile/portable distinction is under the duress of convergence. The next generation of devices will exist in a volatile development environment, with the role of corporate platform gatekeepers having a great impact on how we interact with technologies and games.

**Thinking of portable as a type of play**

Among the diverse work in recent years on the social dimensions of games, those that draw on empirical methodologies are producing some of the most illuminating studies. This is often because they reveal that some of the critical discourse has become disconnected from the social dimensions at stake. In a very detailed 2008 examination of nine subjects, Christine Szentgyorgyi, Michael Terry and Edward Lank pursued distinctions in the self-reported social affects of playing games on the Nintendo DS system. Throughout the article, attention is paid to the impact of the
relatively small screen of the DS, and how it changes behaviour such as multiplayer gaming, which requires group arrangements to be organized in platform specific ways. One of the central conclusions of the research is that some public play with the DS might be constituted as a ‘renegade’ activity. This term refers to the phenomenon where players ‘push the boundaries of where it is possible and acceptable to play games, both in terms of physical location and sociocultural context’ (Szentgyorgyi et al., 2008: 1464). Players interviewed discussed the difficulty in transgressing the social barriers that the DS was meant to resolve, that is, playing with strangers was more difficult than reappropriating a space for gaming, even (or especially) where it might be anti-social:

Players reported gaming in stairwells at work, in classrooms, and in public lounges at school, with people they knew, but also with people whom they serendipitously encountered in public spaces. However, while the combination of portability and wireless networking makes ad-hoc, collocated pick-up games with strangers possible, we found that particular aspects of the DS and its games’ designs actively work against this type of gaming. (Szentgyorgyi et al., 2008: 1464)

Their study also includes how the players examined the social acceptability of play, and how regular players – self-identifying as gamers – will naturally avoid the social and physical circumstances that are inappropriate. In short, they strongly self-select their social groups with other gamers, making it more permissible to enter a gaming context into a physical or social space. This study concludes that portable gaming exists as a type of spatial co-option, or a type of carving out of private space from the broader public space.

In discussing the social and technical convergences surrounding Japanese mobile gaming, Dean Chan noted that ‘there can be a considerable technosocial gap between planned and actual usage’ and that ‘vernacular patterns of actual use underpin the importance of negotiating everyday play practices in context’ (Chan, 2008: 23). These realizations come about because in surveying earlier critical and sociological work in the area, Chan also noted that there is an increasing realization that the primary characteristic site of mobile/portable gameplay is actually the home itself.

Larissa Hjorth’s work addresses the cultural changes involved in the growth of mobile media in Asia, in which a focus on the resilience of ‘place’ figures heavily, despite the market rhetorics of convergence, freedom, and dislocality. Hjorth noted in 2007 that:

As a domestic technology that has literally left the physical confines of the home, mobile media is still very much affected by the user’s notion of home and place. Far from eroding a sense of place, ethnographies into mobile practices ... have demonstrated the significance of mobile technologies in re-enacting the importance of place and home as both a geo-imaginary and socio-cultural precept. (Hjorth, 2007: 371)

The home is persistent across our examinations of mobile and portable devices because they engender an almost completely private zone of experience that can develop a sense of ownership of time and space – which is fragmenting and complexifying as different media attempt to rewrite the concept of home (Hjorth, 2007). As home consoles and PCs develop more presence across the media landscape – pay TV subscription services being embedded inside game consoles, for example – they commercialize the concept of the living room and shared familial space. This notion was explored by Roger Silverstone and Leslie Haddon, who argued that consumer technologies were taken home and domesticated, using a complex range of design and exchange values (Silverstone and Haddon, 1996). As the technologies of portable game consoles require regular battery charging, they are in practice largely anchored to the home even when in use in public spaces. Silverstone and Haddon argued that innovation, rather than a static concept, was a
continuous shift of relations that involved the user-consumer in the process of finding uses for technology in and out of the home (Silverstone and Haddon, 1996).

The players of the Nintendo DS sitting on stairwells and hiding in rooms together to play *Mario Kart* or *Pokémon* are seeking a highly focused, and certainly longer period of play than the distracted engagement of the mobile game player, even if they often retreat to the same space to do – ostensibly – the same thing. While we have seen that the design of a device often radically diverges from its ‘vernacular patterns of actual use’ (Chan, 2008: 23), it also creates deep affordances, literacies and loyalties in users that are bound up in the platform. Some are entirely suitable to capitalization – and others are more nuanced, vernacular and unregulated.

**Affordances, histories, loyalties**

As familiarity with a technology develops, games become potentially expressive – though not in a clear sense of expression of the device or its user. Games and their play grow to express that familiarity – which can be understood in terms of affordances, histories and loyalties. At the same time, market forces and the space of consumption encourage the owner of both mobile and portable platforms to identify value – to find new things to play on their device (Rochet and Tirole, 2003). The owner of an iPhone browses the App Store to add functions and find games to download. The process is incredibly easy and has quickly promoted a disposable concept of software. Small games – crucially not just ‘casual’ games, but more accurately ‘small’ games – are sold for as little as US$0.99 or even free, under a wide range of ‘free-to-play’, or ‘freemium’ models. An active gamer with an iPhone or iPad can find many games specially built for the platform, versions of old game classics, commercial homages to popular genres, indie games from famous and up-and-coming game designers, ‘ports’ (translations from other software environments) from free Flash websites and importantly, Facebook. As the App Store environment has matured, large traditional game publishers such as Electronic Arts and Ubisoft have muscled into the space and released very high-end game experiences and quickly discounted their price to the absolute minimum in order to dominate the App Store’s software charts. The success of the App Store and games such as *Angry Birds* have begun to cast a shadow over the traditional licensed business model of games publishing, in which developers and publishers buy the right to release games from the hardware manufacturers Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft and develop high-concept, high-price software by discrete means. The App Store is by no means less closed, but its market environment has begun to radically alter the sense of value in game software.

By comparison, owners of a DS or PSP in the years 2005–2011 were searching for software on their platforms in completely different ways. Many early adopters of the DS platform were investing in the inevitable Nintendo software library – *Mario*, *Mario Kart*, *Tetris*, *Metroid*, *Kirby*, and so on. As Nintendo of Japan developed new priorities in software development, more so-called casual titles appeared on the system, and the highly popular *Nintendogs* and *Dr. Kawashima’s Brain Training* games radically grew the system’s user base through marketing an alternative social vision of computer game use. The PSP owner, brought onboard by loyalty to the PlayStation brand, is explicitly denoted as someone who seeks to continue the type of games purchases already happening in the home. However, as the system struggled against first the explosive growth of the DS, and then struggled to attract key developers, the device became the site of several interesting software experiments and niche gameplay types – some with the express encouragement by Sony of Europe and Sony of Japan, acting often independently to publish and promote new games. What is absolutely crucial in the difference between these environments is to understand the impact that
the fundamental economics have on the games developed. The large-scale model of console
development is predicated on the platform holder ‘charging software developers a fixed fee
together with a per-unit royalty in the games they produce’ (Rochet and Tirole, 2003: 1016). In
the App Store model, a percentage fee is extracted on sale. The platforms sold by Sony, since the
beginning, have been ‘loss-leaders’, that is, the sale of the console loses money, which is then
recouped as the sales of games increase. The fundamental business proposition of PSP ownership,
for both consumer and company, is that of a consistent and varied purchasing pattern. Nintendo, by
comparison, has always produced cheaper devices and made money on both console and software
sales – leading the software development model with high-quality titles.

This landscape is crucial in gaining an understanding of the affordances, literacies and loyalties
tied to the platforms. We have seen how ownership and use can have radical divergences, and how
even within the category of mobile play, there are deep divergences that relate to locality and place.
We have seen how social and other barriers can forestall the imagined public uses of game
platforms. We have seen how the home retains a great deal of locative power in our uses of
technologies.

Affordances are the first point of interest in the following case studies. Not merely examining
what technical affordances game platforms offer players, but what games offer affordances to both
the player and platform, and so on. The notion of the affordance is complicated if we are to propose
a focus on technicity in our work. In a much-discussed article, Helen Kennedy and Patrick Crogan
highlighted the need to redouble the effort to understand gaming as an ‘event’; one ‘where contingent
and dynamic processes coalesce in and through which both human and nonhuman agents
come into being in their very interactions’ (Crogan and Kennedy, 2009: 112). Bjorn Nansen
expands on their discussion by summoning the notion of the assemblage to discuss the ‘seam of
interaction between bodies and technics’, in order to make sense of the gaming interface (Nansen,
2009: 69). Nansen proposes that this kind of work could constitute a significant turn in the history
of game studies, as it looks for footing in technological changes. The concept of ‘affordance’ is
most useful perhaps when we consider this ‘seam’ and the expectations they create. The
affordances are not merely conceptual, but have concrete impact, first, on the types of games that
are made, and, second, on the types of players who play them. For example, the Wii controller and
nunchuck created a new ‘dialect’ of game control, and significantly impacted upon the types of
games that were published on the system. We can say then, that affordances, occur before the game
is played.

Histories are the second point of interest in the following case studies. Games are built on what
can be vast systems of meaning, which presuppose not only a passing informational knowledge,
but also depend on having been played and lived through previous incarnations within the series or
genre. The very experience of playing contemporary (especially commercial) games is one of
recasting, recouping and reorganizing a personal history in which deep relationships are satisfy-
ingly drawn on, redeveloped and remade. This is often cited in the popular and market press as a
distinguishing feature between ‘hardcore’ and ‘casual’ types of play, but on closer examination,
even casual games with simple interfaces draw on deep histories. Though there is significant
difference between the notion of personal history and literacy, there is a productive overlap in
terms of a generational shift in understanding. The terms are unstable precisely because the
phenomenon is unstable. The notion of ‘gaming literacy’ has been taken up by scholars looking to
inform education and literacy fields with this massive generational shift in knowledge production
and assimilation. Christopher Walsh and Thomas Apperley described the difference between the
more commonly understood procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2006), and a ‘procedural literacy’:
Procedural rhetoric refers to the ways videogames enact ideology in their computational structures by using rule-based representations and interactions to convey a meaningful and persuasive argument in the code of games. Videogames and gameplay embody a form of procedural literacy because verbal, written and visual rhetorics inadequately account for the unique properties of procedural expression common in computer games. (Walsh and Apperley, 2008: 3)

Important to this notion of procedural literacy is that players have to personally engage with both games and their ‘paratexts’ (Consalvo, 2007) to make sense of their growing knowledge. The ‘unique properties’ Walsh and Apperley allude to are the meaning-making of particular games. Some elements are easily understood, and with games on (for example), Apple’s App Store, there is little meaning to be made as the value proposition is much lower. However, in relatively expensive PSP games, a history is required. One that builds on player knowledge of the PlayStation platform and the relation of the control schemes, game histories, and so on. The cultural and economic stakes are higher, so the historical impulse must be satisfied on all sides – the user must feel that the game represents their game knowledge, and the market ecosystem must coherently relate how the platform delivers on those histories. Designer Eric Zimmerman proposed that while media studies was perfectly capable of understanding how literacies of media interact, game design does not fit within the schema, requiring a new intellectual staging (Zimmerman, 2009). Histories, then, occur as the game is being played.

Loyalties are the third point of interest in the following case studies. Games offer not only stepped, or recurring narratives (such as the Final Fantasy series), but reward continuance in a series through knowledges of many kinds. Sometimes, as we will see in the case of Pokémon, the ability to continue a ‘game’ across games creates a loyalty. Loyalty is an uneasy concept because it so readily adheres to the commercial imperative of high-end game publishing. However, it is a crucially significant part of the enjoyment of many of the significant games on the portable platforms – something that could potentially separate them from the mobile game development environment, in which high-end, high-concept game development is very rare. Loyalties, then, occur after the game is played.

The two case studies, of Pokémon HeartGold/Pokemon SoulSilver for the Nintendo DS, and Monster Hunter Freedom Unite for the Sony PSP, set out to discover the specific arrangement. As we have seen, the work of game studies has turned significantly towards the platform and the situation of the player in response to concerns that the game text may have too primary a role. These studies are a complement, rather than a reaction to those turns. In establishing how these two significant titles create their sense of playing in public – both by dint of their portable platforms, and their multiplayer capabilities.

**Pokémon HeartGold/Pokemon SoulSilver**

In a famous anecdote, Satoshi Tajiri, the original designer and concept manager for Pokémon, witnesses two children playing a game through two original monochrome Nintendo Game Boy consoles linked by the system’s multiplayer cable. Tajiri paused at this scene and imagines ants travelling along the grey cable between the machines, as if being traded by the two children. After this epiphany, he would then flesh out earlier game design ideas involving the capturing of insects and bugs with this abstraction and began work with his collaborator Ken Sugimori on the ‘Pocket Monsters’ concept, which would grow into a multi-billion dollar enterprise. This anecdote is ‘crucial to the understanding of how the majority of scholars position the aesthetic of Pokémon’
(Surman, 2009). The anecdote only illustrates one design concept of Pokémon, but it serves to illuminate the gameplay at its core, which might otherwise be mistaken for a shallow game aimed at young children.

In terms of game design, Pokémon games are conventional Japanese roleplaying games (or JRPGs) with very simple battle mechanics. A player inhabits the role of a young Pokémon trainer who then collects the monsters on his or her journey, aiming one day to have captured every kind on the entire list. Much of the game centres on battling your Pokémon against others, and much of the medium-term gameplay focuses on the ‘evolution’ of certain Pokémon from form to form. The game (technically, two very similar games differentiated by small changes) under examination here are Pokémon HeartGold and Pokémon SoulSilver, both released in 2009/2010 for the Nintendo DS and which remake the 1999/2010 games Pokémon Gold and Pokémon Silver.

Pokémon games exist in roughly-equivalent ‘generations’ of games in the main series, each which add Pokémon monsters to find and collect, new game mechanics, and so on. These generations also span different Nintendo consoles, from the Game Boy, Game Boy Color, Game Boy Advance and Nintendo DS. For example, the Generation II games of 1999–2000 comprise Pokémon Gold and Pokémon Silver, which are bifurcated versions of the same base game (with some different Pokémon to collect in each), and a later enhanced version of the game, Pokémon Crystal. The next generation would begin year later with a new base-game template, new Pokémon, and so on.

A great many Pokémon players have moved from generation to generation of game, with the ability to transfer the monsters caught in older games to newer ones. This generative quality is reflected deeply throughout the game design, as David Surman explores in a thorough examination of the design qualities of the Pokémon concept and series (Surman, 2009). For Surman, the ‘evolution’ game mechanic reflects a player’s own relationship to Pokémon, which is typically put aside as a child adapts to the social pressure of puberty, and is taken up once again on the threshold of adulthood. Surman’s analysis continues into the seriality of Pokémon play, which grows as you labour in the game to find a particular Pokémon with particular traits that give you a desirable advantage. Crucially, the games possess a ‘percussive disclosure of serialized forms’, by which the practice of play unfurls the inherent gameplay mechanics, arteried to later or hidden areas, sound and in this case, specific monsters (Surman, 2009).

The anecdote about Tajiri’s inspiration relates to the game’s ‘trading functionality, in which players can trade the individual Pokémon they have with other players for all sorts of specific in-game benefits, but works to allow players to capture Pokémon not available in their specific edition. Anne Allison has written extensively on the relationship of Pokémon to space and place, and the importance of cute aesthetics in the Pokémon brands. In her earlier writing on Pokémon, Allison examines how children interact with the games; she identifies three types of what she calls ‘interactiveness’, or the seeming-interactions at the centre of public play. First, because of the overwhelming information architecture of the games, in which endlessly deep mechanics sit underneath very simple interactions, children have to communicate and trade knowledge about how to play. Second, they are able to trade Pokémon to advance in their quest for mastery, but also trade for social and playful reasons. Most interestingly, Allison identifies a third type:

This was giving kids what a number of child specialists I spoke to called a ‘space of their own’: a play environment that is imaginary but also emotionally real, that ‘cushions’ kids from the world of school, home, and daily pressures. Pocket monsters are the embodiment of this imaginary space. (Allison 2003: 389)
This notion reads similarly to those proposed earlier concerning ‘renegade’ gaming practices, where players carve out space from the real world to make room for a private unreality (Szentgyorgyi et al., 2008). It may be appealing here to draw us back to the notion of the magic circle and revisit the question of the separateness of play, a debate which has thoroughly consumed the field of game studies for a decade. However, Pokémon has design values and gameplay types that make it ‘polymorphous, open-ended and everyday’, as Allison explains (Allison, 2003: 384). The phantasm of the play-world and the everyday can bisect in productive ways for both child and adult players.

There are two game design histories at work in these games – the original Gold and Silver games, and the addition of the DS-specific features. Being that all of Pokémon’s major gameplay styles happen in static selections, with very little real-time pressure, there exists much less pressure on the ‘seam’ of the interface. This is true of all Pokémon games. HeartGold/SoulSilver (and the other Pokémon games on the DS) use the lower touchscreen to arrange options for selection in the turn-based battles, and many of the game’s menus. Play can be entirely slowed down, paused, considered, with few time or difficulty pressures. The two screens allow for the action of the battles to be displayed on one screen, while the options for play on the lower. This division means that players ‘look’ up and ‘touch’ down, gaining different haptic knowledges for each. The buttons can often replicate the role of the touchscreen, which reflects the original game’s design.

‘Generation IV’ games were the first to allow players to use a Wi-Fi connection to trade Pokémon, search for battles, and play a variety of game types. This radically changed an already global player culture, by allowing a broad array of co-operative and competitive play modes. In the game, the player-character has to travel to a ‘Global Trade Station’ or ‘Global Terminal’ (depending on the specific game) to initiate these online features. They are greeted by staff, and shown to a demarcated room. This presentation of online play is highly idiosyncratic to Pokémon, making the multiplayer aspects of the game as part of the ‘fictive realm’ (Surman, 2009). Likewise, trading Pokémon with other players via close-range wireless requires the in-game player-character to travel to a nearby Pokémon Center (which also allows players to heal, rest, save and organize their Pokémon) and walk into a specific room. This is by no means the most convenient method, the games could have designed multiplayer and online features – many games will have these features available in a menu that bears no relation to the fiction. But the in-fiction explanation of public play types allows players to, in Allison’s terms, continue exploring the boundary between the game’s fantasy and everyday life. The DS’s local wireless and Wi-Fi capabilities allowed the fictive realm of the Pokémon universe to expand to include these spaces.

Most notably, perhaps, HeartGold/SoulSilver was released with a separate pedometer device called the Pokéwalker, which allowed players to train their Pokémon by transferring them to the device and walking with them – encouraging players to physical activity. The small devices are small enough to be clipped to a belt or bag. The Pokéwalker can communicate with the game cartridge it was packaged with, and with others of its kind, which result in gifts being given to both players. If we return to Allison’s three types of ‘interactiveness’, we can see here a fourth in the remade games – one that is explicitly about public, social play. The optimal play experience of these games involves not only a DS, but also a Pokéwalker – allowing for multivalent types of play, and reducing the barriers to social involvement.

HeartGold/SoulSilver is embedded with elements that make play deeply ‘public’. It requires a social knowledge; it rewards co-operative trading and competitive play; it rewards a long-term commitment to the Pokémon universe, and so on. The affordances, histories and loyalties that exist in the spaces between platform(s), player culture, and game design – the set of circumstances
reveals itself as highly idiosyncratic. Assumptions about interface disassemble if the game design
de-emphasizes its own interface – as Pokémon does, for the most part. The touch screen of the DS
enables game developers, not players, to experiment with different control methods. Most
importantly, the optimal player of Pokémon – going well into the hundreds and thousands of hours
of gametime – shatters absolutely the notion that all mobile gaming is synonymous with short,
inattentive play.

**Monster Hunter Freedom Unite**

As the DS grew dominant in software sales during the period 2005–2011, Sony struggled to find a
secure footing for the PSP software library. Persistent attempts to form a market around the device
slowly moved away from the notion of a high-end convergence media device to one that compli-
mented the PS3 software library. Crucially, the PlayStation Network online store was common to
both platforms, allowing certain games to be played on both systems, and save files traded between
them. The small UMD discs were slowly phased away in favour of encouraging consumers to
avoid the retail channel entirely and buy their games on the store. The later iteration of the PSP,
the small form-factor PSPgo, did away with the UMD drive entirely. This alienated consumers
who had built up a library of games. Alienation might describe the typical PSP consumption expe-
rience, in which an uneven catalogue of games, with particular strengths in several niches, changes
the stakes of playing it in public.

**Monster Hunter Freedom Unite** is part of the **Monster Hunter** series developed and published by
Capcom, on both the PS2 and PSP consoles. It is notable and critically useful for a number of
reasons. First, it encourages small-group multiplayer games through the PSP’s local wireless
capabilities. Second, it enjoys vast popularity in Japan, and a cult following in the two other major
game publishing territories – North America and ‘Europe’ (which includes Australia and New
Zealand). Third, and most importantly, it is a series that enjoys significantly more commercial
success on the PSP platform than on two home consoles, PS2 and Wii. This allows us to analyse
the affordances, histories and loyalties of portable play with more direct focus.

The last of these three qualities – the broader success of the game series on portables – is worthy
of close examination. In a physiological and psychological response study, James Ivory and Robert
Magee examined the difference in response between users of a PSP game and the very similar
(though importantly different) PlayStation 2 game, both in the **Prince of Persia** series published by
Ubisoft. (*Prince of Persia: Warrior Within* on PS2 and *Prince of Persia: Revelations* on PSP). The
similarity of the games allowed for the researchers to develop a notional sense of even difference
between the platforms (Ivory and Magee, 2009: 292). They concluded that players were less
physiologically stimulated by the PSP experience, and also reported less psychological engage-
ment. Because the research did not map several games alongside each other, the data are useful in
reading the relationship of these two games as much as their platforms. However, the player
responses to these particular games may relate to the relatively poor quality of the PSP game’s
graphic and sound issues comparative to the original game on PS2, though these were not con-
sidered major factors (Ivory and Magee, 2009).

While we can theorize broadly about games in order to make sense of similarly broad changes in
culture, games make highly individual expressive statements about the platforms on which they
belong. In the case of *Monster Hunter Freedom Unite*, deeply engaged and difficult play expresses
the platform’s positioning as an adulterated home platform. James Newman notes, ‘for many game
designers, it is important to ensure that there is no explicit detachment and distance from the
contents of the game, and it is that desire that drives the creation of ergonomic hardware and software interfaces’ (Newman, 2004: 17–18). Newman’s ‘detached’ relationship between software and hardware is different to Bjorn Nansen’s examination of the seam – attachment is more concerned with the experience of play. Monster Hunter Freedom Unite, examined in design terms, is a thoroughly attached game, one that is carefully developed around the capabilities of the system and produces a deep play experience. Interestingly, while the series is more successful on the portable system, it may not be the system’s actual portability that engenders its success. Rather, its ability to communicate in small-group multiplayer networks and relative elegance of the interface is more expressive. By comparison, the home versions of the series are somewhat compromised, both commercially and in design terms.

I wish to examine Monster Hunter Freedom Unite as both a ‘post-MMO (massively multiplayer online)’ and a ‘post-Pokémon’ game design. With the success of MMO games (especially World of Warcraft), console development of role-playing games reacted in several ways. Final Fantasy XII eschewed the format of the series to favour a kind of offline-MMO aesthetics in which direct action experiences were replaced with continuous behaviours organized by the player. The Monster Hunter series, in turn, appealed to players who appreciated the slow play of role-playing games and the nearly endless item-gathering (colloquially known in the West as ‘loot’) of MMO designs. But the core aesthetic is one of an adulteration and inversion of the Pokémon formula.

In Monster Hunter Freedom Unite, your hero is seen as one of many who seek to protect a village from a world of monsters. In that, the entirety of the story world is described – in its place, gameplay, aesthetics and collectorship is heavily emphasized. The introductory video of the game shows not your hero, but a multitude of heroes, and more often the community that the player works to protect. The game is organized into quests, all of which take place in a limited number of areas. Players must hunt monsters, but plan beforehand for each attack, harvest dozens of items in the field and manage their use during the quest. The central dynamic of the game is the overwhelming difficulty of the real-time combat, which can extend fights for some monsters to 45 minutes or more. This quality explicitly encourages small-group multiplayer, for the purpose of teamwork. No element of the game punishes playing with friends, as there is no shared experience system – only a number of items to harvest, synthesize, and so on. A player can switch from single player to either online or local multiplayer with no change or penalty. Most importantly, it is with two, three or four players, that very difficult monsters can be caught and special items obtained – allowing players to return to the single-player portion with vastly improved chances of success. This type of optional co-operative multiplayer echoes the design values of games such as Pokémon but produces a very different gameplay as a result. Hunting in a small group in Monster Hunter Freedom Unite is a process of very nuanced role-sharing. Some players will use traps and snares while other players attempt to get the attention of the monsters. The rewards for group play are significant, allowing you quickly to gain advantages in the otherwise difficult single-player game. Like Pokémon – and likely because of that series – the multiplayer capabilities of the game are similarly located in the fictive realm. The game’s ‘Gathering Hall’ is the equivalent of the ‘Global Trade Station’ of Pokémon HeartGold/SoulSilver. Inside, players can meet with three other hunters, equip items, and select quests that are then instanced on a central server operated by Capcom. Importantly, this multiplayer exists only in the local ad-hoc wireless mode, meaning the group has to be in the same room. A later update allowed owners of both a PS3 and a PSP to play the game online, but this obviously requires the portable game to be played at home. With so much focus being put on small-group play, the game design encourages players to meet in a location – ideally with access to power to recharge the PSP’s batteries. The system’s portability is
used to establish new spaces for play, but small group multiplayer often requires a shared space, though not necessarily a public or open space.

In 2002, Olli Sotamaa described the concept of semi-mobile, which is distinguished from fully mobile by describing activities that were done with mobile technologies but in largely stationary situations (Sotamaa, 2002). The semi-mobile may refer to sitting in a café with a mobile device, but remaining motionless. This notion is extremely helpful for describing the kinds of play Sotamaa was examining – location-based multiplayer games, as it allows distinction between categories of play of the same game, for example. Since 2002, with so much having occurred in the field of mobile gaming, it is intriguing to return to this concept momentarily. *Monster Hunter Freedom Unite* is a difficult action game with a very long play-cycle that rewards what Clifford Geertz once called ‘deep play’ of high social and cultural stakes (Geertz, 1972). The semi-mobile may describe a range of experiences that disavow locality and anchor the user in their activity outside of their everyday environment and deeply in their activity – their phantasm, in Allison’s terms (Allison, 2003). Here, though, it makes sense to separate the type of experience from the notion that mobility may be the prerequisite. *Monster Hunter Freedom Unite* is not successful because it is portable, but because that portability suits a method of play – small-group same-location multiplayer. Much like the study of DS players in renegade player activity showed that some games do not truly encourage portable play, it can be said that *Monster Hunter Freedom Unite* categorically does (Szentgyorgyi et al., 2008).

The sense of the portable in this game is one that does not fit within a framework that sees the home as the primary place of enjoyment. However, neither is it satisfactory to say that the game design is truly mobile. Rather, the portable – much like a home-made lunch – exists in relation to the home. The social activity is highly limited, in a list of predetermined animations and player actions. The affordances of the game and platform allow players to experience play in certain formats, but only the appreciation of game literacy and knowledge produces the satisfying rewards of continued play.

**Conclusion**

In both case studies, we see deep gameplay that requires as much game knowledge as platform knowledge emerge as the key design paradigm. These portable games embody significant and diverse design histories of their own, all the while drawing on and feeding back into other design histories. The resulting experience for the player of these games challenges our assumptions about what actually constitutes ‘mobile’ gaming. These games are sometimes more involved than counterparts on home consoles – and it is their portability, not their mobility, which allows that depth. If mobile games are those involved in distraction and quick responses, then we must acknowledge that portable games can be those made deeper, not shallower, by the size of the technology. The word ‘portable’ cannot be productive confused with ‘mobile’ without ignoring these deep play experiences. We know that portable games are not automatically a continuation or shadow of the games on the home console, but can constitute a genuinely idiosyncratic experience. This difference, we can argue, is equidistant from the home console games on one hand, and the mobile games to which they bear only a resemblance of type. Two close examinations, *Pokémon HeartGold/SoulSilver* and *Monster Hunter Freedom Unite*, aggregate a case for redoubling our efforts for specificity.

We could assume that the games of mobile platforms and portable game devices exist in a continuous spectrum. Game design and development tells another story. The ‘portable’ and the
‘mobile’ game may constitute genuinely different categories of human-technological activity. They certainly describe different game design histories, methods and players. The mobile exists as a category to describe a great deal of multivalent, polymorphous activity that goes on with mobile technologies. But in the fine grain, deep activity occurs in some portable games that requires us to distinguish them from mobile games. Lastly, we cannot assume that the home has centre stage in these experiences – even as the site of actual play may be bedrooms, or living rooms, close to the power chargers for the device’s hungry batteries. For the players engrossed in deeply satisfying games, barely looking up from their screen to notice which location they find themselves in, the game-world is their home.

References


Biography

Christian McCrea is a lecturer and researcher at the Games Program of RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. He researches digital histories, aesthetics and audiences, and is currently researching how play cultures coalesce around skills and knowledge bases. Among his published book chapters and articles are those on Starcraft and e-sports cultures, horror videogames and the pleasures of difficulty, Anonymous and 4chan’s culture of the digital grotesque, anime culture and VHS collecting, portable game consoles and Pokémon.