

Analysis of Transmedia Storytelling in Pokémon GO

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Abstract—This study is part of a doctoral thesis on the topic of *Hyperfiction: Past, Present and Future of Storytelling through Hypertext*. It explores in depth the impact of transmedia storytelling and the role of hypertext in the realm of the currently popular social media phenomenon *Pokémon GO*. Storytelling is a powerful method to engage and unite people. Moreover, the technology progress adds a whole new angle to the method, with hypertext and cross-platform sharing that enhance the traditional storytelling so much that transmedia storytelling gives unlimited opportunities to affect the everyday life of people across the globe. This research aims at examining the transmedia storytelling approach in *Pokémon GO*, and explaining how that contributed to its establishment as a massive worldwide hit in less than a week. The social engagement is investigated in all major media platforms, including traditional and online media channels. Observation and content analyses are reported in this paper to form the conclusion that transmedia storytelling with the input of hypertext has a promising future as a method of establishing a productive and rewarding communication strategy.

Keywords—Communication, hypertext, Pokémon GO, storytelling, transmedia.

I. INTRODUCTION

In a restless search of intellectual development, people strive to find new ways of entertainment. Storytelling is the earliest-known instrument for amusement and audience engagement, followed by drawing art, music and written text. With the progress of our society, the evolution of entertainment became ingenious. First, movies brought books to life, and then media pierced the text through hyperlinks. Flexibility is no longer a prerogative to the human evolution; it is now an integral part of the narrative as well. A well-told story can change attitudes, create euphoria and influence masses more than any other communication tool. When the story is implemented in an incisive communication plan, the results are significant.

In “*You ‘Gotta Catch’ Pokémon’s Storytelling Strategy*” [1] on *The Holmes Report* website, Arnau Vidal points out that Pokémon owes its success both to the story itself and the way it has been leveraged through multiple channels, platforms and technologies. This statement became the foundation of the current analysis of the transmedia storytelling strategy of the *Pokémon GO* game that took the world by storm since July 2016. There are several aspects of the storytelling approach of the game that are worth analyzing due to their impact on lifestyle, education, marketing, public relations, entertainment (not limited to gaming), interpersonal communication, and businesses. All of these aspects together form the influence of

the social phenomenon and prove the immense power of transmedia storytelling.

The current study was formed through in-depth examination of articles about the Pokémon franchise and Pokémon GO in particular, in traditional and online media, incl. blogs, vlogs, stats, scholar literature, and audience input through shared content, considering comments, analyses and reviews.

According to the *DMR 70 Amazing Pokémon GO Stats* [2], the number of users on the busiest day of the game (July 14, 2016) was 25 million people. There are 500 million estimate downloads of the game to date (9/15/16). Pokémon GO has users in 100 countries worldwide with over 1.1 billion interactions on Facebook and Instagram only in July 2016. These numbers attest to the impressive reach of the product that owes its success to the transmedia storytelling approach in its conventional and reformed configurations.

The rest of the paper examines in detail how the approach was gradually developed over 20 years to achieve the end result, which is the establishment of the Pokémon franchise as a global blockbuster and of Pokémon GO as the most successful gaming phenomena in our history so far.

II. TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING (R)EVOLUTION

A. Transmedia Storytelling Development

The concept of transmedia storytelling dates back to ancient times – examples can be found in mythologies, where stories were translated in nonverbal symbols, such as artworks and pottery [3]. In *A history of transmedia entertainment* [4], Derek Johnson refers to the Bible as one of the most successful transmedia narratives in history. The concept has evolved gradually with the sociocultural evolution. The Industrial Age brought up broadcasting and later, Digital Age complemented the big picture with the advent of the Internet.

Just like photography and moving pictures precede the invention of television, the computer, and later Internet became prerequisites for the entirely upgraded version of transmedia storytelling, which, thanks to the ever-expanding possibilities of new technologies has gained the incredible power to change perceptions, create communities and affect not only the mind but also the lifestyle of audiences on an unprecedented scale.

Prof. Marsha Kinder was the first to mention the term *transmedia* in its relevant sense back in 1991. Her book *Playing with Power* [5] became the starting point of an extensive research and perceptive discussions on the topic of transmedia storytelling, lead by Prof. Henry Jenkins since 2003 and developed further by many prominent proponents like Stephen Dinehart [6], Carlos Scolari [7], Max Giovagnoli, [8] Elizabeth Evans [9], Colin Harvey [10], Robert Pratten [11], Kevin Moloney [12], Dr. Andrea Phillips [13], and Dr.

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Pamela Rutledge [14] to name a few. The general conclusion of all scholars and transmedia analysts is that this interactive form of contemporary storytelling transforms the whole entertainment landscape by expanding its capabilities to a state of supremacy.

B. Transmedia Storytelling and the Pokémon Franchise

In her early work, exactly 25 years ago, Prof. Kinder starts the topic of transmedia not so much in relation to storytelling but in terms of achieving commercial success through the system of media. In *Playing with Power*, she observes the emerging phenomenon of transmedia intertextuality on one hand, and the rise of the Nintendo entertainment system on the other, more relevant to this analysis paradigm. Back in 1990, it was already clear that “the biggest potential business for Nintendo is in multimedia entertainment systems” [15]. Whether by chance or by some strange prophetic intention, the first idea of Pokémon appeared at the same time (1989-1990). It is essential to highlight, however, that the transmedia storytelling approach in Pokémon GO was a progressively elaborative process that originates from the cross-platform concept of the 90s (TV, games, trading cards and film) to the more sophisticated communication form of the phenomenal franchise. To understand the multidimensional transition at its full extent, it is essential to refer to the article *New World Created By Social Media: Transmedia Storytelling*, published in the Journal of Media Critiques by Prof. Emet Gürel and Öykü Tığlı [16]. Basing their arguments on the reputable conclusions, reached by previous research and theory on the topic of transmedia storytelling, they outline its essence as:

“In an ideal transmedia application, each channel does the best and unique thing that it does. Accordingly, a story can firstly be launched as a movie and be extended through television, novel, and comic book versions; and eventually, the created world, which is open to explore in all aspects, can be experienced through games. In addition, in order to take pleasure in playing the game, it is not necessary to see the movie and be informed about the story”. With reference to Pokémon example, each product is like the access point for ‘franchise’ practices representing the whole. Each narrative, which is a part of the story within the framework of transmedia strategy, is at the same time a product, called as ‘franchise’. The drive to continue exploring the franchise is increased by promising not narrative repetition, but extension. While each could be experienced separately and still be enjoyable, each component became part of a single unified storytelling experience. In the light of these details, transmedia storytelling can be defined as creating a proactive story world and transferring all its elements like story, adventure, character, space, and culture, on both ‘online’ and ‘offline’ all kinds of media platforms through more than one channel and different communication codes. In this regards, in transmedia world there are more than one narrative. Each narrative, as a part of puzzle or a piece of the big picture, contributes to the whole. Every narrative is a separate

story and it constitutes a part of a bigger story by serving to it. In point of fact, through the narratives transferred via different channels it is both helped establishing the story world and reaching different consumer groups. Through its nature emphasizing participation and experimentalism, transmedia storytelling as a technical term makes consumer exist within the story world and become story’s consumer, narrator, and producer”.

Since its birth in 1996, Pokémon has become a world blockbuster franchise with 122 core, spin-off and side series games in addition to 19 seasons of anime; manga; toys; branded merchandise, and trading cards. The first games that were launched in 1996 include 151 characters, while at present the total number is 765 [17]. The Pokémon Empire was built over the course of 20 years with conscious marketing and transmedia storytelling efforts. 3 years after the initial release of the first core games, another two were released in 1999, followed by additional 2 in 2002, 2006 and 3-dimensional editions in 2013 that became the best selling 3DS games of all times. Meanwhile, the sequels were launched in 2003, releasing spin-off games in 2007, 2011 and 2012 [18]. The Pokémon Adventures manga were launched in 1997 with a total number of 52 editions [19]. The animated series that were launched simultaneously were followed by 17 Pokémon movies with shorts to go along. Although Pokémon emerged as a video game, it immediately unfolded across books, films and television with no media privileged over any other” [20]. Each Pokémon story exists on its own, while yet complementing the rest:

“The first *Pokémon* television series sets up the events of the first *Pokémon* movie and the second *Pokémon* movie introduces new elements that are featured in subsequent seasons of the TV series (*Pokémon GS*) and the Game Boy releases *Pokémon Gold and Silver* (Patten 338). *Pokémon* therefore develops as a fully functioning multiplatform ecosystem, developing complexity through the addition of new layers of narrative, new challenges in gaming and new merchandising opportunities. The network grows as a child would grow, plugging the audience into an increasingly larger and more complex networked assemblage of artifacts” [21].

To further prove the successful transmedia storytelling implementation in the Pokémon franchise, it is mandatory to observe how the 7 core principles of transmedia storytelling, presented by Prof. Henry Jenkins in 2009 [22] relate to the pop culture phenomenon:

- *Spreadability vs. Drillability*: Pokémon might have taken all available media channels simultaneously but the more important fact is that its content was engaging enough to make audiences loyal in not only following but further developing the storyline. There are millions of active consumers of the franchise who not just trade and play, but also design characters, share content through social media and forums, organize events like tournaments, contests and exhibitions, arrange information in databases, and all the more - create artwork, including comic books, plush toys, even new video games! The

logical outcome of all that engagement was the implementation of the Pokémon theme in education – a concept, known as *edutainment* [23]. Numerous coloring books, worksheets, word games and even Pokémon-themed classrooms came out to encourage children to learn in a more interactive way, thus encouraging the storyline progress.

- *Continuity vs. Multiplicity*: Video games were already popular when Pokémon entered the scene as Nintendo dominated the market since 1985. In the face of the growing competition, marketers knew that it would not be profitable to focus on simply releasing upgraded or even brand new versions of the game without offering additional means to keep the public attention. That's how Pokémon took over all media and traditional marketing channels in series but that only enhanced its commercial success – describing *multiplicity* only partially. The initial focus of the Pokémon creator, Tajiri Satoshi, fell on *communication, community and communion* [24] and that became the cornerstone, which made Pokémon ascend beyond the game and turn into a social phenomenon.
- *Immersion vs. Extractability*: This is probably one of the most relevant principles of transmedia storytelling, applied to the Pokémon franchise. Most importantly, the fantasy Pokémon world shows numerous references to the Japanese culture, thus supporting intercultural exchange and subconsciously teaching tolerance, understanding, and broadening geographic boundaries. Many real-life objects were brought in to relate the fiction to the daily routine of Pokémon players (e.g. the Pokédex). The fantasy world of the game quickly turned into a real-life obsession, named *Pokémonia*. At the release of the First Movie in 1999, the switchboard at Warner Brothers received 70 000 calls a minute from people “desperate for tickets” [25]. Parents saw the Pokémon frenzy as an educational opportunity for their children to learn budgeting, trading and interacting with their friends; psychologists and school officials were alarmed due to occurring fist fights, thefts and turning playgrounds into black markets, in addition to distracting children from their regular school duties. On the other hand, there were millions of fan-created stories, characters and artworks that convey the fictional Pokémon world to reality. The apogee of this principle is found in the augmented reality game *Pokémon GO* that will be observed in Section III.
- *World Building*: This principle is pervasive for the Pokémon franchise as the Pokémon regions in each generation of the game are “strikingly similar in geography and demographics to regions in the real world, and sometimes even officially stated to be based on certain locations” [26]. The Pokémon GO game takes *World Building* a step further by actually merging the real and the fantasy worlds.
- *Seriality*: The 6 generations of the Pokémon game, together with all supporting movies, anime series, merchandise and manga, released over the 20-year history

of the Pokémon franchise are enough to prove the attainment of this principle that keeps the story going.

- *Subjectivity*: The Pokémon story conflicts are more than overwhelming – ranging from opinions on species to the overall game impact and the net worth of the Nintendo stocks in relation to the latest released update. The feelings, tastes and opinions of the Pokémon users and observers are worthy of a whole separate study, which only proves the realization of yet another transmedia principle in Pokémon.
- *Performance*: The motivation to perform the Pokémon stories in real life comes from the constant efforts of the Pokémon franchise to engage the audience, using creative techniques such as TV show appearances and magazine covers (e.g. TIME magazine, 1999 [27]) that result in Pikachu parades, World Pokémon tournaments, and gadgets that complement the virtual Pokémon world in real life.

C. Transmedia Storytelling Reinvented

With the shift from consumer to participatory culture and the information technology revolution, transmedia storytelling has thrived in the newfound realities. Moreover, it has taken the much broader standpoint in the form of pervasive entertainment in our digital world. Robert Pratten defined the term in 2010 as *transmedia storytelling evolved* [28]: “*Pervasive entertainment* is entertainment untethered and unencumbered by time, location and reality. For those who like equations, here's one:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{pervasive entertainment} = & \text{ubiquitous media} + \\ & \text{participatory experience} + \text{real world} \\ & + \text{good storytelling} \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

Naturally, not all transmedia storytelling examples extend to pervasive entertainment (1) but in the case of the Pokémon franchise, it is definitely the most adequate definition of what their communication strategy achieved over the course of 20 years. The easiest way to understand the magnitude of pervasive entertainment is to explain the concepts of the canon, the fandom and user-generated content as does Fernanda Pires de Sá in her research project *The co-viewing experience in the age of transmedia storytelling* [29], supervised by one of the protagonists of new media production and transmedia storytelling, Carlos Alberto Scolari. For the purpose of this analysis, the concepts were adjusted to the Pokémon case and compared to the simple transmedia storytelling forms:

- As Fernanda de Sá states, “*the canon is the official narrative story, created by an author or a corporation*” [30]. In the Pokémon instance, that would be all products of the Pokémon franchise, incl. games, manga, TV series, films, official website, merchandise, and the Pokémon World Championships. These various communication channels go beyond transmedia storytelling – media being only part of the variety of marketing channels used. The rest accounts for ubiquitous entertainment (namely,

advertisement or branded entertainment), used for stronger audience engagement.

- De Sá explains fandom as a realm where fans produce their own narratives and texts. During a European speaking tour in 2012, Henry Jenkins talks about *spreadable media* in the context of the entertainment environment. In his lecture: *Engagement, participation, play: the value and meaning of Transmedia audiences*, he admits that fans increasingly play a greater role in transmedia practices [31]. At the end of his talk that presented examples about transmedia content, created by fans, he emphasizes that the transmedia novelization is the thing that we should pay attention to and from the lecture it is clear that this novelization includes the circulation of fan based recreations of the canon storytelling. Jenkins draws the attention to social media as part of transmedia and the circulation of amplified buzz, created by influencers that blur the line between fan-created storytelling and the original message. In the Pokémon case, these statements translate into fan gatherings, fan-created products, fan fiction and even false content. The most important point here is that fan communities take storytelling to a life of its own and circulate that new content into a subsidiary transmedia storytelling that reshapes the entertainment environment.
- Finally, citing Guerrero, Fernanda Pires de Sá defines *user-generated content* as texts created by the audiences or users as either a part of a fandom or individually. Here Jenkin's spreadable media principle *Circulation vs. Distribution* comes to mind that is explained best by the metaphor of the dandelion. The Pokémon GO craze presents many examples, including newsjacking by huge brands like T-mobile, Sprint and Walmart. [32]

The concept of transmedia storytelling in its general definition seems to be insufficient to describe all complex

processes that are taking place in the digital realm. The active usage of media technologies on a daily basis calls for a more sophisticated explanation of the transmedia world that we live in [33]. Generally, it all starts with the power of the story, however, the new multi-dimensional approach goes beyond transmedia storytelling into immersive experiences that are similar to digital marketing [34] but actually surpass everything that has been known so far.

III. POKÉMON GO: THE MAVERICK OF NEW MEDIA ART

A. Pokémon GO Alters Reality [35]

Pokémon GO is globally recognized for adding value to users, businesses and the tech world; creating impact, being a frenzy, phenomenon and sensation. Communication, marketing and technology experts around the world have been constantly reevaluating the positive and negative aspects of the augmented reality (AR) game since its launch. With over 100 million downloads (Appendix 1) and daily time spent in Pokémon GO that surpasses world's most popular apps (Figs. 1 (a), (b)) it is obviously here to stay and turn the current social environment – both digital and physical – upside down.

Fig. 2 visually illustrates the results of an analysis of 10 random articles between July 11 and October 10 (with positive, negative and neutral focus) in top media sources like The Wall Street Journal, Forbes, New York Times, The Guardian, Business Insider, Bloomberg and the Telegraph, using Jason Davies world cloud generator. The protruded words clearly outline the essence of all articles that can be summarized in the following two sentences: Pokémon GO is a world hit mobile game app, co-created by the Pokémon Company, Nintendo and Niantic. It is played social and features digital creatures, found by free walk in nature. The rest of the words just contribute to all different aspects of the game significance: time, people, reasons, ideas, data, etc.

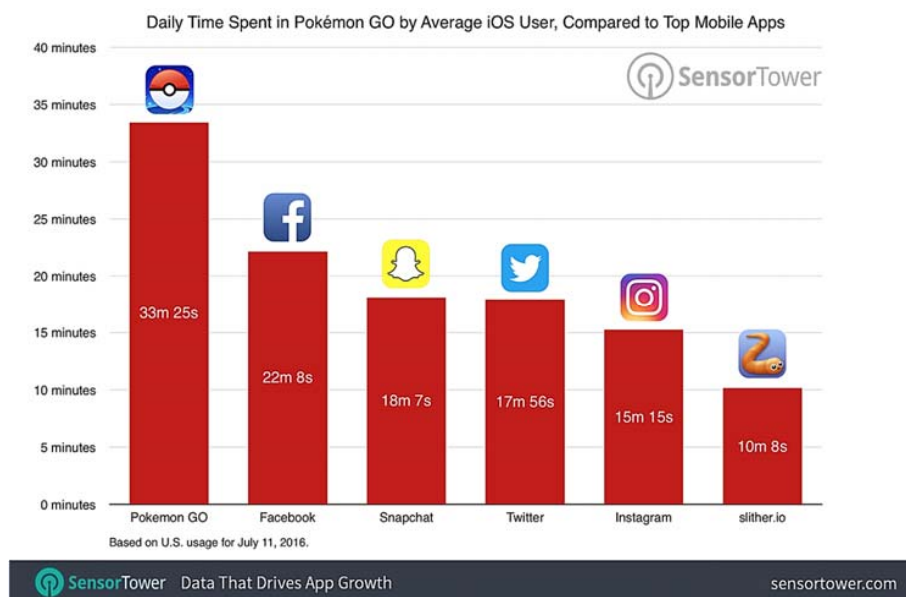


Fig. 1 (a) Mobile Users Are Spending More Time in Pokémon GO Than Facebook [36]

Usage Time: Pokémon GO vs Social Media Apps

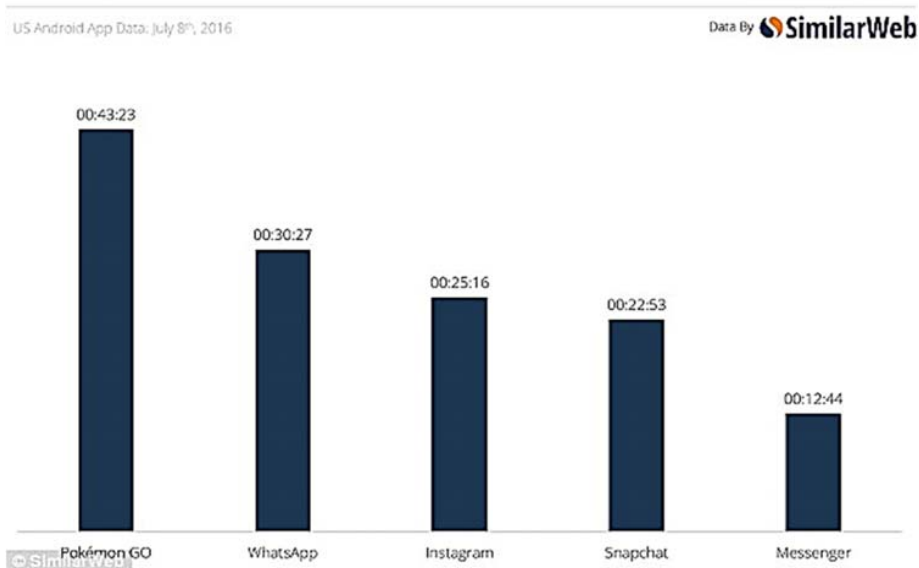


Fig. 1 (b) Pokémon GO overtakes Tinder, WhatsApp and Instagram as controversial hit game adds \$7.5 BILLION to Nintendo's value [37]



Fig. 2 Word cloud generated from the text of 10 media articles [38]

In reality, it is neither the plot of the game, nor as much the technology that generated ardent discussions worldwide among users, experts, analysts, media, scholars, teachers, parents and basically everyone old enough to process information – it is the adoption rate and scope of Pokémon GO that practically infiltrated all aspects of the global physical and digital society, just the way it merged real and virtual worlds [39]. What's even more astounding to marketers is that they witnessed that phenomenon proliferate without any great marketing efforts (or so they thought). First, Ad Age expressed its confusion about the lack of notable branded marketing in early July and tried to attribute the success of the game to *word of mouth* and *familiar brand name*, otherwise seeing it as “*won out-of-nowhere*” [40]. By mid-July, marketers were convinced that “*while it feels as if it appeared from nowhere, Pokémon GO is painstakingly assembled from what came before it: An overnight success 20 years in the making*” [41]. Then, finally, starting at the end of July, until now marketing experts have started tapping into definitions like *first real viral success of augmented and virtual reality*

(VR) [42], *the future of online to offline (O2O) marketing* [43], and the *social interaction component*, related to transmedia storytelling [44]. However, besides all debates, they still are in a state of uncertainty about how exactly Pokémon GO will influence marketing. Meanwhile, tech experts and business analysts struggle to find the golden mean between revenue stream and consumer engagement in Pokémon GO. They have been crucifying the mobile app between a *broken fever* [45] and *mass success* [46], being unable to reach a stable conclusion. Small businesses have definitely benefited from the Pokémon craze [47]. In terms of lifestyle, Pokémon GO has been seen by the community as a threat to National Security in several countries, concerns about safety and privacy issues of users were also discussed, even religious semantics were hotly debated in Christian circles [48]. The health benefits of the app complement the lifestyle changes that it brings along, having users exercise more [49] and increasing their social interaction.

Whether due to an established fan base, smart data usage [50] or user engagement instruments, experts agree that Pokémon GO has turned into a game changer not only for the gaming industry but also for businesses, people, and global communication. A reflective commentary on the Pokémon GO transmedia storytelling strategy is presented in the next section.

B. Pokémon GO: A Perfect Blend of Transmedia Adaptation and Database Logic

Pokémon GO is definitely a part of a two-decade Pokémon transmedia storytelling strategy on one hand, but at the same time it might be considered as a transmedia storytelling phenomenon by itself. However, there are certain conditions that apply to this statement.

Referring back to the seven principles of transmedia storytelling, defined by Henry Jenkins, its strongest points are *spreadability* and *world building*. Despite the fact that there were many games and technologies before Pokémon GO, merging virtual worlds with the physical environment (hybrid reality), it's officially declared as the first successful AR app that is bound to change the implementation of this technology in the future. Its viral reach is well beyond the phone screen – on social media, general media outlets, blogs, applications (e.g. Poke Amino) and practically everywhere in the physical world. *Drillability* is also obvious – people discuss religion, health, tech, business, communication and marketing effects

of the game, bringing even national and international politics in [51]. *Continuity* is presented by the development of complementing technology such as Pokémon GO Plus or the Pokedrone and is yet to be seen in an allegedly discussed screenplay [52]. The principles of *immersion*, *extractability* and *performance* are evident from the real-time statistics (Fig. 3), fan fiction, created daily in blogs (e.g. Pokémon Fans), hack apps (e.g. PokeMesh, PokeWhere), and YouTube channels with millions of subscribers, and billions of views [53]. In addition, there are numerous virtual events that turn into physical fan gatherings of thousands of Pokémon GO players [54].



Fig. 3 Real Time Statistics from the App Institute website presenting the number of Pokémon GO downloads worldwide for 7 hours, 32 minutes, 28 seconds on Oct. 14, 2016 [55]

While *subjectivity* as a transmedia principle is apparent from the massive feedback that the game received since its launch, the principles of *multiplicity* and *seriality* are lacking any measurable evidence of existence. This fact forces the question:

Is Transmedia Storytelling the correct definition for the success of Pokémon GO and if so, are there any nuances that need to be added to complete the puzzle of its ubiquitous triumph?

In order to answer this question accurately, some definitions must be analyzed:

- *Mixed Reality (MR)* – a term, well explained by Robert Pratten on his blog in 2015 [56]. His definition of MR as a combination of AR, VR and Alternative Reality (ALR) can easily be applied to the Pokémon GO phenomenon. The experience starts 20 years ago, in the virtual world with the Pokémon video game and anime series, then penetrates the real world through the Pokémon trading card game along with all merchandise to finally advance into augmented reality with Pokémon Go, which creates ALR via groundbreaking social engagement. A

connected, personalized, participatory and social experience to the letter.

- *Pervasive Gaming* – an occurrence, described in 2005 by Steve Benford, Carsten Magerkurth and Peter Ljungstrand as a new generation entertainment technology that takes computer games to the streets and ultimately, beyond [57]. Clearly, the description matches the nature of Pokémon GO that expands the fictional world of Pokémon into physical reality.
- *InterCompositional vs. IntraCompositional transmedia phenomena* – extensively elaborated by Christy Dena in 2009 [58]. While the first concept consolidates transmedia practices that have multiple related compositions, the second refers to pervasive and ubiquitous games that are self-contained (transmedia work themselves). In the case of Pokémon Go, these definitions prove that it is both InterCompositional (part of the transmedia storytelling strategy of the Pokémon franchise) and IntraCompositional transmedia phenomenon (a transmedia work by itself, started as a mobile app and spread across other apps, social media and soon possibly a movie).
- *On-Demand Narrative and the transmedialist* – introduced by Rick Hoving from the University of Amsterdam in 2014 [59] in his Master thesis, these concepts relate transmedia storyworlds to the perception of hypertext in terms of its non-linear structure. Storyworlds are thus presented as narrative databases that users access and navigate through according to their own interests, hence facilitating unique experiences. This proposition explains the massive social media engagement that Pokémon GO aroused, implicating all aspects of the contemporary lifestyle.

Taking into account the recently examined terms, it becomes apparent that Pokémon GO is particularly complex transmedia storytelling practice. It surpasses most previous attempts to apply this technique for greater audience engagement due to its comprehensive method of implementation. It became a logical continuation of an already established phenomenon, but with its own characteristics and path of development. By addressing not only the fandom but also the general audience it managed to take transmedia storytelling to the next level – above and beyond the traditional concept, unfolding innovative ways to build human-to-human and human-to-technology relationships in the overconnected world. It proves that in order to execute a blockbuster product launch through transmedia storytelling, the developer must look not only into the technological prospects but rather to understand the audience routine.

IV. CONCLUSION

The possibilities of transmedia storytelling in the Postdigital Age [60] are unbounded. The powerful combination of digital and human interaction was recently proved by the sociocultural phenomenon Pokémon Go. Its ubiquitous success was mainly achieved by the focus on the audience,

represented in its transmedia storytelling strategy. Reviving past storyworlds through new technology resulted in unexpected adoption rate of the product. Moreover, the transition from digital to physical was well planned from the initial intention of the game developer John Hanke [61]. It was never meant to be just a game – it was planned to reform lifestyle, enhance entertainment and evoke emotion. The current analysis proves that Pokémon GO went far beyond gaming – it created an entertainment experience that reshaped the general perception of technology, gameplay and social interactions. Using carefully elaborated transmedia storytelling and focusing on the human component, Pokémon GO made history in the future of social interactions, enhanced by technology.

APPENDIX I

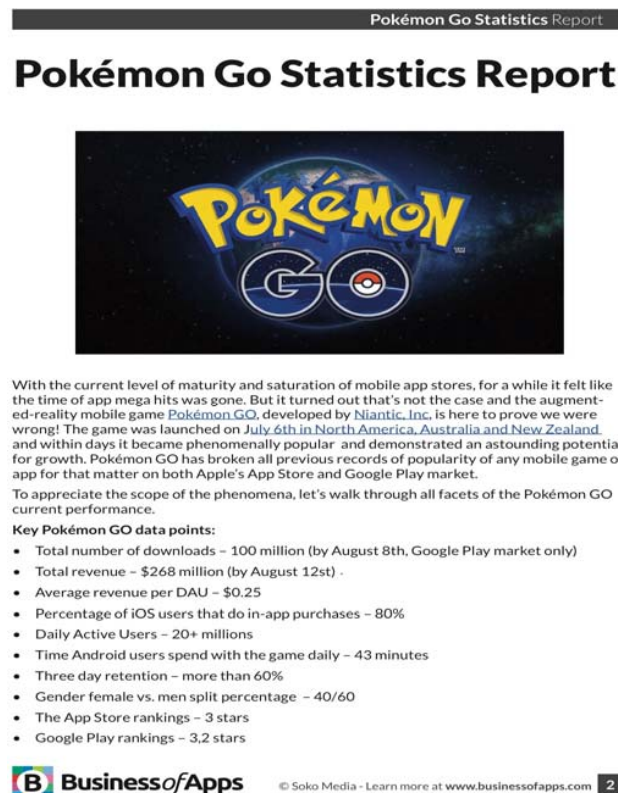


Fig. 4 Pokémon GO usage and revenue statistics, Aug 15, 2016 [62]

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