PLAYING TOGETHER ACROSS SPACE AND TIME

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The last time I played a Pokémon game was the original *Pokémon Red* on my giant brick of a GameBoy. The year was 1999. I can still recite most of the details of the game from memory. I have a pretty good memory for games to begin with, and the amount of time I put into that one game was enough to get it to stick.

The year is now 2019. Over the winter holidays, we purchased a Nintendo Switch for the whole family. My daughter Janis, who just turned 8, was familiar with the Pokémon IP but had never played any of the games. I felt it was time, so I purchased *Pokémon Let's Go Eevee*. I chose Eevee over Pikachu for gameplay reasons. In the original game, Eevee could evolve three different ways, including into the rare and powerful Ice type, while Pikachu was stuck in electric type, making Eevee more versatile. While my daughter initially was more excited about Pikachu (*Pikachu is the famous Pokémon*, she said), I hoped my daughter would eventually come to value her Eevee and forgive me. In time I was vindicated; after nearly finishing the game, she agrees that Eevee is cuter than Pikachu, and would not give up her Eevee for anything. (Ironically, your starter Eevee in *Let's Go* can't evolve, thus nullifying my rationale, but I did not know that at the time.)

I have not played *Let's Go*. Janis has played it incessantly for the last couple of months. But we talked about the game frequently when she wasn't in the middle of playing, and to my surprise, I was able to understand what she was talking about and even give her gameplay advice. While *Let's Go* isn't an exact replica of *Red/Blue*, it returns close enough to its roots that we were able to relate to each other's experience, despite that experience being separated by a score of years. What follows are her observations on the game, and my observations on her observations.

ON COLLECTION

> Janis: *I like the idea of studying different species of Pokémon.*
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> Me: Why?
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> Janis: *The Professor told me that I should, and I just like it when I know more stuff.*
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> Me: What if Professor Oak told you to do something you didn't want to do?
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> Janis: *He only tells you to do things that you'd want to do anyway. Otherwise, that would be catastrophic... you wouldn't play the game!*

Indeed, *Pokémon*'s NPCs and quest givers – especially along the main quest – push the player towards engagement with the game's core mechanics of exploration, battling, and collection. *Pokémon* in particular goes to great lengths to chain together its narrative and its mechanics: the player character's profession is a collector and trainer. To the extent that the player enjoys the gameplay and wants to engage with the game's systems, they should easily buy in to the narrative that asks them to do just that.

When I first played *Pokémon*, I remember this being just as effective a hook for me as it is for Janis. When I was growing up, I played a lot of video games and took pride in being skilled at them. I had the drive and available free time to play games to

completion and even beyond to the level of absolute mastery, and the idea of a game that made completionism a core value from the outset appealed to my desire to show all of my content.

ON ANTICIPATION

Janis: *I just got a Master Ball! The game told me it's a Pokeball that never misses.*

Me: You should save that one for Mewtwo, it's the most powerful Pokémon in the game and you get it much later, and being able to capture it right away without having to fight it will be useful to you. The game only gives you one Master Ball and you can't get any more ever, so I suggest you hold onto it.

Janis: *What's Mewtwo? No one in the game said anything about it. Maybe it's not in this game.*

Me: No? Well, in the game that I played, it was a big part of the game. You found an entire area that was completely destroyed, and you found out that it was one Pokémon, a Mewtwo, that did it. The story in the game is that there was a research lab where people were trying to make the cutest Pokémon ever, and they called it Mew. And then they tried to improve it even more, and they called the new one Mewtwo because it was the second one, but something went wrong and it got a lot less cute but also really powerful and it got mad and destroyed everything around it, and you find it pretty late in the game.

Janis: *That sounds neat, but a little bit scary. I want to catch both of them!*

Me: Well, in the original game you couldn't catch Mew, though there were a lot of people who made up stories about ways to get it, but I think they were all just stories. I'll look it up for you, though… yes, according to this FAQ, you will find Mewtwo but only after you beat the Elite Four. It was different in the first game. I'm sorry, my advice was bad this time because it looks like they changed this part of the game.

Janis: *Wow. What do Mew and Mewtwo look like?*
Me: Well, Mew is really cute, kind of like a kitten with really big eyes, and Mewtwo is… a lot less cute and a lot scarier looking and

really mean. It's not Mewtwo's fault, though, people were mean to it first.

Janis: *I'm going to draw what I think Mew and Mewtwo look like. Is it like this?*

Me: No, but I'd like to use this in our Well Played article if that's okay with you.

Image 1: Janis's rendition of "Mue" and "Mue2" [sic] from my description

Image 2: Mew and Mewtwo (images from bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net, accessed 2/28/2019).

As she progressed to the later stages of the game, Janis noted that *Let's Go* makes heavy use of anticipation throughout the game to make certain encounters more exciting. With legendary Pokémon such as Articuno and Zapdos, the player hears rumors of them and gets clues to their locations long before encountering them face to face, which makes the final encounter that much more exciting. Relatively early in the game, the player meets the character Lorelai, one of the Elite Four (essentially one of the final bosses of the game), notifying the player of their existence and suggesting a final goal. Throughout most of the game, the player is collecting badges from Gyms, some of which are inaccessible until the player completes other small quests (such as a gym that is closed until the player explores a nearby mansion). At most points in the game, the player has an immediate short-term goal which unlocks the path to a longer-term goal, with several side goals that are known, so at every point the player has several major game events that they know are coming, and that they are anticipating. While many games make use of this technique, it is central to the *Pokémon* experience.

Aside from anticipation for its own sake, this layering of short, medium, and long term goals that are all exposed to the player has another critical effect on the play experience. It keeps the

player moving through the game's content because the player is never very far away from completing something. While this technique is perhaps best known from Sid "one more turn" Meier's *Civilization*, it is also strongly present in the play of *Pokémon*. Interestingly, *Let's Go* allows the player to save anywhere, allowing them to break out of this compulsion loop and exit the game at any time. While this would seem to work against the game's systems that keep the player playing indefinitely, the ability to offer a safe exit is typical of other Nintendo titles, and plays to the company's "family friendly" image. This same attitude can be seen in other Nintendo games: *Animal Crossing* has a real-time day/night cycle based on the system clock that severely limited what players could do at night (so that children were less likely to stay up late), and both *Wii Fit* and *Brain Age* reminds the player to take breaks at frequent intervals. While neither the original *Pokémon* nor the new Switch version explicitly prevent extended play – as noted above, they rather encourage it – both games seem to be designed with the use case in mind of a parent telling their kid that it's time to stop playing, and they remove the excuse of "just let me play until the next save point."

When I was actively playing *Pokémon*, I appreciated the feature so that I wouldn't lose progress if I was told to turn off my game immediately or otherwise had to stop due to an important interruption. As a parent, I appreciate this feature so I can convince my child it's time for bed without having to deal with her deep hatred borne of losing progress in her progression-based game.

ON CUTENESS

Janis: *I like that my Pokémon look cute.*

Me: What makes them cute?

Janis: *Their eyes. The eyes carry a lot of their expression.*

Me: Are there other things that about them that are also cute?

Janis: *The way they look, the way they sound, and their animations in battle or walking around.*

Me: Why is it important to you that they're cute?

Janis: *It makes it easier to love them. They're more likeable if they're cuter. You can dress your Eevee and [my trainer] the same way so they have the same clothes. Isn't it cool?*

When designing a game to appeal to children of all genders, one way to do this is to find universal non-gendered themes that appeal to everyone, and another option is to use gender cues of both genders. *Pokémon* opts for the latter: it's a game about cute cuddly animals that beat the snot out of each other.

The visual look is part of the appeal for her. It provided the initial hook to get her to want to play before she knew anything about the gameplay, and made it easy for her to learn the characters and personalities of her team (combined with the text descriptions in the Pokedex entries, which she read immediately as soon as she got a new entry). While wandering on the map, the player can also talk to a Pokémon that is following them, letting the player see the Pokémon's thoughts.

She noted that when many Pokémon evolve, their evolutions look creepier and scarier. Shellder is a simple bivalve with a rounded shell, large eyes, playfully sticking out its tongue; its evolution Cloyster has "angry eyes" as she puts it, a profile with sharper lines, and multiple spikes sticking out at all angles. Koffing is smiling and has two small pointy teeth as might be seen on a kitten; when it evolves to Weezing, it has two faces, both of which are frowning, and its teeth are much larger and pointing up rather than down (see Figure 3). While not all evolutions follow this pattern of getting less cute over time (the caterpillar-like Caterpie, for example, eventually evolves into the butterfly-like Butterfree), it happens enough to be noticeable.

While this might seem to go against the initial premise of making the game as cute as possible for wide appeal, by the time a Pokémon evolves the player has generally been playing with them for some time already, has already emotionally bonded with them, and is able to accept that they now look more powerful and able to fight against advanced opponents.

Image 3: Shellder and Koffing evolutions (left to right: Shellder, Cloyster, Koffing, Weezing; images from bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net, accessed 2/28/2019).

True to gender roles, the cute aspect of the game was never a major appeal to me. Until Janis talked to me about the aesthetics of the game, I had never even noticed the shift in visual style during evolutions. As a systems designer at heart, I see JRPGs as thinly-veiled spreadsheets. By contrast, Janis has the heart of an artist, and I had to agree with her assessment of the visual impact and its role in denoting the power and progression of the player's party.

ON THE STARTER POKÉMON

Janis: *I like playing with Eevee. I can feed her and groom her, and I get all these different responses from her.*

Me: Can you do that with anyone else?

Janis: *No, but you can walk with or ride on other Pokémon, but Eevee can travel on your head and you can also pet her.*

One of the places where *Let's Go* diverges from *Red/Blue* is in the player's starter Pokémon. In the original game the player

was given a choice: Charmander, Squirtle, or Bulbasaur. In *Let's Go*, the choice is made at point of sale, where either the Eevee or Pikachu cartridge is purchased. *Let's Go* puts much more emphasis on the player's initial Pokémon as well. It is treated not just as the start of a collection (that will inevitably be replaced by other more powerful Pokémon shortly into the game) but as the player character's primary companion and, at least in Eevee's case, a powerful companion who gets strong attacks early on in order to keep it relevant in combat throughout the game.

In the original GameBoy game, the trainer was the main character and the trainer's goal was to "catch 'em all." In the new Switch game, the starter Pokémon is as much a main character as the trainer, and new interaction mechanics were added to emphasize this link.

Image 4: Feeding and grooming Eevee and Pikachu (image from Twitter Post of @Pokémon, https://twitter.com/Pokémon/status/1017425259652308992, accessed 2/28/ 2019).

In addition to petting and grooming, the game puts additional emphasis on the role of the starter Pokémon character. Throughout the game, the player collects five Secret Techniques that help to move around the map and access new regions, but it is the Pokémon and not the trainer who learns these techniques. Janis explains why: *Eevee is the main character. She can make her Pokeball move even when she's inside, and they become best friends. You even get to control Eevee directly when you're in the Team Rocket hideout.* I asked her why Eevee is the main character, and she rolled her eyes as if this were obvious. *It's called Pokémon Let's Go Eevee, not Pokémon Let's Go Janis. Well, you get to choose the name of the human but not the name of the Pokémon.* This was one of the only areas of the game where I felt there was enough of a difference between *Red/Blue* and *Let's Go* that I could not relate my own

experience to hers, because the original game did not encourage any kind of relationship between the human main character and their starter Pokémon.

ON BATTLING

> Janis: *Whenever you aren't in combat, you can look at your box of Pokémon to build your team. You can have up to 6 Pokémon on your team. Most of the other trainers in the game only have between 2 and 5.*

> Me: That hardly seems fair that you have more Pokémon on your team than everyone else. Why do you suppose they designed it that way?

> Janis: *Because then you'd have to go to the hospital after every fight, which would slow you down. It also wouldn't be fair if your opponent's Pokémon were more powerful or higher level than yours and they also had as many of them, then you couldn't beat them. It also means that when you do meet a trainer with 6 Pokémon, it feels like an important moment.*

At the time we had this conversation, she had not made it to the end of the game, but she predicted correctly: the final battle in the main quest line, against your rival after beating the Elite Four, has 6 Pokémon (the rest of the Elite Four have 5 Pokémon each). In general, the number of Pokémon held by opponents slowly increases as the player progresses through the game, and significant enemies such as Gym Leaders do tend to have larger teams than those around them, making these battles feel more dangerous, more significant, and more gratifying.

When I played the original game, I enjoyed the combat systems for the same reason that I've enjoyed the combat systems of any JRPG: it's repetitive enough that I can easily enter a flow state, allows enough player agency that I can optimize and win battles above my weight class, and it's driven by numeric systems that appeal to my analytical nature. For these reasons, I expected my daughter to be less excited about this element of the game (she

is less analytical and more creative than I am), but she ended up enjoying the combat for entirely different reasons.

When asked why she liked the fighting, Janis's immediate reaction was the rewards. She earns money and her Pokémon level up. The player only earns money if they win (they lose money if they are defeated), but overall the player tends to earn more than they lose. Money is mostly used to buy consumable items in the game and it doesn't play a major role (the player can generally ignore their funds for most of the game, which makes losing money after a defeat feel like only a minor setback and not a devastating blow). To Janis, the appeal of having more money is just to have more money so she can feel rich. Parallels to the real world aside, this would seem to be in line with the rest of the game: with a focus on collecting Pokémon, it's only natural to want to collect other things such as currency.

By contrast, Pokémon themselves do not get weaker when defeated. In fact, as long as the player doesn't lose to the very first enemy in an encounter, their own Pokémon level up in the middle of battle after each individual defeated enemy Pokémon, meaning that the player can come out ahead in combat strength even after multiple defeats. To me, the appeal of Pokémon getting stronger is the ability to progress in the game. To Janis, the appeal is to please the characters that she has emotionally bonded with over their cuteness.

She also noted that some Pokémon start out powerful and at a high level when you first catch them, and this usually corresponded to how rare they were and how long it took. Highly anticipated Pokémon that the player had been tracking down for a long time would feel like more of a reward if they started out at Level 50 rather than Level 5. While this left the player with less time spent with that new Pokémon to level it up, and thus less of an emotional connection through training it, that time had already been spent up front in anticipation of

hearing about it, tracking it, and finally capturing it, giving the player plenty of time in advance to become invested in this new character.

ON EXPLORATION

> Janis: *I like running around and not having to go anywhere. I mean, you can go and battle the Elite Four but you don't have to, you can go other places.*
>
> Me: What makes you decide where you want to go?
>
> Janis: *I don't know. Maybe I think of the Pokémon that are there that I want to catch.*

While exploration as a mechanic does not change throughout the game, the regions of the game feel distinct from one another, in their descriptions, their visual look-and-feel, and the different Pokémon that inhabit them. This change in scenery denotes progression as the player travels through the game, providing an additional reward (beyond money, leveling, and narrative advancement) as the player moves forward in the game.

This is one area where my experience deviated strongly from Janis's. She views this as an open-world game because the game gives her the agency to go wherever she wants. While the game does restrict or gate her movements in certain areas to make sure she is of a sufficient power level before reaching more dangerous zones, those are the exceptions and feel like significant barriers because of it. For most of the game, the player can go where they want within the zones they have unlocked.

To me, the game felt linear. Yes, I can hypothetically follow any path available, and yes, the game does reward exploration through offering some hidden paths to secret areas, but the map still has a clear path that the player meant to follow. The main quest line pushes the player in a very specific direction, and uses the narrative and promise of rewards to incentivize the player

to follow. The game promises agency, but then turns around and manipulates the player into doing what the game wants them to do. This is not a difference between *Red/Blue* and *Let's Go*, but rather a difference in perception between an excited eight-year-old and a jaded forty-four-year-old.

CONCLUSION

Pokémon's core gameplay, overall presentation, and even content are more similar than different between *Red/Blue* and *Let's Go*. This allowed me to provide strategy tips that I remembered from the old version and that were still valid in the new one. Since the Pokémon in both games are the same, if she told me there was a Snorlax blocking the way or came to me excited because she just caught a Cubone, I knew what she was talking about and could celebrate, commiserate, or strategize with her. We played different games, but we shared nearly the same experience, twenty years apart.

And yet, we are different people and approached the play of the game in different ways. I initially approached the game as a JRPG with an emphasis on grinding, leveling my party, and maximizing my combat effectiveness. Janis is much more interested in her relationship with the Pokémon characters (especially her Eevee companion), emphasizes collection and exploration, and sees combat as merely a means to those ends. To the extent that *Let's Go* adds new elements on top of *Red/Blue*, those elements are geared towards Janis's play style, with more of a focus on the relationship between the trainer and their Pokémon, and making the Pokémon feel more like playable characters than game resources.

To the extent that *Let's Go* also caters to players like me, it has added more choices in character builds: Pokémon learn techniques more rapidly than in *Red/Blue* but they can only can only have four combat moves at a time, forcing the player to

choose which techniques to learn and which to discard. This allows a single Pokémon species to have several different viable combat styles depending on the choices the player makes. Pokémon can be further customized with techniques found along the way, which are found more frequently and can be used more often in *Let's Go*, allowing a combat-focused player to optimize their roster more carefully.

Playing games with my daughter is always a singular pleasure for me, and seeing her play (and conquer) games independently fills me with pride and nostalgia. Being able to share in her experience of a game I haven't played without playing alongside her was unexpected, and added to the depth of my interest in both her and the game itself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS