AGENCY, IDENTITY, SEX, GENDER, AND POKÉMON GO

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INTRODUCTION

August 2016, as I went walking in Hays, Kansas, I witnessed a strange sight. Downtown, just after 8:00 pm, nearly a dozen cars had parked along the side of the street, their passengers sitting with their phones, swiping at the screens, windows rolled down on a pleasantly warm summer evening. I knew why they had gathered there, because I was there for the same reason. The three teenage boys sitting on the bench under the trees had drawn all of us to this corner to catch pokémon—the intersection boasted three pokéstops, and on each pokéstop a lure module sparkled, promising to spawn new creatures for us to capture with each passing minute.

Pokémon Go had only recently been released, and its fervor was at its height.

For those unfamiliar with the augmented reality phenomenon, *Pokémon Go* is a mobile game that uses real world locations, the phone's GPS and camera to allow players to wander through

the world, tracking down and catching cartoon monsters who players then battle against each other for control of Pokémon gyms. Gyms and pokéstops are found at landmarks and places of interest and are vital for players wanting to restock on supplies, gain in-game currency or win experience. Pokémon can appear anywhere and everywhere, but are most common in areas where larger numbers of people play the game. The stated goal of the game, like practically every installment in the franchise, is to "catch 'em all," to find and catch at least one pokémon of every pokémon species.

Over the course of this paper, I will be exploring sex and gender in *Pokémon Go*. Most of my investigation stems from a specific update released in February, introducing sex/gender to the game in a way that it hadn't previously appeared. It was a major update, and one which raised a number of questions for me as a feminist scholar.

THE UPDATE

On February 16th, 2017, *Pokémon Go* launched its biggest update so far, adding dozens of pokémon from gen 2, new types of berries, and additional avatar customization options (*Pokémon Go*, 2017). It also added a new piece of information to every pokémon in the game: their sex.

Throughout this paper, I will be talking extensively about sex and gender, utilizing the following Oxford Dictionary definitions: Sex here refers to "Either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and most other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions" while gender is understood to be "Either of the two sexes (male and female), especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones. The term is also used more broadly to denote a range of identities that do not correspond to established ideas of male and female." Sex is

understood to be biological, whereas gender is socially constructed and performative.

Setting aside Nidoran, a pokémon species that has been sexually dimorphic from the beginning, sex began sneaking into the game around December of 2016 when sexual dimorphism began appearing in pikachu (Reddit, 2017). Pikachu have different tail shapes based on their sex, with male pikachu tails sporting the pointed lightning bolt tip, as seen on practically every piece of Pokémon advertising, while female pikachu's tails have a rounded off, heart shape at the end. When pikachu evolve into raichu, the males continue to have a more pointed tail, while the female's tails are more curved. At that time, the sexes of pikachu and raichu were somewhat fluid, with Reddit users reporting their Pikachu changing sex during evolution or between updates as developers continued tweaking the code.

With the February update, sex solidified and you no longer had to be a savvy pokémon zoologist to identify the sex of a pokémon—next to statistics about a pokémon's species, type, height, weight and hit points is a little symbol marking it, declaring its sex as an immutable fact of its being.

Only, many of us had been playing for months by then, had pokémon we had raised, named, known, who's "lived" identities mattered to the program not a bit. I had tended toward feminine names and identities for my favorite pokémon, and suddenly pokémon I'd known as female for all of their short pokémon lives had been declared male. Eloise, my warrior lady rhydon, toughest of my fighters, male. Crocus, my starter bulbasaur, my oldest pokémon friend, male. Duchess, the vaporeon, male. The gender assignments I had given my pokémon through feminine names were placed at odds with their newly assigned sexes.

As I continued exploring the sex assignments within the game, I started noticing that not only were many of my pokémon

misgendered, the majority of my pokémon overall were male. Sorting by combat power, my most powerful nine pokémon were all coded male.

I also realized, as more species of pokémon started to display sexual dimorphism, that up until this point the physical traits we had seen in pokémon with subtle gender variation had all been male presenting. Gloom, for instance, a plant-like pokémon, has more spots on its buds if it's male, fewer but larger spots if it's female. Until the update, all Gloom had displayed masculine coloration despite not having been officially sexed, reflecting a male-as-default attitude.

These findings raised a variety of questions for me as a scholar. The first is sex distribution within *Pokémon Go*. I wondered whether my pokémon were predominantly assigned male by chance or by design, and so I compared my findings with friends for a slightly larger sample and looked into the history of sex distribution in pokémon games. I then examined player generated lists of the strongest pokémon species in *Pokémon Go* and the sex distribution those pokémon have demonstrated in previous games, exploring assumptions about sex/gender and power that might be at work in this game.

Second, I look at player agency, exploring the loss of agency inherent in the game's assignment of sex to previously unlabeled pokémon, and the new forms of agency introduced by that change. I present a few different ways to read the addition of sex several months into a game where sex/gender had previously been open ended, and ways of interpreting the tension between player assigned gender and game assigned sex.

Finally, I touch on some of the ways in which players of Pokémon Go have been impacted by gender from its release. As an augmented reality game requiring players to explore the real world for in-game rewards, the gender dynamics of the real

world are always in play, requiring women and members of other marginalized communities to navigate issues of safety and accessibility that their white, male, straight, cis, able bodied counterparts might not even notice.

MALE AS DEFAULT, MALE AS POWERFUL

In looking at sex distribution, I decided to start off by focusing on the most powerful pokémon, using the combat power (CP) statistic provided by the game. The most powerful pokémon a player has are likely to be the pokémon they use most often in gym battles and have spent the most time and resources powering up—for these reasons these pokémon are the most likely to have been given names and identities. When I started asking friends about the gender breakdown of their most powerful pokémon, I asked them to look at their top twelve pokémon by CP. The game organizes pokémon into rows of three, and although different phones may have slightly different aspect ratios, most screens show about four rows before the player has to scroll down. This means that the top twelve most powerful pokémon tend to be visible at the top of the screen when players have their pokémon sorted by CP. Gathering the gender distribution of those twelve pokémon seemed like a small enough sample to be quickly gathered by my generous friends, but large enough for a pattern to start to form. In my informal sampling of six players, every one reported a male majority among their most powerful twelve pokémon and one discovered only male pokémon in his top twelve. I am sure that there are people for whom this is not true, either by chance or through their choice to favor female pokémon post update, but my sample strongly suggested that my experience was not unique.

Next I graphed the sex distribution of my own 75 oldest pokémon. All of these pokémon were caught before the update, had survived numerous rounds of cuts to make way for new catches, and more than a third of them had names and associated

gender identities. For my data visualization, I collected gender and combat power for each of those pokémon and graphed them in Gephi. The dark grey circles represent male pokémon, the pale grey circles with the darker borders represent female pokémon and the single mid-grey circle near the top represents a single nonbinary pokémon (a Ditto, a genderfluid, shape changing species). The size of the circle corresponds to that pokémon's CP. The nodes are grouped by color and roughly organized by size.

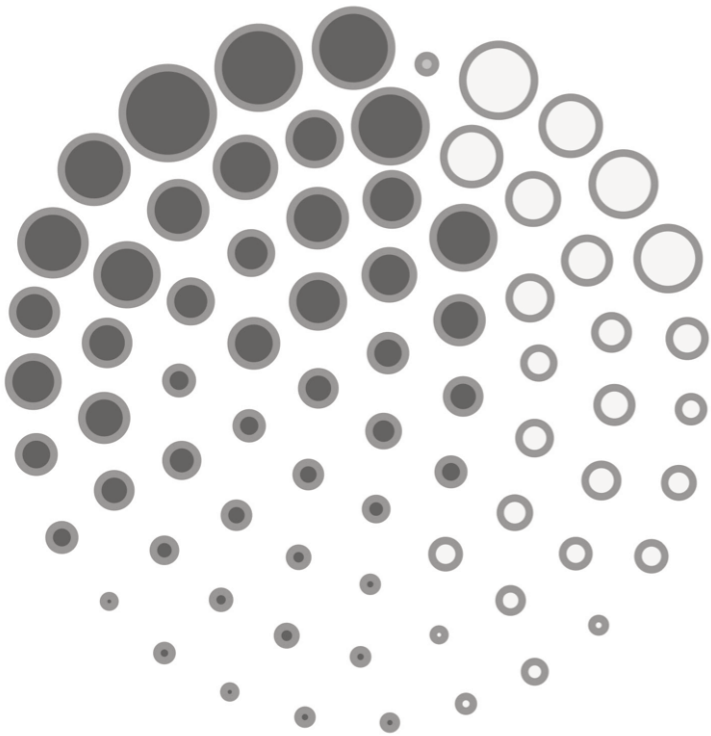

Figure 1. My oldest 75 pokémon, mapped in Gephi to show gender and combat power.

Of this set of 75 of my oldest pokémon, 49 were male, 25 were female and one was nonbinary. On average, the male pokémon

were stronger than the female pokémon. Without knowing exactly how the program assigned gender to existing pokémon or how it assigns it to new ones, I can't definitively speak to why we're seeing these patterns, but I can take a few educated guesses.

One possibility is that in pokémon species with sexual dimorphism, all pokémon that players had caught prior to the widespread release of gender were coded male. Between my and my partner Tom's pokémon, we counted 43 instances of pokémon caught prior to the update who exhibit sexual dimorphism in one or more of their evolutions and every one of them was male. Because players send away a large percentage of the pokémon they catch, and older pokémon are more likely to have already been weeded out, our sample is relatively small, although the numbers are compelling and suggest an ideological male-as-default stance within the game.

This male-as-default stance is problematic in that it treats femininity and nonconformity as a deviation from standard. Sometimes this is subtle and seemingly harmless, as it is in determining which sprites to use in a phone game before gender/sex are fully integrated into the mechanics, but simple decisions about what to include and what to leave out can support ideological assumptions that can have a meaningful impact in promoting discriminatory action (Barton and Barton, 2004 [1993]). Furthermore, the use of strict sexual dimorphism reflects cis-normative gender values. Any pikachu with a heart-shaped tail is female, and any with a pointed tail is male—these presumably biological visual expressions of sex are treated as a clean cut division between female and male pikachu.

While any two players may have a widely different selection of top pokémon, fans on *Ranked Boost* have created a list ranking pokémon by their max potential CP, and this is the ranking that I drew from in identifying the top twenty pokémon for the next step of my research (*Ranked Boost*, 2017). Examining this list

and comparing it to the list of pokémon who exhibit sexual dimorphism provided by *Bulbapedia* (*Bulbapedia*, 2017), I found that three of the top twenty pokémon, two of whom are within the top five, exhibit sexual dimorphism, which may have caused all pokémon of those species to be labeled male during February's update, skewing the distribution of powerful pokémon in a male dominated direction.

A second possibility which could contribute to a male majority among players' toughest pokémon is that the game is dividing pokémon along gender lines in similar ways to previous games in the series. Using *Bulbapedia*'s statistics on previous pokémon sex distributions and the ranking list cited above, I examined the top twenty pokémon species in *Pokémon Go* and their traditional sex distribution. Although I can't definitively say that *Pokémon Go* does follow similar sex distributions to previous games, I believe those numbers provide a valuable insight, if only to explore latent biases concerning sex and power that may have found their way into this game.

What I found was striking. Of the top twenty Gen 1 Pokémon species in *Pokémon Go*, ten of them have been predominantly male in previous games. Seven of those species are 87.5% male, three 75% male. The other ten species were equally split male/female. No nonbinary pokémon appeared in the top twenty, nor did any predominantly female species. Three of the top twenty pokémon with an 87.5% chance to be male are evolutions of Eevee and therefore have the same sex distribution, but because Vaporeon, Flareon, and Jolteon rank differently and because these species are so much more common than most of the other high ranking Pokémon, I have included all three evolutions on the chart. Without Eevee's evolutions the chart still shows a strong male slant (see Table 1. for the detailed list).

In previous games, this tendency towards making more powerful species predominantly male has been utilized to make breeding

pokémon more difficult (*Bulbapedia*, 2017), treating sex as nothing more than an indicator of reproductive ability, overlooking the sexist connotations between masculinity and power, femininity and reproduction.

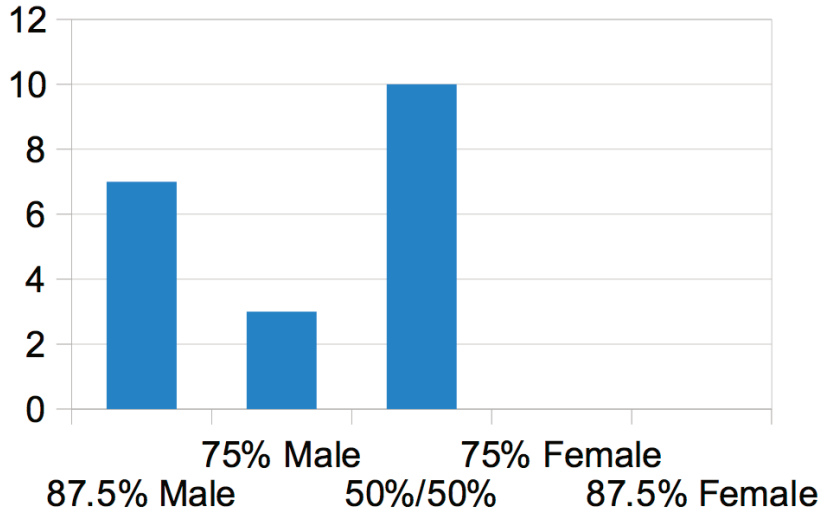

Figure 2. Traditional Gender distribution among the 20 most powerful Pokémon in Pokémon Go.

I chose not to include Gen 2 pokémon in my chart for a few reasons. Gen 2 pokémon were released in the same update that assigned pokémon sex en mass, so the relationship between those pokémon and their sex has been more static—part of my interest is in the transformation of previously sexless pokémon into a male dominated set. Gen 2 pokémon also haven't been part of the game as long, and aren't as widely recognized and known.

While they are not on the chart, I want to mention that Blissey, a pink, frilly, egg bearing pokémon introduced in the second generation, falls between the 4th and 5th pokémon on my chart and has quickly become a gym defense favorite. Blissey is traditionally a female-only pokémon. While it is problematic that

the only female leaning pokémon to rank this highly is visually coded in such stereotypical ways, it is positive that such a very feminine pokémon is so widely used and highly ranked, leading me to believe that most players care more about a pokémon's power than its gender expression. I also excluded legendary pokémon from my chart. Although they were included on the *Ranked Boost* list, they were not yet available in regular play.

If both of these hypothesized effects are influencing the gender distribution of highly ranked Pokémon, the two effects would compound one another—Of the three dimorphic species in the top twenty, two would traditionally be split evenly male and female, while the third already leaned male. If every Rhydon and Gyarados caught in the six months prior to the update is male, then even if newly caught individuals have an equal chance of being male or female the demographics will likely be skewed for some time to come.

Species	% Male in Previous Games	Dimorphic?
Dragonite	50.00%	No
Snorlax	87.50%	No
Rhydon	50.00%	Yes
Gyarados	50.00%	Yes
Vaporeon	87.50%	No
Lapras	50.00%	No
Golem	50.00%	No
Exeggutor	50.00%	No
Flareon	87.50%	No
Machamp	75.00%	No
Alakazam	75.00%	Yes
Arcanine	75.00%	No
Pinsir	50.00%	No
Jolteon	87.50%	No
Muk	50.00%	No
Kingler	50.00%	No
Charizard	87.50%	No
Omastar	87.50%	No
Gengar	50.00%	No
Aerodactyl	87.50%	No

Table 1. Top 20 Pokémon in Pokémon Go ranked by power, noting gender distribution and dimorphism. Pokémon rankings from Ranked Boost, distribution and dimorphism from Bulbapedia.

AGENCY

Murray defines agency in games as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices." (Murray, 1998). In the sexless world of *Pokémon Go* pre update, one element of agency that players held was the power to name their pokémon and in doing so create their identities, including the assignment of gender/sex. I had the power to make my top pokémon a team of warrior ladies, because their gender identity, if any, was in my hands.

Players still have the power to name their pokémon, and the

power to pick names with gendered associations is still in our hands, although the game itself has declared the majority of our toughest pokémon to be male. Some players accept the gender of their pokémon as matching the assigned sex, some resist. Either way, the open ended-ness of our agency to determine the identities of our pokémon for ourselves has been challenged by the developers. It is frustrating that this inclusion of sex favored masculinity so strongly, particularly since early user demographics suggested that significantly more women than were playing the game than men (Mac, 2016). However, despite my frustration with the breakdown of pokémon sex demographics at the moment of the update, the update also did something interesting and powerful: it introduced a strong transgender narrative into what Forbes called "the most popular mobile game of all time" (Mac, 2016).

For players who had not named their pokémon, or had not gotten invested in their pokémon's personalities and identities, the assignment of sex was not such a big deal. Players I talked to who haven't made a habit of naming their pokémon reported neutral reactions or mild annoyance at the game's assignments, and had not spent much time or energy exploring the demographics of their newly sexed pokémon. Long time fans of the franchise reported little surprise at the demographic breakdowns, having been familiar with the traditional sex distribution. Some players noted that the affordances of *Pokémon Go* don't encourage players to build relationships with their pokémon or get particularly invested in their identities. Ochsner and Saucerman argue that openness to different play styles is one of the factors that has made the pokémon franchise so successful and allowed it to appeal to such a diverse audience (Ochsner & Saucerman, 2015) and I am inclined to agree—all of these different experiences are valid, and I recognize that my attachment to my pokémon and my experience of frustration

when my pokémon's gender identity came in conflict with their assigned sex may not be typical.

For players like me who had named their pokémon, and who had created identities for their favorite pocket monsters and become attached to them, there were a couple of different ways to react to the sex assignment and ways to read and understand those reactions. Regardless of what players chose to do once their named pokémon had sex assigned to them, when this update occurred a large number of pokémon suddenly had sex assignments which did not match their names and identities. That fact alone creates a trans narrative.

When this update occurred, my pokémon had largely feminine identities and were primarily coded male by the game. I chose to read the names and identities I had developed for my pokémon as richer and more valid than the sex assigned by the program. In this reading, the game's assignment of sex is loosely translated to the idea of sex assigned at birth, and the names and identities I chose for my pokémon are metaphors for the lived gender experiences of individuals. Where these two assignments are at odds, I understand my pokémon to be trans and I continue to embrace the chosen names and "lived" identities, disregarding the assignment made on the basis of a few pieces of data in some algorithm or sonogram. I read the sexes assigned by the game not as my pokémon telling me about themselves, but as the game trying to dictate and undermine the gender expressions of my pokémon.

Another reaction is to read the addition of sex as something communicated not by a feelingless algorithm but by the pokémon themselves. In this reading the assignment made by the game is the gender of the pokémon, not necessarily their sex (although players anticipate that sex was introduced in this update as a precursor to the addition of breeding mechanics, which would enforce the assignment as biological sex), and the

player takes a role similar to a parent who's child has just come out to them—changing their name and respecting their identity is a way of supporting and affirming the experience of the pokémon.

Of course, players are free to read either narrative onto their game and to change names or not. A player may choose to see the renaming of pokémon as an erasure of gender nonconformity just as easily as they can read it as an affirmation of identity. They can read choosing not to rename a pokémon as forcing that pokémon into a gender expression which does not match its identity just as easily as they can read it as a refusal to conform to external pressures. Ultimately, the game doesn't care, and the little chains of code that make up the pokémon within *Pokémon Go* don't actually experience gender. All of it is in our heads—but that doesn't make it less interesting or important.

By challenging my understanding of my pokémon's genders, the game pushed me to be less cis-normative. Had the game assigned sex from the beginning, I may not have questioned those assignments the way I did when they came into conflict with my pokémon's established identities. Realizing this has prompted me to continue ignoring the game's assignment of sex and to recognize and challenge my own tendencies towards cis-normativity.

The game developers almost certainly did not intend to insert trans narratives into *Pokémon Go* with this update, but as Barthes has been arguing for decades, the intent of the author doesn't matter nearly as much as the ways in which the audience understands the text (Barthes, 1968). The addition of sex to *Pokémon Go* is a polysemic narrative—there are a variety of ways of reading and understanding the update (Hall, 2012 [1977]). This feeds into a different concept of agency in video games, described by Voorhees, who argues for looking at agency not as the ability to impact the game world but as "the ability to create

meaning in a situation not of one's own making." (Voorhees, 2014). Players lost the ability to decide the sex of their pokémon along with their gender, but they gained interpretive opportunities in navigating the tension between the game's sex assignments and the gender assumptions inherent in previously assigned names.

AUGMENTED REALITY AND PLAYER IDENTITY

Although other scholars are getting into questions about the ways augmented reality games intersect with player identity more deeply, I would be remiss to write a paper about identity and agency in *Pokémon Go* without at least touching on these issues. Real world challenges and inequalities can have a huge impact on a player's interaction with any game, but even more so with augmented reality. Early after the game was released, a whole slew of articles and opinion pieces started popping up, expressing fears about the ways in which players might endanger themselves in the pursuit of animated monsters. Of these pieces, one of the most widely shared and discussed was Omari Akil's article "Warning: Pokémon GO is a Death Sentence if you are a Black Man", exploring issues of racial inequality and the dangers of wandering around town trying to catch pokémon as a person of color in a time and place where police violence is a harsh reality and people of color are viewed with suspicion for performing even the most ordinary of daily tasks (Akil, 2016). Other authors expressed fear that children could be lured into dangerous situations, and that inattentive game players could be taken advantage of.

In the *Pokémon Go* panel at the Southwest Pop Culture Association Conference this February, each scholar on the panel expressed different concerns about inequality or safety issues built into the game. Nicole Dilts explored the ways in which *Pokémon Go* can be inaccessible for people with limited mobility or fine motor skills, centering her study around her experience

playing *Pokémon Go* with her autistic son. Jamie Henthorn looked at *Pokémon Go* as a fitness app and touched on some of the ways in which women are forced to be more careful than men whenever they're out in the world, something that women runners have long been aware of but which the *Pokémon Go* community has not yet really addressed. The ways in which population density influences the playability of the game also came up in panel discussion, as the game favors players in urban areas over those in rural ones (Dilts et all, 2017).

Through no malicious intent, *Pokémon Go* has managed to favor the same demographic that many games favor: Able bodied white men. Many of the factors weighing into this are outside of the developers' control, although perhaps more could be done to actively work against the systematic disadvantages faced by women, individuals with disabilities and people of color. These would be challenges for any augmented reality game entering the market at this time, and we explore them through *Pokémon Go* not because *Pokémon Go* is bad, but because it is one of the first major forays into this new territory. The things that scholars and game developers learn watching *Pokémon Go* will be important lessons for future explorations in this field.

CONCLUSIONS

The addition of assigned sex to pokémon in *Pokémon Go* is complicated for a number of reasons. The developers seem to be building upon previously established demographics in their assignment of sex among pokémon, and to have made all pokémon within species that exhibit sexual dimorphism male when the update introduced sex, choices which have supported stereotypes which treat masculinity as default and powerful. The update also created tension between gender identities assigned by the players in naming their pokémon and imagining their identities prior to the update, and the sexual identification assigned by the game, unintentionally inserting trans narratives

into a mainstream mobile game. This is a potentially powerful thing.

There are many opportunities for game developers to speak their values through their games, and to do it without being pedantic or condescending towards their audiences (Flanagan, 2009). When developers treat female characters as a mechanic for reproduction, they place value on women only in so far as they are capable of reproduction, something that many women are unable or uninterested in doing. When developers make the majority of their toughest fighters male, they play into stereotypes about masculinity and power. When they suddenly assign sex to previously ambiguous characters, they ask players to navigate the tension between sex and gender and to find a way of coming to terms with that tension, even if those narratives were unintended.

As I argued in my presentation "Visual Rhetoric and The Silence of Our Friends," sometimes the most seemingly trivial media can allow political content to get through resistance and opposition much more easily than well respected, serious and overtly political media (Bannister, 2017). In that paper I discuss music and comics as methods of fighting racism, here I see tremendous opportunity for games like *Pokémon Go* to subtly, quietly, include trans narratives into their game, battling cis-normativity while their players continue their quests to "be the very best", and "catch 'em all" (Pokémon Theme 2008 [1998]).

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