

TRAVEL ESSAY

Newsletter 2016-8

A trip in Sokcho for Pokémon Go

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※ A Korean translation of this article is available on Hansun Foundation's Korean website as part the August 2016 Newsletter.

My Descent into “Pokémania”

I was never a huge Pokémon fan.

I never understood the appeal of monsters and never took an interest in collecting, raising, or battling “pocket monsters”. Thanks to my fellow classmates and 90s babies who grew up with the game, I was aware of the general idea of Pokémon and recognized its iconic characters like Pikachu and Squirtle, but that was about it for my relationship with Pokémon.

All of this changed when the The Pokémon Company released the location-based augmented reality mobile game Pokémon Go on July 6, 2016, igniting an international Pokémon craze, or “Pokémania”. This craze had blown up to the point that I was unable to keep up with conversations with my college friends in the US, who along with millions of others across the nation seemed to be entirely consumed by the game; my Facebook,

Twitter, and Instagram feeds have been flooded since with updates, rumors, tips, and memes of Pokémon Go. I had to see what the hype was all about, and the fact that the game had not yet been officially released in Korea, where I spend my summer breaks, made me all the more curious.

So when news came out that Pokémon Go worked in Sokcho, I decided to tag along my brother and cousin—both millennial kids and major Pokémon fans—when they decided to make a weekend trip up north.

I'm certainly not a technology expert, and I'm nowhere near being a sociology, economics, or anthropology scholar either, but I am an adventurous and curious 21-year-old millennial who has an obsession with the world's newest trends. As someone who made the rather spontaneous trip to Sokcho for the sole purpose of trying out a game she was never even interested in, I humbly present the following couple of insights from my personal experience with Pokémon Go.

The Technological Dimension: Implications of the Fourth Industrial Revolution

Pokémon Go was unlike the Pokémon games I was familiar with. The twist is that monsters are released into the real world and are digitally mapped on the player's surroundings based on Google's mapping service. Monsters appear at random and can be caught by pointing the smartphone camera at them and tossing Poké Balls in their direction until they are captured. There is no need to buy extra fancy gadgets; all I need is my smartphone to download the free Pokémon Go app. With a simple, easy-to-use interface, the game requires little prior knowledge about Pokémon, which explains its wild worldwide popularity.

There is one term that appears with every article written about Pokémon Go: augmented reality (AR). This means that digital technology is integrated with the player's physical environment in real time. Though it is not the first AR game to hit the markets, it is certainly the first to experience such rapid international mainstream success. But while this term has been so frequently cited to explain and market the game, there is actually very little AR involved; the only AR feature is using the phone's camera to catch virtual Pokémon. However, most gamers I've met, including myself, turned the AR feature off to save battery life, which the game devours at a ruthless speed, and make it infinitely easier to aim Poké Balls. Location data, or GPS, is what is actually key to the game; Google's extremely accurate and extremely vast database of real-world locations dictate where to find Pokémon and game items.

This is not to undermine the game's AR features. After all, it is the world's breakthrough game that gave so many people around the globe their first exposure to AR. What I'm actually trying to say is that there are huge implications behind this small glimpse of AR. This function is only tiny piece of the groundbreaking technological progress happening in what the 2016 Davos Forum has presented as the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which is characterized by progress in cloud computing, big data, artificial intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), and 3D printing. Even an inexperienced game dummy like me found Pokémon Go full of areas for improvement: its mechanics are incredibly simple, the server crashes with every other Pokémon capture, and the social features are very limited. Yet, I couldn't walk away from it, and I still constantly think about it while I'm in Seoul, meaning that there is infinitely more potential for this new technology that is only in its infancy.

There are varied opinions on whether or not Pokémon Go is a simple fad, but the technology is here to stay and evolve. Tim Bjarin, technology consultant and president of Creative Strategies, predicts that companies such as Disney, which also owns Marvel, who own globally recognized characters, will also release their own variations of a game app, now that they have seen how Pokémon Go has blown up. Rumor has it that Korean app makers are developing a "Pororo Go," based on the popular Korean children's animation *Pororo the Little Penguin* on EBS. My personal prediction is that already existing apps with wide user bases will be quick to launch their own features that use AR. I can see apps like Snapchat, which already revolves around the camera feature and now has more than 150 million daily active users according to Bloomberg, releasing next big AR phenomenon.

AR aside, there are also huge implications for AI. Our world was shaken up when AlphaGo beat Go champion Sedol Lee in a 4:1 victory last March. This event has been a major milestone for AI achievement because Go is considered to be a game that requires higher-order creative thinking skills. With Pokémon Go, I'm not competing against an AI but am playing a game run by an AI, who knows that water Pokémons like Squirtle should be in the wild when in rains, or that sand Pokémons like Sandshrew may require a trip to the Sahara Desert. In terms of IoT, the network of physical objects to digital sensors, tracking down virtual monsters is only the beginning to eventually being able to track down items, victims, or criminals through wearable sensors.

The Social Dimension: Rethinking Physical and Digital Boundaries

Smartphone games tend to be trendy and short-lived, and it could also be the case for Pokémon Go. However, while it is difficult to calculate how long the fervor will last, it is

certain that Pokémon Go is something entirely different from other mobile games. Previous viral phenomena—games, videos, websites, social media platforms—have immobilized people. But with Pokémon Go, I’m not alone in my room on my phone or a console; I’m roaming Sokcho’s Central Market, climbing the hills of Seoraksan, and discovering other landmarks that I wouldn’t have otherwise given my attention. I’m also among packs of other players—tourists and locals of all ages and walks of life—doing the same exact thing; a 12-year-old would point me to a rare Rapidash at a sweet potato truck two streets down, a father in his 30s would tell me that there’s a Poké Stop at Expo Park’s basketball court that gives away Poké Balls and Lucky Eggs. It actually facilitated conversations with people I would have never communicated with, and I’m almost certain that I met more new people in that one weekend than I did the entire year of 2016.

Obviously, Sokcho has begun to capitalize on this opportunity. The city was already a popular vacation spot, but tourism has certainly boomed thanks to Pokémon Go. Train and bus tickets have been completely sold out, and as soon as we drove into the Gangwon Province, we were greeted with banners and advertisements of Pokémon Go, some even displaying offers of gifts at certain locations. In the US, as I’m sure Sokcho will soon too (if it hasn’t already), some stores and restaurants have begun to attract customers by using the “Lure” module on the app, which literally lures wild Pokémon to that area. The digital world has been redefining ways people congregate in public spaces of the physical world.

My response to the Pokémon shock has been rather welcoming. I see promising potential for the future of technology, communication, and interactivity between the physical and digital worlds. But I also recognize that there are perils that must not be dismissed. A cousin who recently went on a honeymoon to Italy, where Pokémon Go had been made available in the middle of their travels, said that people were so engrossed in the game that they disregarded the historic beauty around them. Landmarks like Rome’s Colosseum, Florence’s Duomo, and the Tower of Pisa suddenly became secondary to the primary mission of catching Pokémon. There has also been an unfortunate amount of fatal or near-fatal accidents because users were too absorbed into the game; in one interesting case, two children accidentally illegally crossed the US-Canada border while searching for Pokémon.

The reality is that technology will continue developing at immeasurable rates, transforming the ways we work, play, communicate, and at a more fundamental level, redefining who we are as people. I’m not sure I’ll be the one creating these technological breakthroughs, but I know I will have to adapt and keep up with the changing world to survive in the 21st century as a millennial. In the meantime, before the next big tech hit rolls around, I’ll be counting down the days till I go back to the states where Pokémon works if I don’t make another trip to Sokcho before then.