The World Of Pokémon:
A Dynamic Ecological Classification System

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Introduction

The stimulus for this paper was the recent ISKO 2000 conference in Toronto where papers were presented on exotic classification systems (Olson 2000), ecological work-based classification schemes (Albrechtsen 2000; Pejtersen & Albrechtsen 2000) and self-organizing environments (Dron *et al*. 2000). The world of Pokémon combines all three of these approaches to understanding classification. Because the Pokémon trading game is heavily merchandised and widely played, it has generated a global cohort of young players who have been introduced to classificatory principles through their participation in the game. We propose that their understanding of classification should be explored further, as it may provide insight into the appropriation of mediated worlds in other modalities like the web.

The world of Pokémon

The world of Pokémon resembles a self-organizing ecology in several respects. Entities emerge and evolve in response to environmental constraints which more or less follow a set of rules, although contingency is also a feature of this world (e.g., the arbitrary interventions produced by the flip of a coin) . In the game Pokémon, each player wields his own deck of 60 cards consisting of individual Pokémon, energy (or life force) cards, and trainers whose intervention can modify or reverse the course of fate. This deck of cards is constructed by the individual players and functions as a self-organizing ecology that must struggle to survive in the face of interaction with the ecologies of other players. Thus one of the major characteristics of each Pokémon is its "HP" or "Hit Point" value, a kind of k-value or fitness rating in the world of Pokemon ecology: a Pokémon may be removed from the environment of the game after suffering one or more harmful encounters that exhaust his life force. To quote form *The Official Pokémon Handbook* (Barbo, 2000), "Pokemon are creatures that come in all shapes, sizes, and personalities. ... There are 151 different known species ... Each Pokémon is identified by an element. The element tell you know what kind of characteristics and techniques your Pokémon will have ... [and] clues you in to which Pokémon would do well in a battle against another element" (p. 8-9). As Barbo observes, the world of Pokémon is like a more elaborate and far more complex game of rock, paper and scissors.

Each deck evolves through trades that a player makes with other Pokémon players. This trading may be carried out on the basis of cash transactions or on the basis of barter. Values are formally assigned to Pokémon cards in a series of 'blue books' or handbooks endorsed by the manufacturer and its marketing network. To achieve status within the Pokémon community of practice, each player must earn badges that are awarded on the basis of points accumulated through winning games against other players. This allows a player to proceed up a series of achievement levels, each of which endows the player with increasing power in the game. Obviously, there are strong

incentives for each player to master the rules and classification structures conducive to the formation of a 'champion' deck.

The world of Pokémon as a model for classification structure

Though the world of Pokémon operates on the basis of a general set of rules and an interlocking series of classificatory structures, each individual player's 'world', represented by his personalized deck, remains more or less idiosyncratic since each player's choice of components for the deck will vary on the basis of both his understanding of the consequences of certain combinations (as a function of their experience) and his affinity with the Pokémons that he handles. (The notion of affinity is very important in the computer game version and the official guidebook implies that gender may influence bonding behavior.) The Pokémon game thus illustrates a common research problem in classification: the practical consequences of individual classification in contexts that are apparently bound by general or universal schemes. Our pilot work with key informants, both male and female, indicates that cards may be evaluated for inclusion in a player's deck on the basis of different classificatory principles depending upon the age, sex or experience of the player.

It is our contention that payers' perceptions of and interaction with the classificatory structures embedded in both the Pokémon game and other similar games may have important implications for web design. We suggest that, given the wide range of characteristics exhibited by Pokémon cards and our observations of variability in the combination of these characteristics, analysis of the Pokémon classificatory structure may lead to identification of a modular classificatory structure that can be applied in other contexts, including instructional exercises and the simulation of practical environments of praxis as well as the construction of other specialized games. We propose to present on our preliminary work with this research project, including a prototype for a Pokémon classification scheme, a brief discussion of its applicability in the design of innovative organizational structures for the web environment and a working example of the use of a Pokémon classification scheme as an instructional tool for teaching LIS students about non-traditional classification structures.

References

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Questions

1. Is it possible to create a classificatory structure that can "evolve" and what mechanisms would support an evolving classificatory structure?

2. How can rule-based card games help us understand how children (and adults) classify the world?

3. Is the classificatory structure imposed on the world of the Pokemon identical across players (ie, are the same criteria used to order characters the same for all players)? Or is it variable across players and/or across time? What effect does this have on the potential evolution of the classificatory structure used in playing the game?

4. Are children aware that they are creating and/or using a classification scheme and can they account for the rules that they follow in creating a classificatory structure?

5. What might we learn from a comparison of a 'formal' version of a Pokemon classification and the classification systems that players themselves use?

6. How important is a player's understanding of the classification used in playing Pokemon and how is this understanding affected by or implemented as an evolving structure?