



Tracking Pokémon Sleep

Bjørn Nansen

EasyChair preprints are intended for rapid dissemination of research results and are integrated with the rest of EasyChair.

June 10, 2022

Tracking Pokémon Sleep

Bjørn Nansen

University of Melbourne
nansenb@unimelb.edu.au

ABSTRACT

The announcement and subsequent silence on the release of Pokémon Sleep, a mobile game utilising the Pokémon Go Plus+ wearable to incorporate the tracking of sleep patterns in gameplay, raises questions about the intensive gamification of daily life. This article highlights this issue within broader discourses at the intersection of sleep technologies and sleep health by locating it within critical datafication literature and popular reception on the Pokémon Sleep hashtag on Twitter.

Keywords

Pokémon Sleep, sleep, sensors, Twitter, datafication, game, gamification

INTRODUCTION

On May 28th, 2019, in Tokyo, Pokémon Company CEO Tsunekazu Ishihara announced the launch of a new mobile game, Pokémon Sleep. Utilising the Pokémon Go Plus+ wearable, Pokémon Sleep was described as a mobile game that would track players' sleep, operating in companion to the popular augmented reality version of the franchise, Pokémon Go. There has been silence from the company since this announcement, with speculation about whether the game has been shelved, awaiting cancellation, or awaiting to be revived. Similarly, details about the functionality of Pokémon sleep were scarce; the general description of it as “turn[ing] sleep into entertainment”, suggesting a mode of gamification that extended Pokémon Go's gamified physical activity tracking to the more intimate and intensive space of sleep. The public reception to this personal application of gaming technology may point to some reasons for the subsequent silence.

PLAYING WITH SLEEP TRACKING

Based on accelerometer sensors built into mobile phones or the Pokémon Go Plus+ wearable to track the movement of sleeping gamer bodies is, a form of measurement that much like other sleep tracking apps, acts as a proxy for duration, efficiency, and latency of user's sleep patterns (Lyll, 2021; O'Neill and Nansen, 2019; Nansen et al, 2021). In addition to accuracy, such a gaming entanglement of sleep raises questions about the role of gaming for “reward[ing] good sleep habits as part of a healthy lifestyle”. As such, we can observe how Pokémon Sleep operates within broader discourses at the intersection of sleep technologies and sleep health, by locating it within critical datafication literature and popular reception.

In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathon Crary argues that “there are now very few significant interludes of human existence (with the colossal exception of sleep) that have not been penetrated and taken over as work time, consumption time, or marketing time” (2013, 15). Since the publication of that book, however, we have seen an explosion in the technological monitoring and mediation of sleep, extending from mobile applications to all kinds of wearable and smart devices (Lyll, 2021; O'Neill and Nansen, 2019; Nansen et al, 2021). These recast sleep as a site of productivity and improvement through the datafication of sleep tracking for both

Proceedings of DiGRA 2020

© 2020 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

personal wellbeing and economic value. Situated within this historical trajectory and broader digital encroachment on everyday life, Pokémon Sleep represents an intensification of self-tracking imaginaries (Crawford et al. 2015), not only utilising sensors, data, and algorithms to monitor sleep quality but transforming the unproductive time of sleep into the quantified grind of digital play (Hulsey, 2019). In doing so, rather than viewing sleep as a competitor to entertainment industries – a sentiment expressed by Netflix CEO Reed Hastings’s in 2017 – Pokémon Sleep aims to entangle sleep within a continuous ‘interface envelop’ (Ash, 2015) of play activity and reward for the games industry.

HASHTAG RECEPTION

This ambition of Pokémon Sleep to challenge possibly the last boundary of play has, however, not been received smoothly within gaming publics. Highlighting the ambivalence of both gaming and internet cultures (Phillips and Milner, 2017), responses involving memes, antagonism, and critique quickly populated the Pokémon Sleep hashtag on Twitter following the announcement of the game. This popular hashtag combined elements of cultural criticism represented by the memetic use of Snorlax imagery, alongside more overt political economy critiques of Niantic and the Pokémon Company’s franchise intruding into the experience of sleep as part of a broader commercial ambition to gamify every space of daily life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to my son Harvey for helping to play and research Pokémon Go.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ash, J. (2015). *The Interface Envelope: Gaming, Technology, Power*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Crary, J. (2013). *24/7: Late capitalism and the ends of sleep*. London: Verso.
- Crawford, K., Lingel, J., & Karppi, T. (2015). Our metrics, ourselves: A hundred years of self-tracking from the weight scale to the wrist wearable device. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18(4-5), 479-496.
- Hulsey, N. and Hulsey, N. (2019), The Labors of Play, In *Games in Everyday Life: For Play*, Emerald Publishing Limited, pp. 161-185.
- Lyll, B. (2021). The ambivalent assemblages of sleep optimization. *Review of Communication*, 21(2), 144-160.
- Nansen, B., Mannell, K., and O’Neill, C. (2021) Senses and Sensors of Sleep: Technology Mediation and Disconnection in Sleep Architectures. In *Disentangling: The Geographies of Digital Disconnection*. Oxford University Press, pp. 137-162.
- O’Neill, C, and Nansen, B. (2019). Sleep mode: mobile apps and the optimisation of sleep-wake rhythms. *First Monday* 24.6.
- Phillips, W. and Milner, R. (2017). *The ambivalent Internet: Mischief, oddity, and antagonism online*. Cambridge: Polity Press.