Mind over Matter: How Pokémon Made Its Metagame

A Culture of Competition, Collaboration, and Creativity in the Global Community of Pokémon Battlers

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Presentation Preview

- What is **Metagaming**?
- Where can we find it?
- What are its prime constituents?
- Metagaming in Nintendo's Pokémon
  - Design: Rules of the game
  - Technology: Connectivity and communication
  - Player: Community and creativity
  - Competition: tournament play

An Introduction to Metagaming

- Wikipedia: "Any strategy, action, or method which transcends the prescribed ruleset."
- Meta = 'beyond' or 'change'
- Key components to *meta*game
  - Awareness – of culture and the competition
  - Application of knowledge in strategy
  - Prediction, Preemption
- Examples

The Forms and Faces of Metagaming

- Family games
- Collectible card games
- Magic: the Gathering
  - Decklists
  - Sideboard
- Professional sports
- Digital games

Maximizers of the Metagame

- Balance, Variability in multiplayer modes
- Communication Technology
- Player Community & User-Created Content
- Competitive Motivation
  - Rewards (Recognition)
  - High stakes → Sacrifice

THE BALANCING ACT
Balance and Variability in Rules

How Game Design Affects Metagaming in Nintendo's Pokémon

Red & Blue: Personal Choice

- 151 different species (80 evolved / 60 viable)
- 165 available moves, each with a type
  - Physical attacks: Ground, Flying, Fighting, …
  - Special attacks: Water, Fire, Electric, Psychic, …
  - Status effects: Poison, Sleep, Burn, …
  - Stat boosting: Attacks, Defenses, Speed
- Highly variable multiplay
  - Teams of six Pokémon
  - Movesets of four moves

Battle Chart

Gold & Silver: Breeding New Ideas

- 251 Pokémon, 251 moves, 2 new types
- Breeding – Added variability, unpredictability

Skarmbliss

- Killer strategies → Response
  - SkarmBliss (Skarmory + Blissey)
  - Toxic-Sandstorm-Spikes (Tyranitar)
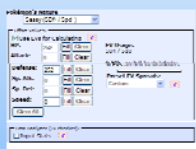 - Baton Pass Sweep (Scizor / Umbreon)

Ruby & Sapphire: Nature vs. Nurture

- 386 Pokémon: strange type combinations
- Abilities: weather effects, new resistances
- Individual Values (IVs)
- Effort Values (EVs)
- Defensive role metagame
  - Tanks → Sweepers →
  - Hazers → Tanks → …
  - Variability within roles
- EV distribution metagame

Diamond & Pearl: Old Dogs, New Tricks

- 492 Pokémon, 466 moves
- Each type has both physical *and* special attacks
- More difficult to predict based on type alone
- Players blend old and new, use everything
- More studious, creative prevail
  - Opponent prediction becomes an art
  - Creativity defies predictability

How Connectivity Influences Metagaming

STAYING IN TOUCH
Communication between Players

The Minor Leagues

- Initial lack of hardware support
  - Joe Hardcore at recess, dim sum
  - No American tournament scene

- Local play can be fun, just not competitive

Simulation and Battle Bots

- RSbot (IRC)

- NetBattle

- Online elitism

- Perfect Pokémon

Making Online Connections

- Nintendo WiFi
  - Everybody connected
  - Newbies & new ideas
  - Metagame shift

- Online video
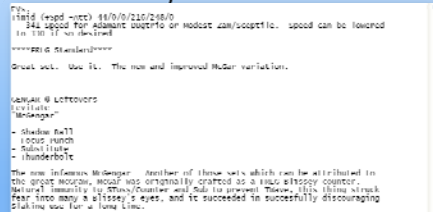 - Veterans to neophytes
  - Mass distribution

How a Vibrant Community of Player-Creators Reshape the Metagame

Player Community, Creativity, and User-Created Content
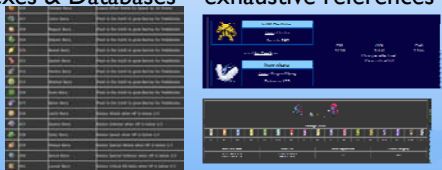
Textual Content

- Online communities
  - IRC, AOL, GameFAQs, NetBattle
  - Smogon: guilds and apprenticeships
- Movesets & EV Spreads bore authorial name
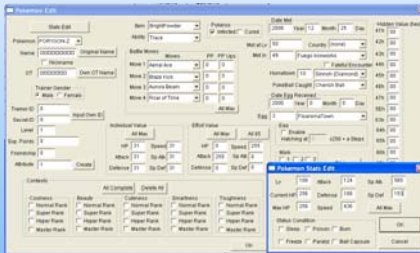

Calculative Content

- Stats calculators – IV breeding
- Damage calculators – online prediction
- Dexes & Databases – exhaustive references

- Metagame less dependent on chance, more on skill, creativity, and awareness
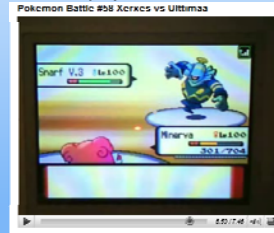
Pokésav: Hacking the Perfect Metagame

- Respecting the limits of the game
- Net effect: Metagame encroaches total skill

Player as Producer

- Instructional videos for novice battlers
- Bragging – flaunting personal flair
- Game film – replayed, dissected, disseminated

Competition and the Metagame

- Casual play : minor league sports ::
- Competitive play : professional league sports

- The Pokémon tournament scene

Presentation Review

- **Metagame** as a competitive game augmented with awareness of opponent, pop culture
- Metagaming is everywhere
- Metagaming in Pokémon
  - Variability arising from game structure
  - Communication between players
  - Communities as a repository of user-created content
  - Creativity – trading Pokémon, ideas, skills, tools
  - Competition – more reward, more extremes

Thanks for listening. Do you have any questions?

Special thanks to Professor Henry Lowood
www.gamefaqs.com, www.smogon.com, www.serebii.net
http://shoddybattle.com, http://pokemon.marriland.com, www.pokesav.org