The geopolitics of Pokémon GO in Asia

Danielle Cave looks at how a viral mobile video game reflects regional tensions and challenging the state.

It took only weeks for Pokemon GO to become the world's most viral mobile app of all time.

Developed by Niantic Labs, and with over 550 million downloads in 80 days, the augmented reality (AR) game has mainstreamed and altered how handheld technology allows users to interact with their immediate surroundings.

Taiwan's rare Pokémon stampedes and a Pokemon-themed fun run in Singapore are just some examples of how the game has taken hold in Asia's biggest cities. The app is also boosting foot-traffic in Manila's largest malls, spinning off new fashion options in Japan, helping businesses in Indonesia 'lure' in customers, and giving NGOs in Myanmar creative options to raise awareness and attract new donors.

Pokemon GO is here to stay

While the initial shine may be wearing off with daily unique users and download growth in decline, there are three reasons why the game's future may not be as gloomy as it appears.

First, as an app, developers can continuously improve and add features to the game that will entice old and new users. Recent attempts by Niantic to use Halloween to connect users with real-world events seem to have paid off**,** and one can image a Chinese New year equivalent taking the world by storm.

Second, the game is still being downloaded approximately 700,000 times every single day. In addition, some markets are actually not in decline and are rebounding, including key markets Japan and Thailand.

Third, Pokemon Go is yet to launch in some of the world's largest mobile markets. If developer Niantic can get the game into China and India they will be able to tap into an additional 1.185 billion smartphone users.

Regional tensions and political symbolism

In Asia, one of the most interesting developments with the launch of Pokemon GO is how the app is reflecting and highlighting regional tensions. For example, even though the game is yet to officially launch in China, a day after the app's Japan launch, Chinese players flooded a gym (a location where Pokemon players battle each other) at Yasukuni Shrine. A commemoration of Japanese WWII troops, the shrine has long been a point of contention between China and Japan. A group of 50 Chinese players, using a VPN and a GPS spoofing app, were able to take over the Yasukuni Shrine gym, delivering the message 'Long Live China' (symbolically, via a Pokemon dragon).

The Chinese players, who told a journalist it was an act of 'patriotism', also threatened Taiwanese gyms as their next target 'because Taiwan is China's'. Korean media reported that Korean players later took over the same gym, posting critical messages about Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

In Thailand Pokemon GO players are dressing their avatars in black ribbons to pay tribute to the country's revered and late King. In Hong Kong, where hostilities between the city's pro and anti-China political groups are rising, pro-democracy groups are using the game to conceal gatherings and protests. Some of the city's gyms have become symbolic for their links to the 2014 Umbrella Movement protest sites.

National security concerns, cyber insecurities and spyware

Governments across Asia are also grappling with the national security implications of the borderless nature of the AR game. The problems are three-fold.

First, the app navigates users across populated areas with no regard to property lines or the

locations of critical state infrastructure. For example, a French Pokemon GO player was recently detained for wandering onto an Indonesian military base in West Java. Hong Kong's public hospitals are trying to rid themselves of Pokemon players and game elements (gyms, pokestops) after crowds flocked to play on their premise.

Second, the popularity of Pokemon GO has reverberated into each country's public service leading to a range of security concerns, especially for militaries and police. The Philippines has banned its soldiers from playing on the job, citing compromised base security, and officers have also been asked to report to the country's Intelligence Division if they detect game elements inside military camps. The Indonesian Government has banned its entire civic service from playing in or near government buildings, and military officers have been told the use of smartphone GPS enables the viewing of restricted military facilities.

A provincial police station in Vietnam has banned officers from playing the game because of concerns sensitive data could be revealed, while police stations in Hong Kong have declared themselves no-Pokemon Go zones**.** Pakistan's cyber-security agency has advised government officials not to download the game due to a 'technical threats', including the possibility mobiles are being used to record player's surroundings.

Third, Pokemon GO is struggling to enter some markets because of security concerns related to the use of foreign GPS technology, and the game relies, at least partially, on Google technology (note: Google is a part owner of Niantic). For example, in South Korea where the game is yet to launch, the government has long censored Google Maps, instead promoting domestic alternatives Naver and Kakao. The country's National Security Law, which protects mapping data perceived as sensitive, apparently does so to prevent military and state facility locations from falling into North Korean hands.

Technological developments also present new opportunities for the region's intelligence and hacking operators (state and non-state) to exploit the app and its users. For example, hacking into the program would obviously open up a swamp of valuable imagery and metadata, and the app has already been on the receiving end of a number of DDoS attacks. In addition, human intelligence officers working for or against a target now have an extremely convenient cover to be almost anywhere at anytime.

Spyware operators are also tapping into Pokemon popularity. Disturbingly, research from the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab, which led to a recent urgent iPhone security update (the iOS 9.3.5 patch), found that fake Pokemon domain names were being used to lure civil society targets with the aim of infecting user's iPhones with highly sophisticated commercial spyware.

Sidestepping the state

Pokemon GO hasn't officially launched in China, the largest smartphone market in the world nor has it launched in India, the fastest growing smartphone market on the planet. But that doesn't

mean the game isn't being played in both. While India's Gujarat High Court is initiating a ban on Pokemon GO and it remains geo-blocked in some areas, YouTube and Reddit instructions help Indian players access and use the app.

Chinese gamers are using VPNs, proxies and pirated versions of the app to hurdle the Great Firewall. Online market Taobao is even allegedly selling Australian Apple IDs that give Chinese mobile users access to an official version of the game. In order to access the game, South Korean players are taking advantage of a technical glitch and trekking out to the North Korean border to play.

Players in these countries are clearly frustrated with the lack of widespread access. However, the fact that so many of them are using the app regardless serves as a reminder that netizens often remain a step ahead of states attempting to censor online access (and knockoffs won't do).

With the AR and virtual reality (VR) market forecasted to develop into a half-trillion dollar industry by 2025, and plenty more VR products coming our way, it's clear Pokemon GO is only the tip of the iceberg. This is not surprising as there are more than 4 billion mobile users up for grabs. In gaming alone, global brands like Disney, Hello Kitty and Marvel also have the resources and character base to recreate Niantic's formidable formula.

Whether we like it or not, AR app users will be bumping into us, and each other, across Asia's cities for decades to come (and some of them will be paid professionals). As the AR/VR 'fourth wave' of digital entertainment unfolds and handheld technology continues to develop, giving the world's users borderless access to the spaces around them, it will also highlight how these users interact with one another, with their governments, and how they engage internationally. While it's an unintended consequence, this will provide us with unique and sharp insights into the shifting state of international relations.

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