

"Play like that wouldn't be possible without a train": game mechanics of railroad networks

Yannick Rochat, SLI, Lettres, L'Université de Lausanne

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Abstract

With this contribution, we propose to explore the game mechanics associated to railroad tourism, best exemplified by *eki* stamps, stamps with a motif representing a monument or a region from Japan that can be found in most railway stations across the country (長谷川亜紀 and 齋藤春菜編, 2017) and that tourists can “collect” in travel notebooks, sometimes in the context of “stamp rallies” (Seaton, 2017). The action of tourists storing such travel memories is a merge of two game mechanics: badge accumulation and treasure hunting. In this paper, we propose to analyse these mechanics from the perspective of Japanese National Railways’ advertising campaigns “Discover Japan” (1970) and “Exotic Japan” (1984), which had been «designed to encourage people in urban areas to travel to out of the way regions» (Reader, 2007) and «bring people back to [...] a nostalgic frame of mind» (Robertson, 1988). We explore the action of travelling and collecting memorial stamps as well as showcasing nostalgia through an array of examples.

«Play like that wouldn't be possible without a train»¹ is a sentence pronounced by Eiji Aonuma in an interview with Satoru Iwata about *The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks* (Nintendo, 2009), a game in which trips across the game universe are made by train, on tracks revealed as the story moves forward. Games from the *Legend of Zelda* series have been traditionally built around the exploration and the collection of artifacts, whether useful to progress in the story, like weapons or magic spells in *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link* (Nintendo, 1987), or simply there to push the player to keep exploring the world in order to complete the game on top of the main story, like shells in *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening* (Nintendo, 1993). In *The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks*, instead of shells, the player collects in a virtual notebook stamps representing regions of the game universe (Nintendo, 2010, p. 274), establishing digitally a clear parallel between these game mechanics and touristic activities, The game recalls the playful «Stamp your

¹ <https://www.nintendo.co.uk/Iwata-Asks/Iwata-Asks-The-Legend-of-Zelda-Spirit-Tracks/Iwata-Asks-The-Legend-of-Zelda-Spirit-Tracks/3-Play-That-s-Only-Possible-on-a-Train/3-Play-That-s-Only-Possibleon-a-Train-226909.html> Accessed on 14 March 2019.

memories of Discover Japan!» slogan from the Discover Japan campaign (Middeler, 2016) as well as location-based *games* like letterboxing or foot orienteering: «Combining real-life photography with the signature stamp transformed the entire country into a series of boxes to be checked off a list by the ambitious traveler.» (Middeler, 2016). In the context of Switzerland, a country with an important touristic industry as well as a developed railway network, the National Railways launched in 2009 a similar campaign based on nostalgia and an invitation to the countryside, although without memorial stamps.² The game mechanic of collecting localised badges was introduced later and in another context, in 2012, in a mobile app called CFF.connect³ (CFF, 2012) based on the model of geolocalising mobile application Foursquare. CFF.connect invited users to travel throughout Switzerland in order to “own” train and bus stops. However, due to bugs and a very large number of all similar items to collect, the application was removed from the app markets in 2014, showing that a marketing idea and game mechanics which proved successful (Buckley, 2006) might still fail when the narrative is unclear and game design is neglected.

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² Here is an example, displaying Tschäggättäs, which are folkloric and monstrous creatures from the valley of Lötschental, Switzerland
<http://www.sbbarchiv.ch/detail.aspx?ID=370147> Accessed on 14 March 2019.

³ For the French-speaking version.

Contents Tourism in Japan: Pilgrimages to " sacred Sites" of Popular Culture .
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