“Hacking” as a Multipurpose Term in Ingress

by Kaitlin O’Brien

Based on yesterday’s lecture on platform histories that had students code bend Super Mario Bros. on the original console, I have been thinking about how similar strategies could be applied to the augmented reality game Ingress. Through my experience with code bending, I began to think about what I am more familiar with and what I view as similar to code bending and that is hacking. In many ways, Ingress is a display of “urban hacking, and the reappropriation of public space away from an indexical, purely informational, and cognitivist use of mobile computing, and toward the affective and often normatively disruptive acts of distributed storytelling” (Coleman 283).

Before I can even begin to explore hacking in Ingress, I’m going to try and take this very large, multifaceted game with many significant components and surmise it in a few short sentences. The ultimate game goal is to assist one of the two worldwide factions (The Enlightened and The Resistance) to obtain and to maintain control of key points or areas on a Google Map that has been graphically edited to resemble a science fiction-type of map and those areas are portals. To do this, you need to attack portals that you encounter during your travels, establish your own portals and boost the portals of other game players within you faction to make them stronger. There’s much more of a narrative backing to support this game, and there’s also a lot of specific details to consider, but a good place to go to learn more about the particulars of game play, is here.

The terms “hack” and “hacking” are applicable to the study of Ingress because terminology-wise, game players assume control

of portals in the game by hacking them, meaning these players can gain items from the portal, which in turn depletes the portal resources and makes it more vulnerable to potential future attacks from the opposing faction and a potential takeover of that portal altogether. Outside of the game, the term “hacking” bears a negative connotation because it is often associated with disrupting a system and making it either malfunction or run in a way that is different from how it was intended. In the world of Ingress, the use of the term “hacking” is treated as a mode for game players to steal the resources of their opposition and, as such, already associates the game play with taking from an unknown and changing a pre-existing structure, which in this case is the ownership of the portal. “Hacking” as a concept in Ingress is also a very collaborative one- if players of the same faction join together to take on a portal and hack it to weaken it, they have a greater impact on it if they coordinate their hack together. Players are incentivized by Niantic Labs, the creator of Ingress to continue to hack portals because as they begin immersing themselves in game play, Niantic Labs releases secrets and hints in the form of documents that contribute to the overall science-fiction backstory.

When considering the ways in which game players invest their time into hacking the actual Ingress software, it becomes apparent that players looking to circumvent the limitations imposed on them by their physical location aim to “location spoof,” which is “the act of intentionally falsifying one’s true location” (Wang & Terano). In Ingress, game players falsify their location by downloading from an array of available applications including Fake GPS Location Spoofer for Android to mislead the game into believing the game player exists in a physical location he or she is not in. Through watching some YouTube videos that discuss with players how to do this, it becomes apparent that by manipulating latitude and longitude coordinates, players are able to access portals that would otherwise not be in a close enough proximity for them to

interact with.

In one thread on Quora, a game player reveals one of the reasons someone within his faction cheated by spoofing his location, noting that his friend spoofed his location for him to help him hack and ultimately gain control over a portal that was only accessible via helicopter (Goerwitz, “How Does Ingress Prevent Cheating through Spoofed GPS and Network Locations?”). Ingress has an immense following of game players that are dedicated to the maintenance and control of their own portals, while at the same time are eager to expand and gain control of portals from the rival faction. As with many other games, there is an achievement component to the game that has the potential to further motivate players to cheat by falsifying their location data. Ingress is a community of game players personally invested in controlling portals, continually developing the Ingress narrative and furthering the agenda of the respective faction he or she resides within. By spoofing one’s location and therefore expanding one’s achievements, however truthful those achievements are, the game player is constructing his or her own narrative that details the levels that have been earned and the rewards that have been accumulated, and through this, Ingress is enabling this self-generated data display that “…externalizes the player’s digital persona, allowing him- or herself to become an object of self-production, self-surveillance, and self-reflection” (Hulsey & Reeves 8).

Through this examination and consideration for location spoofing, I’m curious to know, short of a game player telling a fellow game player that they falsified their location information, how is location spoofing tracked and terminated within Ingress? How much does Google and Niantic Labs actually know about this type of behaviour within the game and what do they do about it?

Works Cited

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