

Pokemon GO gets people out and about, and that's a good thing

Written by Daniel Angus, Lecturer, The University of Queensland

One week since its release and [Pokémon GO](#) has not only captured the attention of millions of users eager to “catch them all”, it’s also caught the eye of the media, authorities and, at times, a somewhat puzzled public.

Pokémon GO is a smartphone-based game that encourages users to travel to physical locations to collect virtual creatures and engage in game-based tasks, such as training and virtual duels, using collected creatures. Its gameplay extends from the [Pokémon](#) universe made popular in the late 1990s, which may also help explain its massive success.

Consider that the most active users of smartphones are [Gen Y](#), the same generation that lived through the Pokémon trend while at school. So, merge a bit of 1990s nostalgia with easy access to modern technology that helps bring a childhood game to life, and you have the recipe for success.

Like other successful social mobile games, Pokémon GO carefully treads the line between instant gratification and delayed reward. Players need to visit and collect rewards from many locations to advance through the game.

But unlike other social mobile games that code socialisation through virtual channels, such as in-game trading, chat, or online group-based gameplay, Pokemon GO fosters socialisation in the real world.

Out and about

Since its release, I have travelled to some of Brisbane’s Pokémon hotspots at night and during the day to observe and gather thoughts from players. The most visible phenomenon I have witnessed are the many pairs or small groups of players on the hunt for Pokémon together.

While not explicitly coded into the game architecture, an emergent phenomenon is that players are coordinating their play together and roving in small groups to reward-rich destinations.

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At each location, I also saw many instances of spontaneous interaction occurring between total strangers.

A player shouting “Hey, there’s a [Pikachu](#) over here!” at a local park saw a herd of nearby players rushing over to capture the yellow creature. They would then exchange stories of where they had been that night, what they had found and share hot tips on where to find some of the more elusive Pokémon.

Strangers making friends with Pokemon Go.

Each situation displayed an atmosphere of cooperation, whimsy and fun.

When asked about what they would be doing if they weren’t playing the game, the responses tended to be: watching TV, surfing the internet, or playing console games.

It was clear that for the players I met this past week, the sole reason for being outside was the game. Most were aware of how strange that notion seemed.

“This is the third time I’ve come out this week. That’s kind of tragic, isn’t it?” remarked one.

For businesses located near hotspots, such as those in the South Bank precinct in Brisbane, the game has seen a surge in custom on traditionally slow nights. While the number of players is likely to subside in time, for the moment, Pokétourism seems to be paying off.

In many circumstances, players travelled large distances quite purposefully for the game, and had plans to visit other locations in the same night.

Feeling good

Another unexpected but welcome side effect is the app’s potentially positive impacts on [mental health](#).

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While it is too early to show evidence for it, there have been many [anecdotes appearing on social media](#) from sufferers of social anxiety and other mental health conditions who have felt more active and healthier than usual thanks to the game.

While much of the initial media reaction focused on examples from the [USA of users being lured to danger](#), [alleged trespassing](#), and issues with the game itself relating to [user data privacy](#), these issues are being dealt with, or are able to be dealt with in time.

With regard to trespassing and [sensitive locations](#), this is a straightforward fix for the game's developers who were made aware of this [is sue in their Ingress platform](#).

On the issue of personal safety, users I interviewed said they felt safer due to the number of people around normally quiet locations.

While any app of this nature comes with potential risks and players should consider advice of [local law enforcement agencies](#), for the moment, the game seems to be encouraging players to get out and meet new people.

In an age where so much technology is criticised for encouraging sedentary and anti-social behaviour, something that encourages us to be active and more social is surely a good thing.

Daniel Angus receives funding from The Australian Research Council.

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