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## **Pokémon Go (2016)**

### **Abstract**

During the summer of 2016, *Pokémon Go* was everywhere. It was difficult to go outside without noticing players hunting and catching Pokémon creatures in real-world locations; location-based gaming had become a mainstream activity. Through novel gameplay and unprecedented success, *Pokémon Go* became one of the biggest and most impactful games of the time. While the game collected praise of its positive impacts on exercising and outdoor activity, the success also caused disruptive behavior, such as players taking over locations from their previous use, trespassing on private properties, or causing danger in traffic. Many of the game's biggest impacts are of a social nature: it enabled random encounters between strangers, created opportunities to both build new relationships and strengthen existing ones, and increased the feeling of community and belonging. Not all audiences have been included in the same manner, though: the game is not equally accessible or safe to play in all locations or by all groups of people. Despite its shortcomings, *Pokémon Go* managed to bring gaming to new audiences and increased the acceptability of play and playful behavior in our society – for all ages.

## **Pokémon Go (2016)**

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### **A Location-Based Game Breaks Through**

In July 2016, something unprecedented happened. Around the world, crowds of people were suddenly walking outside, mobile phones in their hands, knowingly nodding or grinning to others doing the same: playing a game. The media took note, too. Headlines marveled at the phenomenon and highlighted both the benefits and the dangers it posed. One of the biggest mobile games of the era, *Pokémon Go*, had launched. Within its first quartile, it had reached 500 million downloads.<sup>1</sup> The biggest hype was short-lived, but after a steep drop in active players, the game has gradually found new popularity. In 2020, the game had an estimate of 166 million active players (compared to the first year's 232 million)<sup>2</sup> and reached record-breaking revenue, surpassing \$1 billion.<sup>3</sup> What lies behind these numbers? What made *Pokémon Go* the incredible success that it is, and even more, how has *Pokémon Go* changed games, technology – and us?

In *Pokémon Go*, the player takes on the role of a Pokémon trainer, whose mission is to collect Pokémon creatures. The game and its concept have their roots deep in an existing franchise. Pokémon (short for Pocket Monsters) originated in the 1990s with Game Boy games, but quickly grew into one of the biggest multimedia franchises with anime series, movies, collectible cards, manga, toys, even theme parks. The fandom and nostalgia connected to this franchise are crucial to *Pokémon Go*'s popularity (Alha *et al.*, 2019). The friendly theme and cartoon characters also easily attracted people not familiar with the franchise.

What differentiates *Pokémon Go* from previous Pokémon games is that it is location-based: the game world is parallel to the physical world, showing a map overlay depicting the player's surroundings. The game tracks the device's GPS, and to move the player characters, the players must move themselves. The distance travelled is further calculated and utilized in the game. The game tracks movement speed, and when the speed limit is exceeded, game content no longer appears on the screen and the distance is not calculated. In this way, the game encourages exercising instead of staying still or driving around. The concept of going outside to walk and play a digital game made *Pokémon Go* stand out, even if it was not the first game to include such features. Many research prototypes, artistic experiments, and commercial games with locative elements had existed before.<sup>4</sup> However, while some of the earlier games can be considered successful or impactful, none of them had really reached such mainstream status.

*Pokémon Go* is often described as an augmented reality (AR)<sup>5</sup> game: Pokémon can be seen in the player's physical surroundings through the smartphone screen. AR is more of an extra feature than a core gameplay element though, as this view is present only in specific parts of the game. Even then, most players turn the AR feature off when possible (Paavilainen et al., 2017), as using AR makes interactions more cumbersome and drains the battery faster. Still, the importance of the feature is not to be underestimated. It has served as a way to take amusing or artistic pictures: having an egg-like Pokémon resting on a frying pan or showing a whale-like creature jumping from the ocean creates interesting and playful mixes between the real and the digital. This proved to be a well-functioning viral tactic for the game, as social media was swamped with these pictures.

The central goal in the game is catching and collecting Pokémon. When the player is near such a creature, it appears on the map, and the player can tap it to begin a minigame. The player then uses the touch screen to aim and throw Poké Balls towards the

Pokémon, trying to catch it inside the ball and consequently as a part of their collection. The player can also visit various PokéStops to receive items and Gyms to battle Pokémon left there by other players. These locations are based on existing points of interest in the environment: parks, statues, buildings, or other landmarks. *Pokémon Go* incorporates information about these locations into the game, which makes it a useful companion app when getting to know one's surroundings, whether in one's own neighborhood or exploring a new place.

While these core mechanics have stayed relatively the same, in other regards *Pokémon Go* has changed and evolved considerably since its launch. The game started with 146 catchable creatures, while at the time of writing, there are already over 650 Pokémon, with new ones still being added regularly. New alternative variants have also been added, such as very rare “shiny” Pokémon. The game has introduced a variety of new activities, including events, sending gifts, trading Pokémon, player-versus-player leagues, and raid bosses. Compared to its earliest iteration, the current version is complex, with much more to achieve. Simplicity was important in the beginning as it made the game approachable, but as active players keep reaching the initial goals, more content needs to be added to maintain players' interest. The increasing amount of content keeps demanding more from players while the goal to “catch ‘em all” might start to feel unreachable for players starting out later or playing more casually. This is a challenge not unique to *Pokémon Go* but common in service-based games<sup>6</sup> in general: how to balance the experience between players in different phases of the game.

### **From Random Encounters to More Strategic Cooperation**

Although the game did not have many real multiplayer features at launch, players have always existed in the same world, both virtually and physically. Even if players

cannot see each other inside the game, they are very visible to each other outside of it. Importantly, the content in the game is shared by all players: in addition to the shared PokéStops and Gyms, the Pokémon themselves appear in the same location for everyone. During the first summer, a rare Pokémon was an event shared by all nearby players. Stampedes happened: dinners would be interrupted with shouts of urgency and people rushed to the streets to catch the creature before it would disappear. In crowded areas hundreds, even thousands of players might have run in the same direction. A passerby might ask what was happening, getting an excited response of a Snorlax<sup>7</sup> being spotted on the other side of the park. Depending on whether the person was a *Pokémon Go* player or not, they would then hurry to join the hunt or shake their head in confusion.

In some locations, several PokéStops happened to exist near each other, meaning that there would be both more Pokémon spawning and more resources dropping from the stops themselves. These spots quickly turned into hubs for players. This created a different kind of play experience: suddenly the optimal strategy was not to walk, but to stay in one place. Families arrived together, friends organized picnics, and passersby came to wonder what was going on. Opportunities for emergent sociality arose: players had a common interest to talk about, making it easier to break the ice between strangers. Even without talking, sharing something with the people around brought a feeling of togetherness. These aspects created a shared feel of a game world that the non-players around them were oblivious of, strengthening the sense of belonging (Vella *et al.*, 2019).

In addition to increasing sociality between strangers, the game has also strengthened existing social relationships. Families often play together, which in some cases may be the first time the parents have taken a closer interest in their children's gaming hobby. The game has also transformed social relationships as children can suddenly be the experts and advise their parents (Koskinen & Meriläinen, 2021). For some children, Pokémon hunts

may form the earliest gaming memories and create shared experiences and nostalgia for a whole generation.

Many of the social dimensions were made possible by the popularity of the game. Encounters were frequent due to the sheer number of players, seeing others playing the same game. As the player population crashed after the first summer, the chance encounters and the sense of community decreased as well. New social interactions were facilitated through raids: battles against Pokémon often so powerful that no individual player could beat them alone. The raids are timed and attract players to a certain area at a certain time. This has given rise to cooperation between players, but it has also increased the threshold for participation. Outside the raids, players do not have to actively play together and can choose whether they want to communicate with those around them whereas raids often include organizing and sharing information. Some of the most powerful legendary Pokémon are locked exclusively behind raids, making them a mandatory step towards completing the collection. The forced sociality has pushed some players away from the game, while for some initially hesitant players they have created an empowering experience of building up the courage and skill to play together.

### **Breaking the Norms of Play and Gaming**

One of the legacies of *Pokémon Go* is that location-based games are now part of mainstream gaming, but it is not easy for individual games to get there. Countless games have followed this path, but most of them have either failed or reached only moderate success. While new hits do appear, the kind of success *Pokémon Go* reached in 2016 is difficult to replicate and is the result of many things that went right: the popularity and suitability of the franchise, hype around the game, viral marketing, positivity for encouraging

outdoor activities, technology that felt new, and novel gameplay that was simple and flexible yet offered enough to do for more dedicated players.

Even if we do not see a similar craze as with *Pokémon Go* again, its impact remains. It helped diversify player populations, brought families together, enabled random encounters and connections, created a feeling of belonging, got many interested in walking and learning about their surroundings, and provided meaningful, memorable experiences for countless people. That impact on our society is not trivial. The leaps in location-based technology and augmented reality have created new and more widely available experiences which continue to evolve. We might not yet be in a world where augmented reality is properly utilized, but we are a step closer to it.

While many of the game's impacts are positive, there are other sides to a game with popularity of this caliber. Especially during its peak months, players could take over locations such as parks or graveyards and disrupt their intended use, or trespass in private spaces. Some players or crowds focusing on their mobiles in traffic created dangerous, in some cases even fatal incidents. It is further important to remember that not all players have equal opportunities to partake in playing the game. *Pokémon Go* is notorious for its lack of content in the countryside, and in some countries it is not available to begin with. For people of color, playing the game especially during nighttime or in unsafe areas can be more dangerous, even life-threatening (Salen Tekinbaş, 2017). The game has problems with accessibility, as it is based on moving to various locations, sometimes inaccessible, for instance with a wheelchair, and does not offer accessibility options for people with vision impairments, either. There are also questions of fairness and ethics in how the game makes its money, whether from microtransactions<sup>8</sup> or with the data it collects from its users.

Even though *Pokémon Go* is still extremely successful, it is not without its future challenges. Frequent events and new content might tire out players, while finding more

ways to monetize the remaining crowd could turn away others. It is also unclear how *Pokémon Go* will fare in post-pandemic times. During the COVID-19 pandemic, significant changes were made to support playing from home and avoiding larger gatherings. As these changes are retracted, it remains to be seen how willing players are to return to the pre-pandemic gameplay, especially as some of the temporary changes improved the game's accessibility and safety.

*Pokémon Go* has evolved since its launch and managed to remain highly popular, but especially the first months of the game were the most impactful for our society. Suddenly, playing a digital game was not only okay, but beneficial, and not only for children, but for people of all ages. Never have we seen such a global social phenomenon in games where so many people around the world visibly and shamelessly played a digital game regardless of their age or status. While the beneficial effects of outdoor activity and exercise are significant, it is important to note that a playful mindset, cross-generational gaming, and the joys of playing a game were suddenly shared by a massive, diverse audience. We are a playful species, but we tend to regulate and gatekeep the partaking in gaming and playful activities, while determining what is considered acceptable behavior. Breaking these norms, at least for a little while, is one of the biggest impacts of *Pokémon Go*.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <https://press.pokemon.com/en/pokemon-go-exceeds-500-million-downloads-worldwide>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/pokemon-go-statistics/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://sensortower.com/blog/pokemon-go-one-billion-revenue-2020>

<sup>4</sup> For a recap of location-based games history, see Leorke (2018, pp. 17-44).

<sup>5</sup> AR refers to technology where real-world environment is altered or enhanced with digital technology in real time.

<sup>6</sup> Service-based games refer to a model where games are offered as a service that the player has access to instead of a product that is owned by the player.

<sup>7</sup> One of the rare Pokémon in 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Microtransactions are in-app purchases that the player can choose to buy with real money to enhance the experience. In *Pokémon Go*, players can purchase or earn in-game currency that can then be used to buy several types of benefits: increasing storage space, acceleration for gaining experience or hatching eggs, items to attract more Pokémon or to heal Pokémon after battles, and Poké Balls.

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### **Further reading**

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