

With 'Pokémon Go,' If You Gotta Catch 'em All, Consider The Price



If you were alive in the 1990s, you might remember a new craze that swept the world in the form of a Nintendo Game Boy game called Pokémon. The premise of the game is incredibly simple. You capture monsters, train them and pit them against the monsters trained by your opponents. What made the game so popular was that simplicity combined with the social aspect. Not only could you duel against computerized opponents in single player mode, you could also link two handheld consoles together and battle your friends.

Each new generation of Nintendo handheld console had a new iteration of the same essential premise, with new creatures to capture, of course. The game remained popular, but it never had the same monstrous cult appeal of the original. The core problem is a hardware one. It's hard to convince adults and older teens to buy a dedicated handheld gaming console when they have a phone that can provide endless distraction.

Finally, the makers of Pokémon have found a way to solve that problem. They brought Pokémon to the mobile marketplace with a free app called "Pokémon Go." It's available for iOS and Android devices, but it does require usable GPS functionality. It's been incredibly popular. USA Today reports it has been downloaded over 15 million times, and Survey Monkey claims there are more than 20 million players. The success has been surprising even to the companies responsible for producing it; game servers have been crashing under the weight of unexpected traffic. The game is a perfect storm of convenience and nostalgia.

The game has been largely unchanged. A graphical update makes it look modern, but the concept is still the same. Catch Pokémon and battle them against other trainers. The big departure is that the gamepad has been replaced with something larger: the player's body. You move your digital avatar around the game world by walking with your phone. Walking defines much of the mechanic of the game: Pokémon can be found in the real world outside the house, and various other game components incentivize players to be active.

Players can also obtain supplies at businesses that are registered as "Pokestops." Getting within a few yards of a registered business or local landmark allows players to gather needed materials and may encourage them to step inside to check out a sale. In order to do battle with others, players need to head to "gyms," which are set up in public places like churches, libraries and bus stops. At first glance, the app seems like a positive step in gaming. Rather than sitting in a bedroom playing games all summer, kids of all ages are encouraged to go outside and play with friends. It seems like a great generational compromise.

Still, there have been concerns about the game. News programs have reported instances of distracted players wandering into traffic, with some being seriously injured or even killed while playing. Further, the addictive history of the franchise should encourage some caution about the microtransactions that are embedded in the app.

Safety concerns

Anything that commands your attention while you're moving is a potential health hazard. What makes "Pokémon Go" uniquely hazardous is that it encourages exploration while being distracted. Players could be led into potentially unsafe areas in pursuit of rare creatures.

The best way to avoid these concerns is to encourage collective Pokémon exploration. Two people playing the game and exploring together, or two people playing one game, could be far more resistant to danger. There's also no reason to head to unfamiliar territory while playing. Pokémon appear to populate the world randomly, so there's no need to wander off an established route to catch 'em all. If a young child is interested in playing, it may be helpful to establish a "collection route" that takes them by several "pokestops" and takes a known amount of time.

It's also important to remind kids about the physical boundaries that don't appear as easily in the virtual world, like porches, fences and curbs. If you wouldn't go somewhere without asking to get a ball back, don't go there in pursuit of Pokémon!

At launch time, there were concerns that the app was peeking through users' calendars, emails, and stored files in Google Drive. Google has clarified that these are not and have never been available to the app manufacturer. It's still a good idea to pay attention to what permissions an app is requesting, but there are no immediate privacy or data security concerns with Pokémon Go.

Cost concerns

There are two big cost worries with "Pokémon Go." First, the app includes microtransactions: small fees charged for in-game content. These are used to buy in-game items that otherwise come in limited supply. While they cost small amounts, with the most expensive item being \$5, many of these purchases can add up. It may be helpful to link the account with a pre-paid debit or credit card as a means of limiting the purchasing power of a potential player.

The other concern is in accounting for wireless data. The app takes players away from home wifi locations, which means it needs a constant stream of wireless data access. While consumption rates will vary, 4 hours of play could easily use 0.1GB, about a quarter of a percent of a 4 GB family wireless share plan. Be sure to monitor mobile data consumption on phones being used to play the game, and have a plan to cut off data access to avoid overage charges if that limit is approached.

"Pokémon Go" can be good, clean, healthy fun. It could also be a source of trouble. Talking to players about these risks and what to do to manage them can ensure everyone gets to have a great time.

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