

Can Pokemon Go solve the physical inactivity epidemic?

September 5 2016, by Peter Janiszewski, Ph.d.

Just over a month ago, Nintendo released what has become one of the most popular video games ever created. Although Pokemon Go is somewhat old news now as it has been covered ad nauseum by the mass media, I'm really excited about the potential of this new era of video gaming in terms of its impact on physical activity.

Just in case you were doing a news detox over the summer and haven't heard of Pokemon Go, allow me to explain some basics. It's a game played on smartphones or tablets in which gamers walk around in the real world to capture fictitious animal characters (called Pokemon based on a cartoon of the same name that was popular in the 90's). Thus, unlike all prior video games that were played on the couch, or possibly standing in your living room (Nintendo Wii, for example), players must leave their home in order to play the game. Through the use of the phone's camera the characters appear (and move) overlaid on the actual physical environment (this is called [augmented reality](#)). Once a Pokemon is encountered while a player is walking around, the phone is used to 'capture' the character and add to the collection. The game is a bit more complicated than this, but that's the essence of it.

While I'm too old to know what Pokemon is or to have any understanding of the characters or the backstory, I was absolutely fascinated with the notion of an [augmented reality game](#) played on smartphones in the [physical environment](#). So, as soon as I became aware the game was launched in Canada, I downloaded it and went for a walk in a nearby park (I believe I recently mentioned that I'm a dork, as

showcased in the photo). Marina came along to ensure I didn't walk in front of a car or look too crazy walking around a park staring at my phone.

While I'm somewhat embarrassed to admit this as a mid-30's male, I had a blast playing the game that first outing. Marina and I ended up walking for a couple of hours motivated largely by the potential to capture more Pokemon. We easily covered 10km without really noticing.

What I did notice, however, was that we were far from the only ones who were playing the game. In fact, we passed close to 100 people stumbling over themselves glued to the screen of their smartphone. Over the following weeks, I would see hundreds more. Oftentimes, Marina and I would be going for a walk on one of our usual routes in the neighborhood and would encounter groups of people congregating at a specific location, lured by the presence of some exotic Pokemon (I still find this a bit odd). In those first days and weeks a number of surreal youtube videos were posted of masses of people flooding public spaces, sometimes disrupting traffic, or getting into accidents by playing while driving.

On the positive side, there have been countless reports of typical couch potatoes who were going for regular walks outside and making new friends all because they wanted to play a silly game.

Keep in mind that academics and health professionals have been trying for years to motivate average people, especially kids, to ditch their TV or game console in favour of some [physical activity](#). For the most part these efforts have been unsuccessful, with most data indicating we're only getting lazier as a society with time.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, one company releases a silly game apparently catering to children and accidentally creates a physical activity

revolution. Its really quite remarkable.

I'll be first to admit that Pokemon Go is far from a panacea for our collective inactivity, but this technology promises much potential in this regard for a large section of the population. For instance, I have a number of close male friends who actively play first-person shooting games (E.g. Call of Duty, Medal of Honour, etc.) on their Playstation. Imagine the next iteration of these more adult-themed games utilizes augmented reality, forcing gamers outside to simulate war scenarios? A less disturbing scenario could involve treasure-hunt or mystery games.

I look forward to literature examining the impact of Pokemon Go on players' physical activity levels, or other health markers. Selfishly, I also eagerly await more adult-appropriate games using this technology.

If you haven't yet downloaded the [game](#), I would recommend you at least give it a try. Its definitely not for everyone, but you should probably get a basic understanding of the technology involved. My guess is we'll be seeing much more of it in the near future.

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