

The surprising psychological benefits— and risks— of Pokémon Go

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Credit: Flickr

Pokémon Go fever has officially taken over.

Nintendo's new augmented reality smartphone game is enticing millions of [players](#) to get outside and walk around in search of characters, and is reportedly helping people with depression and [social anxiety](#).

Two UBC psychology professors, Luke Clark and Amori Mikami, explain why the game has become so popular, the mental health benefits

it could offer, and unintended risks players could face trying to "catch 'em all."

Why do you think Pokémon Go has become so popular?

AM: From a psychological perspective, collecting things and acquiring a complete collection of things is highly rewarding. People have long collected objects such as stamps or coins for the sheer pleasure of it, with little concern for the actual utility of the items. In this digital game, you are collecting Pokémon ("pocket monsters") in pursuit of a complete collection. There's also the nostalgia factor: Most Pokémon Go players are adults who played earlier iterations of the Pokémon game as children.

What qualities does Pokémon Go have that seem to be addictive for users?

AM: The game provides frequent, but intermittent reinforcement. That is, Pokémon are often around but you never know exactly which one will be available, or when you will be able to catch one. This keeps you checking constantly in case a rare Pokémon is in your area ready for the taking. Furthermore, you can catch Pokémon anywhere and at any time of the day or night, so there is never a time to turn off the game.

The game is reportedly helping with symptoms of depression and social anxiety. Why do you think this is?

LC: Two core symptoms of depression are a loss of pleasure (called anhedonia) and reduced activity (called avolition). By motivating players

to get out and about, in a way that delivers a steady trickle of reward, it's conceivable that Pokémon Go might work as a form of behavioural therapy. I'd like to see clinical trials test this idea. As players are congregating in public spaces like university campuses, there could also be social benefits to reduce loneliness. Video games often get a bad rap over the controversial association with aggression, but given that they are also very effective at motivating behaviour, games like this could potentially have a range of psychological benefits.

Do you see any potential problems or risks associated with Pokémon Go?

LC: I'm curious to see whether this initial wave of excitement is sustained or if the game is just a fad. It is also important to know whether some players play this game to excess. As you need to go outside and move around to progress in the game, I hope this might work as a natural barrier to the game becoming too addictive. But there are some other concerns about players being distracted at busy road crossings, for example. Personally, I'm most concerned about how many of my undergraduate class in September will be absorbed in the [game](#) when they should be listening to me!

Provided by University of British Columbia

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