

VIEWS AND REVIEWS



NO HOLDS BARRED

Margaret McCartney: Game on for Pokémon Go

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The game Pokémon Go is a “craze,” a “sensation.” You use a smartphone in a virtual scavenger hunt for cartoon characters, but in real locations. It appeals to youngsters and kids. Download the app; start walking.

My youngest child is delighted that his mother willingly accompanies him for miles. The middle child is disgusted with our dedication to the cause, but also (I think) impressed with our plans for domination. My eldest is aghast: the popularity of Pokémon Go leads him to infer, just as Donald Trump ascends to presidential candidacy, that we’re at The End of Times.

The media are similarly torn: is Pokémon Go good or bad for you? We’ve had claims that it can help depression (clue: the reference doesn’t lead to a randomised controlled trial but to Twitter anecdotes)¹; that it could solve the US obesity problem (one UK player who caught all of the characters walked 225 km and lost 2 stone)^{2,3}; and that it can even “ease the type 2 diabetes burden”⁴ (from a press release with no original data but with links to previous research on walking and standing).

In the “bad for you” camp are no end of sorry tales. Pokémon hunters have been rescued by emergency services from sea and caves.^{5,6} The game draws people to real places, making it easy for criminals to spot congregation points. Teenagers in London were robbed of their phones at gunpoint,⁷ and US players have been involved in real shoot-outs.⁸

Most health apps that promote physical activity tend to get users who want to be healthy. Pokémon Go isn’t marketed as a health app

The UK National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has published a parents’ guide. It says that the game lacks adequate protection for children, such as safety reminders when contacting new users, hiding location by default for under 18s, and clear processes on safeguarding concerns.⁹

Sure: Pokémon Go can and should be made safer. Like most things, playing it has a mix of benefit and risk. In my local park I’ve received tips from all manner of folk I wouldn’t have talked to otherwise. In our modern online lives we all need real life connectivity, and the internet can facilitate that.

We never hear about the things that didn’t happen: heart attacks prevented through more exercise, or vitamin D deficiency that geeks have avoided, blinking in the sunlight while catching a Pikachu monster.

Most health apps that promote physical activity tend to get users who want to be healthy. Pokémon Go isn’t marketed as a health app, but players still end up doing a lot of walking. The possibilities for apps to make the streets an active, reclaimed playground in which to have interconnected fun are boundless. Increased physical activity is a tantalising side effect.

Game on.

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