

Cultural Daily

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How Pokémon GO Transforms Modern Exploration: The Good, The Bad, and The Digital

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When it was released in 2016, Pokémon GO was an immediate sensation. Children, young people and adults alike would be seen scrambling across cities and neighbourhoods attempting to get their hands on the rarest Pokémon. And if you visited another continent, you were sure to bring back those regional Pokémon.

Being an AR game which actually required players to move—walking from place to place in order to progress in the game—it had a significant impact on how people interacted with the places they lived and visited. Especially the gamer demographic which—stereotypically—is a more indoorsy group.

This article will take a look at the different ways this new method of exploration manifested—looking at both the good and the bad.

Natural Discovery Through Gameplay

Most fundamentally, Pokémon GO was a game that got people outdoors. Not only that, but it was a game which encouraged peer and friend groups to explore together. It became a common sight to see a group of players shuffling down a street, faces nestled in their phones until one yelled “[insert your favourite Pokémon here]”; to which the only correct response was “WHERE?”. And if you ran out of Pokéballs—you’d see yourself scrambling for **Pokemon Go PokeCoins** to grab some more.

While many people viewed this new trend as goofy, Pokémon GO’s ability to get people outdoors, exploring and exercising was revolutionary. The gaming industry had long been considered a dusty indoor activity, but Pokémon GO proved that it could be the total opposite—both outdoors and active.

Although this sensation was relatively short lived, with it now being much more common to see individuals catching their Pokémon on their commute or solo walk, it proved that AR can be effectively used to create a totally new type of gaming.

The Heritage Connection

Seeing how Pokémon GO mobilised groups of people to get outdoors and get exploring, a number of heritage organisations contacted and collaborated with developer Niantic in order to encourage

users to explore culturally important sites.

One primary example of this comes from the UK, where cultural heritage foundation Big Heritage carefully curated Pokéstops throughout the city of Chester—turning it into an interactive playground for gamers to discover the city’s heritage. While this event was only 2-days long, with 80% of the 16,000 attendees reporting that they learned something new about the city’s history proved that this method was indeed effective.

Since then, many similar events have been found across the globe—whether they be to explore heritage, or simply explore popular locales—the curation of Pokémon GO encourages people to learn and engage with the world around the.

The Commercial Side

While heritage organisations take advantage of Pokémon GO’s potential to bring players to certain spaces, they aren’t the only one. Soon after Pokémon GO’s release, it was revealed that businesses would pay Niantic to sponsor Pokéstops and Gyms—drawing players to their establishments.

Of course, the greatest sponsorships came from huge corporations such as McDonald’s, KFC and Starbucks—drawing players towards their establishments in the hope that they would be able to convert their presence into revenue.

This reveals a slightly more sinister side to the exploration in Pokémon GO—the fact that it isn’t truly organic. In fact, there are vested interests behind many of the game’s Pokéstops... Which turns the exploration from innocent wanderings into a business of turning gamers into customers.

The Digital Lens Debate

Beyond where and why we explore in Pokémon GO, there’s another question to address—that of the quality of exploration. After all, when playing Pokémon GO you’re walking from place to place with your head buried in your phone, with the singular goal of coming back with some Pokémon. It’d be very easy to walk around like this without absorbing the experience of the environments you pass through—or worse still, walk through dangerous neighbourhoods with your guard down and phone out, making you a target.

But to focus on these points is to miss out on the main benefit of Pokémon GO. After all, it takes the indoors and often reclusive act of gaming and turns it into something outdoors, social and explorative. In other words, it’s one of the very few games even encouraging real-world exploration—so surely any level of exploration is better than none? That’s certainly hard to argue against.

Yet another angle may suggest that instead of replacing traditional at-home gaming, Pokémon GO expands the gaming space to eat up your time during other times of day which you otherwise are unable to game. For example on a commute, or walk—you can’t exactly take your PS5 on a walk. So it may simply be the case that Pokémon GO in fact makes gamers play more—perhaps even detracting from their everyday experiences out of the house.

All arguments on the line, it’s up to you to make up your mind. It’s easy to see either side.

The Future of AR Exploration

While Pokémon GO was a smash hit, the same style of AR gameplay hasn't been successful in other titles since. But, of course, that doesn't mean it won't be in the future. We just hope that the next iteration distances itself from commercial and consumer interests—allowing gamers to enjoy the games as games, without getting real-world coercion into the mix.

But however you evaluate Pokémon GO, one thing is clear—Pokémon GO is a game which will go down in history as one of the greatest AR titles of all time.

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