How COVID-19 transformed Pokémon Go into “Pokémon stay-at-home”

Enlarge / Gotta catch ‘em all while not catching coronavirus (TM).
Niantic / Aurich Lawson

reader comments

24 with 18 posters participating

Share this story

Since its launch in 2016, the premise of mobile titan *Pokémon Go* has centered on roaming the outdoors in search of mystical little creatures. As a result, it’s a game that’s particularly ill-suited to pandemic-derived restrictions on movement.

In an attempt to remedy this, *Pokémon Go* developer Niantic has rolled out regular updates to make the game more quarantine-compatible in recent months. This has led to a new era of play among many in the *Pokémon Go* scene. Call it “stay-at-home, play-at-home.”

Such a systemic change in the way *Pokémon Go* is played was likely necessary for the game to survive in an era where many (if not most) players were unable or afraid to travel and gather together for their usual raids. By providing players with a way to play from home, Niantic is effectively removing the golden geese taunting them from the park across the road.

Poké-prison

Some players have seen a few ostensible benefits to the changes Niantic has rolled out. “The sheer volume of Pokémon spawning from Incense is incredible,” popular Australian *Go* YouTuber ZoëTwoDots said. “[There are] far more items from Friend Gifts, new Daily Research without spinning a Pokéstop—at this stage, I think just about every aspect of the game that required you to go outside can now be done from home.”

But some are worried about the effect that the coronavirus’s spread has had on the game’s social core. Brandon Tan—who has been playing *Go* since the second day it was available in Singapore and is widely considered to be the number one player worldwide—is one such worrier.

“With COVID, I’ve been forced to play [*Pokémon Go*] either from home or alone in my car,” Tan told Ars. “After playing the game alone for months, I miss the company of my friends.”

In Tan’s eyes, playing *Go* alone for too long could induce a degree of dryness and boredom capable of shaking newcomers and long-term players alike, creating legitimate concern about the game’s future. While he acknowledges that Niantic is “certainly trying [its] best to cater to players with the introduction of events that are playable from home,” he said he worries that such changes might not be enough to keep the game interesting for regular players.

Enlarge / The kind of casual *Pokémon Go* socialization that is no longer easy to take part in amid a pandemic.

“The only way for a new player to play now is to invest in in-game currency and purchase an item called Incense, which allows the player to encounter a Pokémon every minute while being at home,” Tan explained. “One can also battle Raid Bosses from the Gym using a purchasable item called a Remote Raid pass.”

HQna, a moderator for popular *Pokémon Go* subreddit The Silph Road, argues that Niantic’s implementation of a Remote raiding option has been less than stellar. In order to access a Remote Raid, you need to purchase a specific Battle Pass that is financially detached from the daily free pass Niantic affords players, as well as the Premium Battle Pass players may have already coughed up real money for.

Play-at-home tips

To get the most out of the new play-at-home reality, *Pokémon Go* players may have to adjust their usual habits. “Be sure to

check out the weekly free or one-coin boxes in the shop," ZoëTwoDots advised. "These boxes have stacks of items so you can keep catching or encountering Pokémon." She also mentioned the importance of maintaining a healthy friends list in the game in order to send and receive gifts that will often contain items that make *Go* substantially easier to run from home.

"You can also do online [player-vs-player] battles with these friends, and those battles don't have to be hardcore competitive," ZoëTwoDots added. "One of my favorite [self-imposed] PvP themes is using tiny Baby Pokémon to battle. [Also], check to see if your local community has a Facebook page or Discord group. Use these platforms to find other local players for Remote Raiding or to add as friends for extra bonuses in-game."

HQna believes there's a lot of fun to be had in battling friends, too. "Trainer Battles are probably one the most prominent features in the game as a whole, but especially now as Niantic has made them more available," he explains. "I know not everyone likes PvP, but I see a lot of players in the lower ranks of the Go Battle League and in Silph Arena tournaments organized by a local community who use Trainer Battles to use their favorite Pokémon and just have fun."

Look at this photograph

Quarantined players are also finding new potential in the game through *Pokémon Go*'s augmented reality features, which cause Pokémon to appear against real world backdrops via your smartphone camera.

"One of my favorite features of the game is GO Snapshot, the AR photography mode," ZoëTwoDots said. "I've been trying to take at least two photos at home per week." She explained that each 'mon has its own set of animations to pair with regular household tasks, making curious fun out of the simple ways

Pokémon interact with home environments.

- A selection of “stay at home” AR images featuring some creative Pokémon placement.
  Cian Maher
- A selection of “stay at home” AR images featuring some creative Pokémon placement.
  Cian Maher
- A selection of “stay at home” AR images featuring some creative Pokémon placement.
  Cian Maher
- A selection of “stay at home” AR images featuring some creative Pokémon placement.
  Cian Maher
- A selection of “stay at home” AR images featuring some creative Pokémon placement.
  Cian Maher
- A selection of “stay at home” AR images featuring some creative Pokémon placement.
  Cian Maher

“For example, Machop is a rather muscular fighting Pokémon,” she told Ars. “His flex animation brings his hands in front of his chest, but when placed in front of a sink full of dirty dishes or soapy water, it looks like Machop is doing the dishes or washing its hands.”

“What’s inside your egg carton? Are they regular eggs, or are some Exeggcute hiding in there? Did hungry little Munchlax steal all the lockdown snacks again? There are a lot of creative ways to merge *Pokémon Go* with your reality through AR, [and] I absolutely recommend you try it,” she said.

HQna feels the same way. “AR photography with Pokémon has so much potential and is a great outlet for all the pent-up creative energy now that so many players are confined to their homes,” he explained. “And I personally just love to see all

the AR shots people come up with.” Since the beginning of lockdown, the amount of said AR shots being shared by players has increased exponentially, with Kangaskhans appearing in kitchens all over the world.

“Chansey baking pancakes with the kids, tiny Beedrill flying around the tulips in someone’s garden, or Slaking just, well, slacking off anywhere are really cool to see, and also help bring the game to life—something we all wanted as a child, right?” HQna added.

Tan said this kind of play isn’t really his forté. “I personally would not do that, as I would rather play the game in an efficient manner, and playing with the AR feature doesn’t help progress,” he explained.

But Tan said he also recognizes AR as a fun-filled feature with a lot to offer people who are more interested in progress-detached play. “Those who enjoy taking photos, especially with Pokémon in their homes, might find it fun to help them pass time,” he said.

The less we get together

Even with enforced separation from other players, ZoëTwoDots thinks *Go* is still a massively positive force in mid-COVID society. “I think one really special thing about Pokémon is the ability to bring people together, both physically and digitally,” she said. “Even though we can’t all be together physically, Pokémon is providing a digital connection to others and a distraction from the stress of how crazy things can be right now.”

Enlarge / Two young *Pokémon Go* players that are likely not playing in the park these days.

Tan, despite being more skeptical about certain points, agrees. “There’s something new coming out every single month, with new events that Niantic is throwing out to cater to the hunger and thirst of players for new content,” he told me. “*Pokémon Go* not only caters to people of all ages, from young to senior, but also to people who choose to play the game differently, like being a collector to hunt for shiny Pokémon, or being a battler in Go Battle League. Although it’s a difficult time for many to head out to play *Pokémon Go*, it’s still possible to play from home.”

HQna, coming from a community moderation position, is able to personally vouch for this. “In a global health crisis like this, both the players and the developers of a game with a main focus on socializing and playing outside should show a particular sense of responsibilities toward themselves and to other people,” he explained. “While we all want things to return to normal as quickly as possible, I hope that catching that one Legendary Pokémon, or polishing the quarterly financial report is less important than saving lives.”

“Many of us grew up playing the main series games—inside, on our handhelds,” HQna continued. “And to me, the situation right now just makes it even more nostalgic. And I appreciate that. However, I do look forward to finally seeing my local community in person again and to meeting amazing new people from all over the world at the live events next year!”

Meanwhile, ZoëTwoDots sees *Go* as a powerful medium through which people can still retain a sense of community and society during lockdown. “I think especially for younger players, who may not have the full context of why their world is changing so drastically right now, the game is a great distraction from that anxiety,” she said. “Adults and kids can interact with their home through augmented reality—they have Pokémon in their own home!

“They can watch YouTube videos and see others are playing at home, too,” she continued. “They can join Twitch streams and talk directly with us and other community members to help reduce that feeling of isolation. And when being in the same home day after day can get monotonous, I hope *Pokémon Go* and the *Pokémon Go* community are able to provide a positive, fun, creative, and safe outlet for them.”

“Stay home, stay safe, and I can’t wait to see you all out and about in the future,” she said. “Don’t forget to be a good egg to yourself and others.”

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1691269