



Pokémon GO... Away?

Cyber; Surveillance; Information Security; Counterintelligence

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Overview

What has become one of the world's most popular mobile applications over the course of the summer is now causing headaches among security personnel in both the private sector and governments around the world. Pokémon GO is a game that encourages players to wander through the real world in order to score points in the virtual one. Despite that benign purpose, it has also attracted controversy for contributing to security incidents and becoming a nuisance at both public and private locations.

This report seeks to give OSAC constituents a background on the game and its players, including how to discern legitimate players from potential surveillance threats. It also gives explicit directions on how to request removal of a location that would draw players to a potentially dangerous or sensitive site -- although OSAC makes no guarantee that the makers of Pokémon GO will follow through with such removals.

What is Pokémon GO?

Pokémon GO is a location-based augmented-reality game that has been released in selected countries since July. Players use their mobile device's GPS capability to locate virtual creatures, called Pokémon, who appear on their screen as if they were in the same real-world location as the player. It has quickly become a global phenomenon, having been downloaded more than 130 million times worldwide.

There are currently more than 50 countries where Pokémon GO is currently functional—almost the entirety of the Americas, Europe, and Southeast Asia—with more slated for addition in the near future. Additionally, there are countries where the app is either not set up or not allowed where it works nonetheless near international borders (e.g. China, where one can play close to Hong Kong, Vietnam, or Laos despite the game not making it through the “Great Firewall.” Some claim this is to avoid players accidentally stumbling on secret military bases.)

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And while most locations may have random Pokémon creatures appear, causing players to walk by and then walk on, there are certain locations—“often associated with easily identifiable landmarks, such as public art installations or other points of interest”—where players may linger and congregate longer than security personnel may desire. These locations, known as PokéStops and Gyms, encourage interaction among players, and often result in actions that might otherwise be associated with loitering or surveillance.

Identifying Pokémon Players

Because the game itself is free to download, it has attracted not only a massive number of players, but a wide variety as well, making it difficult to pinpoint a specific type of player based on usual demographic data such as age or gender.

The private sector has expressed concerns with issues such as trespassing by the playing public and the insecure nature of employees using GPS locators that can be seen and tracked by potential malefactors, as well as an increased difficulty of discerning harmless players from potential surveillance threats. Possibly the most important factor for surveillance- detection purposes concerns the camera. Pokémon GO does not require picture or video taking by the user. If the camera is in use for augmented reality play, the users should look distinct from photographers, videographers, and surveillance in several ways:

Individuals may repeatedly return to or linger around a location if there is a PokéStop that they may use within the game. A PokéStop may be used once every five minutes, and may have a lure added to increase the rate of Pokémon produced. This is visible and usable by others, and may attract more players to the area. **This may be mitigated by removing the PokéStop.**

Pokémon do not tend to reappear in the same place (if not near a PokéStop). Players who do not live or work locally should have no reason to repeatedly visit an area.

Individuals not actively catching a Pokémon may hold their phone at their side or in a pocket; those who choose to hold their phone in their hand should resemble someone texting as there is no reason for the phone to be held at an unusual angle or directed up at the sky or buildings.

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An individual actively catching a Pokémon will likely use two hands, one to hold the phone and one to play the game, and it should take no more than a minute or so. Even if using augmented reality, the phone should not be held or aimed above eye level and should be stationary for the duration of play.

Stopping PokéStops

Open the online form at

https://support.pokemongo.nianticlabs.com/hc/en-us/requests/new?ticket_form_id=341148

Enter your email address where indicated—preferably one connected to your organization, rather than for your personal use.

“Additional info/reason for your request:” Enter a short explanation of the reason for your removal request.

“The reported PokéStop/Gym is:” Select one of the following items from the drop down, after which additional information will be required:

Dangerous

Not at this location

Private property (*recommended selection for requesting facilities removal*)

Other

“Exact name of PokéStop:” Enter the location name as it is found within the game, if known. It will identify a landmark, not a street address.

“Address of the PokéStop/Gym:” Enter the nearest street address or intersection.

“Latitude/Longitude of the PokéStop/Gym:” This is an optional field but should be provided if available to facilitate removal.

“Type of Location:” Select one of the following options from the drop down:

Cemetery

College campus

Government office/property

Place of Worship

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Industrial site/power plant
School (K-12)
Business/Corporate Campus
Historical Site/Landmark
Park
Residential
Other

If you select (c) **Government office/property** or (g) **Business/Corporate Campus**, you are required to enter your title and phone number.

Select the check box that states “**I am the owner of the property or have authority to make this request with owners consent**” prior to submission.

Add attachments if necessary.

Other Associated Security Issues

Niantic, the maker of Pokémon GO and associated properties, has included several security warnings on its website. Some concern personal security, while others imply respect from players for the private property of others. Security advice includes:

Protecting personally-identifiable information: *“Remember that team members may not be your real-life friends, so be careful with what you tell them about yourself.”*

Ensuring personal safety: *“For safety’s sake, never play Pokémon GO when you’re on your bike, driving a car, riding a hoverboard, or anything else where you should be paying attention, and of course never wander far away from your parents or your group to catch a Pokémon.”*

Respecting private property: *“If you see a Pokémon someplace where it might not be safe to capture it (like in a construction site or on private property that you can’t get to from the street), don’t do it. There will always be another chance to catch that Pokémon later on.”*

Despite these warnings, a number of high-profile incidents have been associated with the game:

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An attempted mugging in Las Vegas was stopped by Pokémon GO players carrying firearms themselves. A shootout ensued, resulting in multiple injuries.

Four teens staked out specific spots they knew would draw Pokémon GO players in suburban Missouri, robbing them. The robbers used their knowledge of the game to ambush victims at spots they knew would draw players, and picked relatively secluded spots for the crimes.

Additionally, many organizations have come to realize that employees are using official phones to download and play Pokémon Go—leaving them vulnerable to things such as infiltration of GPS tagging and downloading of fake applications. A number of private-sector organizations and government entities alike have banned such play, although the ability of organizations with BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) policies to do the same remains nebulous.

Volkswagen disseminated a directive to its 70,000 employees prohibiting them from playing the game while at work or on company premises. The carmaker also suggested its employees not have the game installed on their work devices such as smartphones or tablets.

Airbus employees have been warned not to play Pokémon Go while at work after activity on the game was detected at one of its sites, "threatening security." The aircraft manufacturer also reminded staff of its policy that any device with a camera that has not been authorized is strictly forbidden.

Iran became the first country to issue a complete ban of Pokémon Go in early August, after its High Council of Virtual Spaces claimed unspecified "security concerns."

The Israeli Defense Force announced a ban in that playing the game on official devices could leak sensitive information like army base locations and photographs of the bases. Israeli media also reports that Israel's emergency rescue services have also issued a warning about the game, saying Israelis have suffered moderate injuries while playing.

Indonesia has banned police officers and military personnel from playing the game while on duty.

Police and the airport operators association in Germany has called for Pokémon Go

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features located beyond security controls to be deleted.

For More Information

More information on private-sector cybersecurity in general can be found by contacting OSAC's Cyber Threats & Information Security Analyst.

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