Critical Gambling Studies Blog

‘Gotta catch em all!’ The Gaming/Gambling Dynamics of Pokémon TCG Pocket

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Introduction

Loot boxes in video games have attracted the attention of public health scholars in recent years due to continuing controversy regarding potential connections to problem gambling and mental health risks – although the latter is contested, with studies reporting conflicting results (Armitage, 2021; Wardle & Zendle 2021; Spicer, 2021; Xiao, 2024; Villalba-García, 2025). Regulators have also been paying attention to the loot box controversy; in the UK, both the House of Lords and former Children’s Commissioner for England have recommended that the Gambling Act 2005 be amended to incorporate loot boxes into the UK definition of gaming (Children’s Commissioner for England, 2019; House of Lords, 2020). Despite such controversy, loot boxes are generally not regulated as gambling in most jurisdictions, and in Belgium, the only country to incorporate a complete ban on loot boxes, the ban has been severely criticised for its poor implementation and enforcement (Xiao et al., 2022; Xiao et al., 2025).

On the 30th of October 2024, Nintendo released the latest game in their highly successful multimedia franchise *Pokémon* titled *Pokémon Trading Card Game (TCG) Pocket*. This game is a simplified, digital version of the physical Pokémon trading card game; trading card games (TCGs) are deck building chance and strategy games where players collect cards and can then use them to play with other people (Craddock, 2004). Since its release, the game has seen incredible success, having generated an estimated $500 million USD globally within just three months of release, making it the second most successful *Pokémon* mobile game behind *Pokémon GO* (Dinsdale, 2025a).

This blog seeks to explore the gaming/gambling dynamics of *Pokémon TCG Pocket* to contribute towards discussions regarding loot box regulation with a view towards advocating for a stricter public health approach to how jurisdictions tackle the issue of

loot boxes (Close & Lloyd, 2021; Dixon & Larche, 2021; Xiao et al., 2022). Loot boxes have been the subject of significant controversy due to their similarities to gambling such as slot machines, having links to problem gambling, and the gaming industry's ever-growing reliance upon them (Salmon, 2021; Kolandai-Matchett & Abbot, 2021). *Pokémon* is an extremely well-known and popular video game franchise, particularly with children and young people, which makes its hyper-aggressive monetisation strategy particularly worthy of focused analysis.

'Collection' and 'Competition' – Motivations of play:

There are ostensibly two identifiable 'purposes' for playing Pokémon TCG Pocket; the 'card game' itself and collecting the cards. Player behaviour, motivations, typologies, and traits form a complex topic, with numerous studies attempting to both understand and model differences in player motivations stretching back almost 30 years (Hamari & Tuunanen, 2014; Tondello, 2019; Diaz, 2022). An in-depth discussion of such studies goes beyond the scope of this blog, however. We will confine ourselves here to only two overarching categories/types of 'motivations' for playing the game, 'collection' and 'competition' and discuss these orientations accordingly. My reason for using motivations rather than the more abstract player 'archetypes' or 'traits' is due to the reductive nature of these metrics – player diversity means that players will be drawn to the game for a number of reasons which may overlap.

'Collection' refers to the card collection aspect of the game – enjoyment can be derived from collecting cards, seeing one's collection grow, and possibly even comparing collections with friends and strangers alike; collection contains aspects of aesthetics, social, and goal orientation (Tondello, 2019). Competition refers to the card battling aspect of the game – this generally encompasses casual play against other players as well as play at a competitive level in official or community tournaments; competition contains aspects of goal, social, and challenge orientations (Tondello, 2019). The way that games appeal to motivations of play are not inherently negative, but they can feed into what are known as 'dark patterns' which are defined as "something that is deliberately added to a game to cause an unwanted negative experience for the player with a positive outcome for the game developer" (Dark Pattern Games, n.d). While it might sound oxymoronic for negative experiences to factor into motivations of play, this article will explore how some game mechanics draw parallels between motivations, game design elements, and dark patterns.

The Rules of the Game

Figure 1 and Figure 2. *Example cards, Pokémon Zone, 2025*

Ultimately, due to the game's mechanics, both types of players will still need to battle to get the 'full' experience of collection and competition. Before I proceed with an examination of the loot box mechanics in Pokémon TCG Pocket, it is necessary to explain how the game itself is played to provide overarching context to the motivations for loot box play. In this game, each player starts with a hand of 5 cards from a deck of 20 cards, with player decks comprised of two different types of cards, trainer cards and Pokémon cards. Pokémon cards are the main cards in your deck and are necessary to play the game; a player's game plan will typically revolve around one or several Pokémon and their abilities to win the game. Trainer cards support your Pokémon cards and can do various things such as accelerate your game plan by drawing or adding cards to your hand or disrupt your opponent by making it easier to defeat their Pokémon or harder to defeat yours.

The board is comprised of 3 zones, the 'active spot', the 'bench', and the 'energy zone'; the active spot is where the player's currently active Pokémon is, the bench has three zones and also contains Pokémon, and the energy zone is where the turn player's energy is generated at the start of the turn – energy is used to fuel Pokémon's attacks. The objective of the game is to either be the first player to get to 3 points, or to remove all of your opponent's Pokémon from the active zone and the bench. Players receive 1 point for defeating an opponent's Pokémon, or if that Pokémon is an EX Pokémon (stronger versions of Pokémon with more powerful attacks and abilities) the player gets 2 points to compensate for the EX Pokémon's power. Players defeat a Pokémon by battling them, using attacks with different energy costs to attack their opponents active Pokémon to reduce their HP (hit points) to 0, thus 'knocking out' the active Pokémon and forcing them

to replace it with a Pokémon on the bench. If the player has no Pokémon on the bench to replace their active Pokémon with, they lose the game.

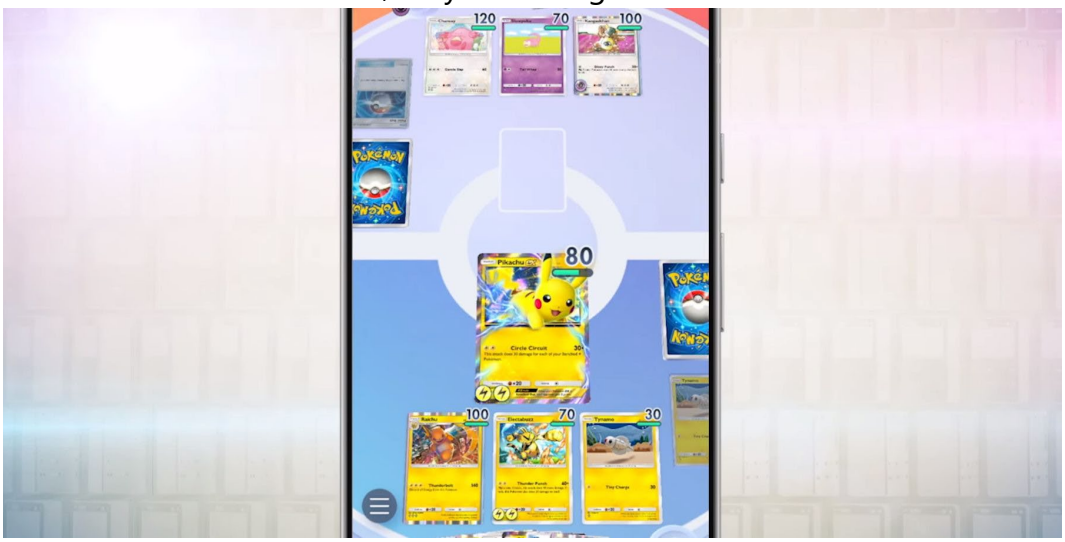


Figure 3. *The Game Board, Baqery M, Gamerant, 2025*

Rarity in Pokémon TCG Pocket

The main card collection method in *Pokémon TCG Pocket* is through the game's loot boxes which take the form of virtual card packs. Similar to its physical counterpart, Pokémon TCG Pocket does not provide players with a complete collection at a point of sale; rather, they sell digital versions of "blind sealed packages of randomized cards of varying power and value" (Xiao, 2021). Conventional wisdom would dictate that the more powerful a card is, the rarer the card should be (Ham, 2010); this is reflected in Pokémon TCG Pocket through its complex 10-tier rarity system. The higher the rarity, the lower the probability of obtaining a card of that rarity; additionally, higher rarities contain more powerful cards such as EX Pokémon, as well as special versions of cards available at lower rarities.

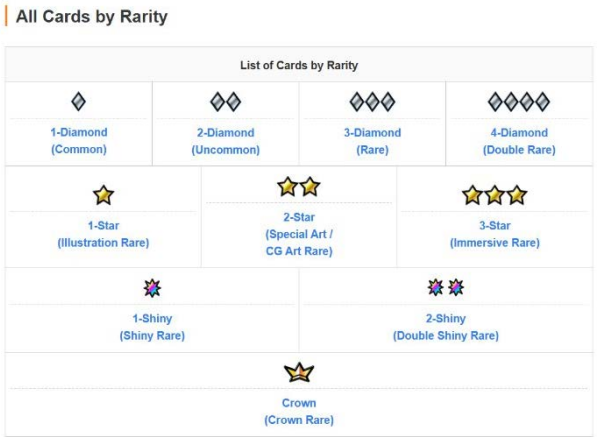
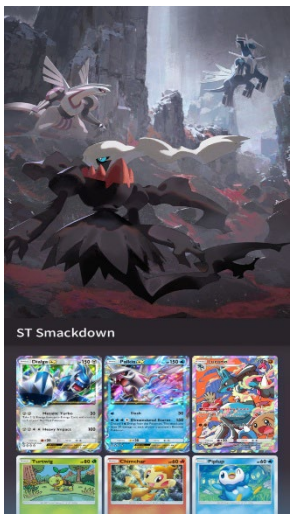


Figure 4: *Card Rarities, game8, 2025*

Powerful cards such as EX cards are of a higher rarity, and players need several powerful cards to make a strong deck, meaning that even on a casual, non-competitive level, most players must contend with the game's low odds in order to make a good deck. While the power of a card may have less appeal for those motivated purely by collection, the special variants of cards attainable at higher rarities provide additional motivation for engaging with the pseudo-gambling experience. This is encouraged through the game's social and aesthetic orientations – the display board and the card binder. Binders allow players to showcase a selection of cards from their collection to their friends and other players in the community showcase, while the display board allows players to showcase one particular card from their collection.

Binders and the display board encourage players to show off their favourite cards to others. It is an opportunity to demonstrate their engagement and social prestige within the game by showing off their rarest cards, most powerful cards, or any card they are particularly proud or fond of (see figures 5 and 6). While not the perfect analogy given how vastly different they are in terms of gameplay, comparisons can be drawn to the social motivations for advancement in MMO's through symbols of wealth or status (Yee, 2006; Van Looy, 2010). The use of social spaces outside the game environment such as social media can also play a part in this motivation, with players wishing to show off their collections to as wide an audience as possible. This, in-turn, serves as positive advertisement for the game and may entice other players to become engaged with the game's mechanics by stoking a sense of competition through collection.



Figures 5 & 6: *Binder and Display Board, Serebii.net [@SerebiiNet], X, 2025*

Timers – Monetizing Impatience

Card packs in *Pokémon TCG Pocket* belong to different expansions, with each expansion adding new cards to the game. Players can earn one pack for free every twelve hours up to two packs per day. Once the player has expended their two free packs, they must either wait twelve hours before they can open another pack, or use one of two in-game currencies, 'Pack Hourglasses' and 'Poké Gold,' to lower the timer. Hourglasses and Poké Gold can be earned in limited quantities during the regular course of play, but Poké Gold' can also be purchased for real money inside the in-game shop.

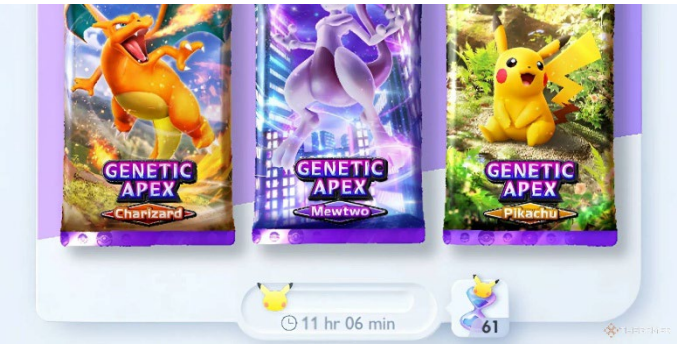


Figure 7. *Pack Hourglasses and Timers, Ziegler, J, Thegamer, 2024*

This is an example of a 'timed gacha' system where the rewards are locked behind a timer, forcing the player to either wait until the timer expires, or to pay and receive their rewards immediately (GameRefinery, 2022). Timers are a "blocking factor" which disrupt the player's ability to open loot boxes and receive instant gratification, leading to player annoyance and impatience (Ravoniarison & Benito, 2019). Through timers, *Pokémon TCG Pocket* capitalizes on the need for instant gratification by selling in-game currency to the player to solve the problem that the timer creates (Buergi, 2024).

Timers are also used to influence players' gaming habits by encouraging them to space out play throughout the course of a day to prevent burnout. This results in players spending more time with the app overall, leading to increased exposure to the game's loot boxes and encouraging the development of a 'habit of play' (Dark Pattern Games, n.d.a). This is reinforced by the game's use of daily rewards which create an "obligation to play" by capitalizing on a players fear of "missing out" if they do not login to the game daily (Frommel & Mandryk, 2022). These daily rewards take the form of 'shop tickets' which can then be used to buy Hourglasses from the in-game store, making them another (albeit indirect) method to reduce the loot box timer. Shop tickets can also be used to buy other items such as cosmetic accessories like binder covers and card sleeves, amongst other things, which further appeals to the social status aspects of collection as described above.

Confusing Design Elements – Price Obfuscation and Spending Limits.

The use of multiple in-game currencies, which can be used to buy other in-game currencies in some cases, can be confusing to players and makes it difficult for them to accurately determine the "true cost of in-game transactions" (Petrovskaya & Zendle, 2021). In addition, Poké Gold cannot be purchased individually, but rather in bundles at fixed purchase rates which give an incrementally better exchange rate as the bundles get larger (Petrovskaya & Zendle, 2021). For example, the minimum bundle of 5 Poké Gold is $0.99 USD, which equates to roughly $0.20 USD per unit. The largest bundle of 690 Poké Gold, however, has the "best" value proposition and converts to roughly $0.14 per unit, a $0.06 USD "discount" for each Poké Gold.

The real value of Poké Gold is further obfuscated by the game's spending limit, which is expressed in terms of Poké Gold rather than the player's regional currency. The maximum amount of Poké Gold a player can spend each day is 720 (roughly $120-$150 USD) and there is no limit on how many days in a row this amount of money can be spent, with one social media influencer being reported as having spent more than $100 USD each day for several months with no intervention (Dinsdale, 2025b). Since the Poké Gold spending limit is just slightly greater than the largest bundle, players who purchase the largest bundle must then purchase multiple smaller bundles with a worse value proposition if they wish to have enough Poké Gold to meet the spending limit. This thereby encourages the player to only purchase the largest bundle, as purchases of the smaller and cheaper bundles represent "wasted money" if the player feels as though they are likely to continue making purchases in the future.

'Wonder Picks' – Integrating Loot Boxes into Social Spaces of Play

The virtual card packs are not the only loot boxes in *Pokémon TCG Pocket* – the game has an additional loot box mechanic called 'Wonder Pick', which allows players to pick a card at random from packs opened by their friends and other players (see figure 8). To use the Wonder Pick system, the player must spend 'stamina' which recharges at a rate of 1 stamina every 12 hours or by skipping the timer using in-game currency. The number of stamina used per Wonder Pick is determined by the highest rarity card in the pack that the player chooses, with higher rarity packs costing more stamina. Social systems in games which utilize friend mechanics are an established game mechanic, with free-to-play games

commonly offering things such as sign-up bonuses to encourage people to get their friends to download the game.

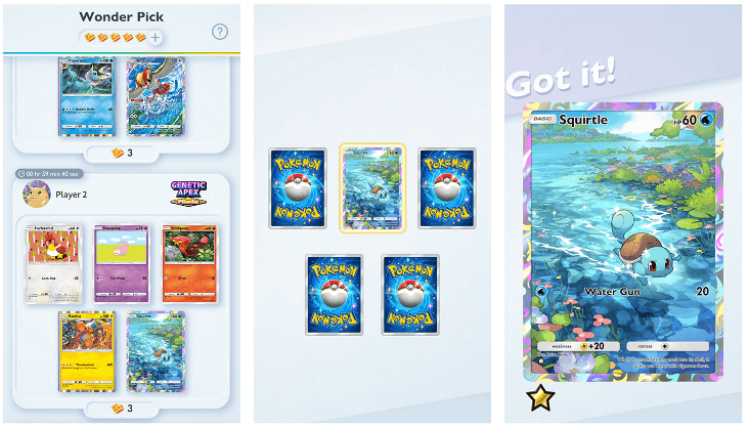


Figure 8. *Wonder Pick, Game8, 2025*

In recent years, so-called 'gacha games' such as Pokémon TCG Pocket have begun intertwining more social systems into the loot box experience, an example of which being the relatively recent 'joint pull' gacha. An example of this type of gacha is the game *Monster Strike*, a purely cooperative game which utilizes an 'affinity' system which grants rewards, including premium currency, for playing with friends. The term 'gacha' is derived from the Japanese term "gacha/gasha-pon", an onomatopoeic word based on the sounds made by the toy capsules from toy capsule machines which are popular in Japan (Lakić, 2023). In recent years 'gacha' has come to refer to video games which incorporate a lottery-style randomized rewards system typically in the form of loot boxes, and there are many different types of gacha widely available throughout the video game market (GameRefinery, 2022). While joint pull gacha is not itself novel, the Wonder Pick system is a novel implementation of a joint pull mechanic in a digital CCG which takes advantage of the digital medium to incorporate a mechanic that would otherwise be impossible to replicate physically.

Poké Gold can also be used on Wonder Picks to gain more stamina and reduce the timer; however, a key difference between virtual packs and wonder picks is that the latter is only available for a limited amount of time before a different pool of cards is generated. Wonder Picks are also used for special time-sensitive in-game events, which offer a random chance to obtain cards that are unavailable through other means and may potentially not be offered again for months, or even years. The time-sensitive nature of these Wonder Picks may make players feel pressured into impulsive decision making out of fear of missing out on potentially valuable rewards that they may not get another chance to obtain.

Wonder Picks give players additional chances at obtaining cards from packs other players and their friends have pulled from to increase their card collection or empower their decks. This is an example of the social dark pattern of 'reciprocity' which is based upon a player's sense of obligation to "return a favour" that is paid to them (Dark Pattern Games, n.d.a). In this case, Wonder Picking a card from a friend's pack could incentivize a player to then pull packs to 'return the favour' and give their friends and other players additional chances to receive cards too. This creates a feedback loop of reciprocity – Player A pulls from a pack and Player B wonder picks from that pack; to 'return the favour' Player B pulls from a pack to give Player A a chance at wonder picking from that pack. Player A then feels obligated to 'return the favour' to Player B, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of reciprocity that encourages continuous engagement with both loot box mechanics.

'Levelling-up' – Social Spaces of Competitive Play

Players will earn EXP (experience points) as they play and engage with the game's various systems such as solo mode, pulling from packs, wonder picking, or playing against other players online. EXP allows players to 'level up' and earn a variety of rewards including the in-game currency Poké Gold; as a value-proposition, Poké Gold earned through levelling-up represents a return on investment that gives a player more opportunities to pull from the loot box. Levelling up is however also a status symbol, and the act of levelling, even without additional financial incentive, is motivation enough for some players for social, goal, or challenge reasons (Van Looy, 2010). Attaching a financial incentive to levelling-up adds further enticement for players who are not interested in the challenge or goal orientations of play but are interested in the social orientations of collection and wish to earn more chances – it is prudent therefore for players to level up, utilizing as many ways as possible to do so.

It is especially prudent for players to earn EXP through battles as alternative ways of earning EXP are inherently limited; the solo mode can only earn a maximum of 1750 EXP provided you fully complete the mode while packs and Wonder Picks are restricted by timers and premium currency, but battling other players is limitless and earns 15 EXP per victory. Furthermore, as you continue to level up, the amount of EXP needed to reach the next level becomes higher, meaning it becomes harder to obtain the rewards from levelling up without increasing your expose and time spent with the game. A higher level not only represents a more engaged player, but is also a symbol of status for players and a goal in and of itself to achieve.

The Value of a Card

It is in this way that 'victory' is given social and monetary value, and this further translates into an individual card's value – the 'real' value of a card is proportional to both the strength of that card, and the 'rarity' of the card. The value of a card does not remain static however; as time goes on new cards will be added to the game to prevent the game from stagnating, and if a player's current card collection is sufficient to win battles throughout the game's lifespan, then they will have no incentive to purchase new cards. New sets introduce cards, and these cards may be more powerful than older cards or introduce new strategies to decks around those older cards, causing their value to fluctuate – this is known as "power creep," which ensures a "perpetual stream of revenue from a single game" (Ham, 2010; Altice, 2016; Švelch 2019).

Power creep means it is generally impossible to predict what value an individual card may hold in the future. A card purchased one day could be functionally worthless merely three months from the date of purchase or could potentially be even more desirable depending on how the game evolves. For example, community driven tournaments provide a clear demonstration of just how fast, and how detrimental, power creep can be within just a short span of time to the value of a card. In the 218 tournaments hosted in December 2024, the deck centred around Pikachu EX placed first 77 times and had a prevalence of 27.88% (774/2776). In March 2025, with 195 tournaments, Pikachu EX decks failed to place first in any tournaments and only had a prevalence of 0.1% (3/2944). As a result, the competitive viability of Pikachu EX and its support cards is significantly lower than in December and is thus less valuable for competitive players (Pokémon Meta, n.d.).

For players who are focused on the competitive motivations of the game, particularly those who engage in tournament play, this means that when they are opening loot boxes in the hopes of obtaining specific cards, they are making speculative purchasing decisions in the hopes that a card becomes more useful or retains its usefulness in the future. This is particularly important for players who engage in tournament play as several community tournaments list cash prizes for winning their events ranging from $50 USD to a staggering $1000 USD (Pokémon Meta, n.d). Even for players who are more focused upon the collection motivation, it is important that they are still able to acquire a good deck that will allows them to compete, at least casually, in online battles. Even if a player has no particular leanings towards competitive play, the degree of prize support available even in community drive tournaments still serves as a very strong motivation to play.

Conclusion: The Need for Public Health Regulation in the Gaming Industry

In this essay I broke down the various deceptive design elements that feature in *Pokémon TCG Pocket*s – its two loot box mechanics, virtual card packs and Wonder Picks – to

evidence the urgency with which regulators need to tackle the issue of loot boxes. The popularity of *Pokémon TCG Pocket* grants it and other games like it a form of pseudo-vindication which encourages other developers to incorporate and expand upon the deceptive design elements I have highlighted in this article. More responsive public health-based regulation is a necessity in order to prevent consumers from becoming vulnerable to emergent harms in games such as *Pokémon TCG Pocket*, which are particularly appealing to younger audiences.

Mechanics such as arbitrary timers and blocking factors manufacture impatience; this in turn makes consumers more vulnerable to the exploitative game design elements which are sold back to them as a means of eliminating the problem the developers created. Social and aesthetic orientations of play utilize player motivations for symbols of wealth, status, and prestige to create a sense of competition and envy to draw players into deeper engagement with card collection mechanics. Additionally, financial optimization is weaponized to target monetarily savvy consumers through price obfuscation and 'bundle deals' with superior value propositions to encourage consumers to spend a large amount of money all at once to avoid 'wasting money' on worse deals. If such design practices are allowed to continue uncontested, then the risk of exploitation becoming normalized and consumers becoming more vulnerable to exploitive game design elements will only continue to grow (Brightman, 2017).

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