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Pokémon Go See the World in Its Splendor

By AMY BUTCHER JULY 14, 2016

IT is strange to live in a place where the skeletons of Alaskan king salmon, loosed from bald eagles' talons, sometimes plummet to the sidewalk. It is strange to live in a place where brown bears are so populous that hikers tie bells to their dogs and wrists. Where ravens as big as house cats caw and the sun barely sets into the ocean beside a dormant volcano.

Stranger still, however, to see young people hold their phones to their faces and scan this landscape for an elusive Jigglypuff.

Bubble-gum pink, more cotton candy than animal, the Jigglypuff might lurk, my students tell me, in the woods among the scattered totem poles. Or perhaps along the harbor, where yachts and trolling boats rock between rows of barnacled piers. The shells crunch beneath their feet as the kids lift their screens into the air, scanning sky and earth and sea, ignoring jellyfish and banana slugs, saying, quietly, "It's just another Rattata."

I used to be obsessed with Pokémon. A middle schooler when the game was first released in the late '90s, I beat the red version in three short days, the blue in four. I bought and ate all the candy. My companion of choice was Charmander, tiny and orange and adorable. I liked most how, like all adolescent things, he had a sweetness

that quickly gave way to jutting claws, a burning tail and a glare reserved commonly for mothers.

How easily my parents bribed me in return for buying booster packs. How many weeds I pulled in pursuit of a Mewtwo. Whole rooms were vacuumed of Ritz crackers and crayon tips because of the possibility of a bumbling Snorlax, a skin-shredding Dratini.

I was, in short, enraptured. I owned three pairs of Pikachu undies and dreamed at night of Ash.

But upon the release, early this month, of Pokémon Go — the long-awaited augmented-reality iPhone and Android counterpart to the original Game Boy series — I found I had evolved to the curmudgeonly attributes of the nearly 30.

“Phones *away!*” became my mantra. I said it dozens of times a day. I was teaching at a fine arts camp in Sitka, Alaska, when the game came out — two weeks spent with talented artistic youth who had chosen to spend their summers practicing mime, ballet and photography. They were enrolled in courses in juggling, sketch comedy and opera. They were practicing the ancient Japanese pottery-making technique of *raku*.

But they were also playing the great Japanese time-suck of Pokémon Go, like everyone else. No longer was I enraptured. The game seemed an incredible nuisance in the classroom, but also in the cafeteria and the auditorium, at our nightly events and on the campus green. The students pointed their cameras at the blackboard, bouncing digital Poké Balls to capture creatures, laughing when a wormy Weedle landed on another student or slithered across a desk. They were respectful when class started, or when the lights dimmed for a performance, but still I resented the game and its viral international reception.

More than anything, I couldn't understand why my students — living in pristine, picturesque Alaska — were so enamored of the invented wilderness superimposed on their screens. The real thing was all around them.

But these were primarily Alaskan students. They represented 45 Alaskan communities, several of them Native, many of them isolated, and banana slugs were not of interest.

Days later, upon return to my Ohio home, when I no longer felt I had to set an example, I downloaded the game myself.

My community came to life in vibrant shades of pastel blue and green, the grid of my neighborhood alive with magic. I caught a Bulbasaur on my comforter. A fluffy Eevee lurked within the garden. In jest, my boyfriend and I walked a block in pursuit of rustling leaves that indicated an animal not yet captured in our Pokédex. We caught him and walked the block. Then another. We walked five miles.

I moved to my suburban Ohio neighborhood two months ago, and have lived in the state for less than two years, after relocating from the East Coast. I drive to work and I come home. The restaurants I most frequently patronize are a mile away at most. My daily life occurs within a radius of 10 to 20 miles, and much of that is countryside, yellow or green but always empty.

Adventure, then, means a life outside Ohio — its many casseroles and flea markets, all those churches and ice-cream shops. It means, more generally, the world outside the United States.

But wandering my neighborhood, progressing downtown toward Poké Stops — blue diamonds scattered among communities that revitalize your avatar's supplies — my world became suddenly foreign. I noticed everything. I stood on Sandusky Street, the town's main drag, amassing Poké Balls, and read from a small blue bubble that on this site, 153 years ago, residents formed the Fifth United States Colored Troops. Four were later awarded congressional Medals of Honor.

“Did you know that?” my boyfriend asked. Then, minutes later, “Did you know that? Or that?”

We weren't the only ones doing this. The neighborhood buzzed with people out exploring, an enormous uptick for a Monday evening. The whole idea of Pokémon Go is to visit where you have not been, to trace sites both new and foreign. A local

Creole restaurant became a Poké Stop, unlocked only from within, and so people clustered within the lobby, waiting for tables or ordering takeout. Next to City Hall, a high school couple laughed as they caught a growling Nidoran. A man in a Slipknot T-shirt flashed his phone at me, saying, “Do you believe these Pidgeys?”

The game thrives most through collaboration. A block away, the century-old cinema glowed pink from a “lure module” another player had set, and a crowd of us shared stories until its 30 minutes of magic had dissipated.

Certainly there is the argument — already frequent, predictable and boisterous — that it is a particular brand of tragedy that leads an entire generation of American children into the great outdoors while clutching phones before their faces.

Still, fads fade. Pokémon Go will no doubt go out of style. But I’ll still feel more tethered to my community and aware of all it offers — I’ll know that the Creole restaurant is indeed very good, and that the movie theater is rather charming, and that this place of dairy and agriculture is not Alaska but is no less lovely.

In the meantime, it seems far from terrible to see a father and son racing down suburban sidewalks. To spend an evening not sitting passively before a TV, but interacting simultaneously with both our media and the world. To share in an experience, however seductive or silly, that forces us to go out and explore together.

The sun was nearly down when, for the first time in my two years here, my boyfriend and I drove out to the state park in pursuit of a water creature. I caught him, big and blue with a golden shell, at the bank of a lake, and then we put our phones away, peeled down to our bathing suits, and waded into Ohio’s green water, forgetting altogether what it was that brought us there.

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A version of this op-ed appears in print on July 17, 2016, on page SR4 of the New York edition with the headline: Pokémon Go See the World.
