

The lure of 'Pokemon Go': Respite from a summer of violence

July 18 2016, by Barbara Ortutay



In this Thursday, July 14, 2016, photo, Associated Press reporter Barbara Ortutay plays "Pokemon Go" while walking through New York's Times Square. The game has become a virtual tour guide, pointing to places you might have overlooked with your gaze stuck to your phone. (AP Photo/Anick Jesdanun)

It's easy to see the appeal of "Pokemon Go."

Coming out of nowhere in what's been an otherwise soul-crushing summer filled with endless shootings and other horrors, the smartphone game offers an escape, without removing us completely from the real world.

I started playing it for the same reason I devoured the Harry Potter books, tended virtual cows on "FarmVille" and suffered through all three "50 Shades of Grey" books, plus a movie.

It was pure, objective intellectual curiosity about a popular cultural phenomenon, the latest involving traipsing to real-life places to pick up virtual red-and-white balls to throw at on-screen monsters.

Put another way, everyone else was doing it.

It hasn't gone smoothly, yet I can't stop.

I'm not one for tutorials or how-to guides . Give me a gadget or app, and have it work. Someone had to explain that you get transported to a virtual Poke-world only when there are digital monsters called Pokemon nearby.

Until then, you see the world through a digital map, similar to Google's or Apple's. You walk around collecting "Poke Balls" from "PokeStops," which are based on real-life landmarks—or often like pseudo-landmarks, such as an old church doorway no one else cares about.

The game turns into a virtual tour guide, as it forces me to notice little sights along my daily route, ones I've been too preoccupied to see until now—probably because my eyes were glued to my phone.

For instance, our midtown Manhattan office has a lot of weird little plaques and markers nearby, such as "Gold Leaf on Printing Cards

Building," whatever that is. There's also a community garden called Alice's Garden just blocks away. Without "Pokemon," I probably wouldn't have noticed a mural near home dedicated to Wu-Tang Clan founding member Ol' Dirty Bastard, who died 12 years ago.

The game gets intense when Pokemon—these cute, sometimes-angry monsters with magical powers—appear in the vicinity. Time freezes, and I'm transported inside the Poke-world, ignoring everything around me as I try to capture Pokemon by flicking Poke Balls. I've bumped into people. Others have twisted ankles or gotten into car accidents.

On the flip side, "Pokemon Go" has sparked spontaneous conversations with fellow players and others curious about the phenomenon. These are folks I might have otherwise ignored while texting or playing the far-more-solitary "Candy Crush." Because it's based on real-world surroundings, "Pokemon" boosts interactions rather than shuts people out.

Having reached Level 5, I am now part of a team. I chose Instinct over Mystic and Valor. Instinct seems not to overthink stuff, though my best friend joined Mystic and declared our friendship over.

I can now visit "gyms" to train creatures and fight Pokemon captured by other players. I haven't gathered up the courage yet to enter a Poke-world gym, much like in real life as of late. My boyfriend assures me that I need to go to the gym to train. Um ... OK.

From what I hear, Poke-world gyms can also be social as strangers converge around real-life locations. Sometimes, too real. The Auschwitz memorial has banned the game on its grounds, for good reason.

The game seems to get more complex as you move along, and I'm not sure how long I will keep playing if it does.

As a busy working mother, I like that I don't have to take time out from my day to play it. I can look for Poke Balls during my commute. I can chase Pokemon while strolling around my neighborhood with the baby, grocery shopping with the baby or going to the park with the baby.

I don't particularly want to battle with others. I don't want my cute pocket-monsters to evolve into scary giant monsters, much in the same way I'm apprehensive about my baby evolving into a teenager.

For now, though, I am having a great time collecting a growing array of strange creatures, along with 185 Poke Balls, three sets of incense to lure Pokemon, and some potions and medicines I don't quite understand yet—I'm sure they'll be useful at some point.

I welcome the ability to take my mind off police shootings, the gay nightclub massacre in Florida, horrific attacks on civilians in France, a coup attempt Turkey, a mosquito-borne Zika virus causing brain damage in the womb and a fraught, divisive U.S. election season. Plus, the death of my cousin at 42, three weeks after he found out he had cancer.

I'll stop before I'll make us all depressed.

"Pokemon Go" is a surprise hit for many of us not versed in this massive Japanese gaming, cartoon, toy and comic book franchise. The characters are meant for children, yet adults are using them to lighten our world for a little bit.

There is a sense of joyous accomplishment in catching a Pokemon at times when everything else seems too overwhelming.

More information: Saying "no": phys.org/news/2016-07-pokemon-smartphone-game.html

Getting started: phys.org/news/2016-07-pokemon_1.html

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