

'Pokemon' no: Trying, but failing to get the smartphone game

July 18 2016, by Todd Richmond



In this July 14, 2016, photo, Associated Press reporter Todd Richmond tries to conquer "Pokemon Go" while walking around downtown Madison, Wis. The 44-year-old downloaded the app and played the game in an attempt to understand its popularity. (AP Photo by Bryna Godar)

No one, it seems, can escape "Pokemon Go."

Not the kids who slouch along my neighborhood sidewalks with their

faces buried in their phones. Not the chic twenty-somethings who shuffle along the state capitol square like they're scanning a beach with metal detectors. Not even my fellow reporters, who are supposed to be working on Very Important Stories but are actually searching the Capitol corridors for deranged virtual chickens with a bad case of hemorrhoids.

Don't get me wrong. I played my share of Galaga, Pac-Man and Tempest as a kid. I've got an email address, a Twitter handle, a Facebook page. I'm even on Instagram. But I'd be the first one to tell you it's all a sham. I'm 44 years old and can barely work any of it. Heck, until just last week I thought "meme" was pronounced "mime."

I tried to ignore the Pokecraze. I really did. But when my son's little league sent out a message warning kids to be careful when searching for Pokemon in the middle of games, I had to find out what the big deal was.

DR. WILLOW PRESENTS

On starting the app, an animated dude named Dr. Willow greeted me. He looks like a teenage version of Doc Brown from "Back to the Future," with spiky white hair, a lab coat and Spandex tights.

The game asked me to access my location, briefly triggering visions of black helicopters and agents ransacking my house in the dead of night. But it's hard to play a map game without being on the map, so after a few tense moments of indecision, I threw caution to the wind.

Back to Dr. Willow, who delivered a warning that I should be aware of my surroundings at all times. Thanks, Dr. Willow. Next he ordered me to create an avatar of myself. This was actually fun—I gave my character hair. That might be the most satisfying part of the whole experience, given that I'm what some people would call follicly-challenged.



In this July 14, 2016, photo, Associated Press reporter Todd Richmond uses Charmander to battle Flareon in "Pokemon Go" in the Wisconsin State Capitol in Madison, Wis. The 44-year-old downloaded the app and played the game in an attempt to understand its popularity. (AP Photo by Bryna Godar)

SQUIRRELS UNDER THE DOME

Suddenly my character was standing in a map of the state Capitol. A clawed squirrel with a tail that ends in a ball of fire appeared in the Capitol press room.

"See your little Pokeball?" Capital Times reporter Jessie Opoien screamed. "Launch it at him!" It took three tries, but I got him. Dr. Willow re-appeared and ordered me to travel the world searching for these things.

I started wandering the Capitol's corridors, and soon captured something called a Rattata, an angry purple rat with huge buck teeth. But the pickings seemed slim, so outside I went, waving the phone in front of my face as if I were warding off evil spirits.

Next to fall was a Spearow, a cross between a chicken and hawk, that appeared at the base of the Hans Christian Heg statue. Hans Christian Heg was a Norwegian-American Civil War soldier from Wisconsin. He died a hero at the Battle of Chickamauga. Now's he's a virtual reality roosting spot.

The rest of the Capitol square was largely Pokemon free, although another Spearow did turn up on the east lawn. I failed to hit it before the app died. I'm sure I looked ridiculous, though not as bad as the nearby fitness class doing jumping jacks in the 86-degree heat.

CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH A BUS

The next morning in downtown Madison, it quickly became clear that the app is about as stable as the San Andreas fault; it froze nearly a half-dozen times. I also had a close encounter with a bus and developed an awful kink in my neck from constantly peering down at my phone. Chiropractors, rejoice.



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On the plus side, I became a stone-cold hunter. New creatures fell to my deadly aim, the strangest being an Oddish, a racquetball with legs and palm fronds for hair. Every time I looked up I noticed other players on the sidewalk. They were impossible to miss, clumped into groups of twos and threes, staring at their phones, stopping on a dime and pointing.

By the end of the outing I'd accumulated enough experience points to enter a "gym," a virtual arena where Pokemon fight. I lost five straight times to a Flareon, a fire-breathing Chihuahua.

So went the Great Pokemon Experiment of 2016.

POKEMON POST-MORTEM

It's easy to see why kids love this game. It's fun at first, in an open-your-presents-on-Christmas-morning kind of way, and it binds them even tighter to their omnipresent phones. The game also offers bits of trivia about local landmarks where Pokemon lurk, so I suppose kids can take something away from it.

But yes, it's dangerous as all get out. It's hard to tear your face away from the phone. God forbid that anyone tries to play this while driving; it's tough enough to avoid walking into a tree.

Call me old-fashioned, but the more I played the more I realized I was missing out on something. I was out of the office, in the summer sun, breathing fresh air; the real world in all its wonderful grandeur and beautiful complexity spread all around me. But I wasn't part of it.

Therein lies the real danger. The game both pushes players into reality and isolates them from it, constricting human communication even further in an age where it's never been more important.

Give me Pac-Man any day.

More information: How to get started playing 'Pokemon Go':
phys.org/news/2016-07-pokemon_1.html

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