Review: Universe2Go like Pokemon Go for astronomy geeks

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I've been interested in astronomy since I was a wee lad.

One year when I was in first or second grade, I received a telescope for Christmas.

I was excited but also a little terrified.

I was convinced I'd see things through that telescope that would scare me. My only reference of what I could expect to see was from watching "Lost in Space" on TV, and I thought the very small telescope in my hands was going to show me what was happening on the moon, as if I were watching it on TV.

You can imagine my disappointment.

My love of astronomy continued through college, when I took Physics 105 (astronomy) and got to look through some of the university's larger telescopes.

For the last few years, I've used an iPhone app called pUniverse, which shows a view of the night sky from your vantage point. If you hold the phone's screen up to the sky, it will identify what you see (mostly).

That concept has been taken a few steps farther with Universe2Go ($99), which is a set of augmented reality goggles and a smartphone app to help you find, identify and learn about objects in the night sky.

You place your phone in the top of the goggles, and you can see the screen superimposed over the actual sky, which is what "augmented reality" means - digital information combined with a real view of the night sky.

It's pretty cool that you can see the sky through the Universe2Go goggles and have the astronomical information in your field of view at the same time.

The phone's screen is reflected into your field of view, and there are settings to help it blend in with the amount of light in your viewing area. I set mine for city lights and had no problem making out all the on-screen information.

When you launch the app and place your phone in the goggles, you'll be asked to do a star calibration, which consists of finding a bright star in the sky and waiting a second or two for the app to identify it. Once you find three stars, the app's map of the sky will match what you can see outside.

As you move your head around, whatever is in the center of your field of vision is highlighted.

If you stop on the moon, you'll see it on the screen. If you hold your gaze on the moon for a few seconds, you'll see the moon get bigger, and the app will begin a short narration about the moon.

The Universe2Go app features more than three hours of audio narration about the moon, planets, stars and constellations as well as other deep-space objects.

There is a catch, though: Because your phone is closed up inside the goggles, you can't use regular headphones or really even hear your phone's speaker.

I used a small bluetooth speaker to hear the audio, which worked out well because I could carry it with me as I moved around my backyard to see different parts of the sky. Bluetooth headphones would also work.

The app has several modes to keep things interesting.

You'll start out in beginner mode. You'll see planets, the moon and constellations.

Discovery mode lets you dive deeper into the stars in the constellations, with data about the distance and size in relation to our sun.

Mythology mode tells you stories about the constellations linked with the stars by the ancient Greeks.

Deep-Sky mode brings far-away galaxies, nebulae and star clusters to your view, and 3-D mode attempts to show you the relative distances between the objects in the sky.

When you get really familiar with the sky, you can go to Quiz mode, which will ask you to locate objects in the sky.

You can search for objects from lists and sub-menus of hundreds of thousands of celestial objects, including satellites. Once you pick an object to locate, you'll be directed on the screen until you're looking in its direction.

Serious astronomers can engage Expert mode and switch on or off entire classes of stars, planets, deep-sky objects and more.

You can change modes and change the app settings by looking down at the ground until you see an onscreen menu, which you then control by tilting your head to move a small cursor of a hand. It's harder to describe than it is to do.

The audio guide has narration about all 88 constellations and information on all the planets, 120 deep-sky objects and satellites, and 30 of the brightest stars.

Overall, I found the Universe2Go easy to set up and relaxing and informative to use.

Find yourself a spot with a good view of the night sky, pull up a chair, turn on a Bluetooth speaker and you can just sit back and gaze at the stars while actually learning their names and the stories behind them.

I own a telescope, and I use it less than once a year because it's a hassle to set up.

The Universe2Go is easier and more fun. It would really be a great gift for astronomy lovers.

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Pros: Great content, easy to use.

Cons: A bit expensive; audio is less than convenient.

Bottom line: Lots of fun for the backyard astronomer.