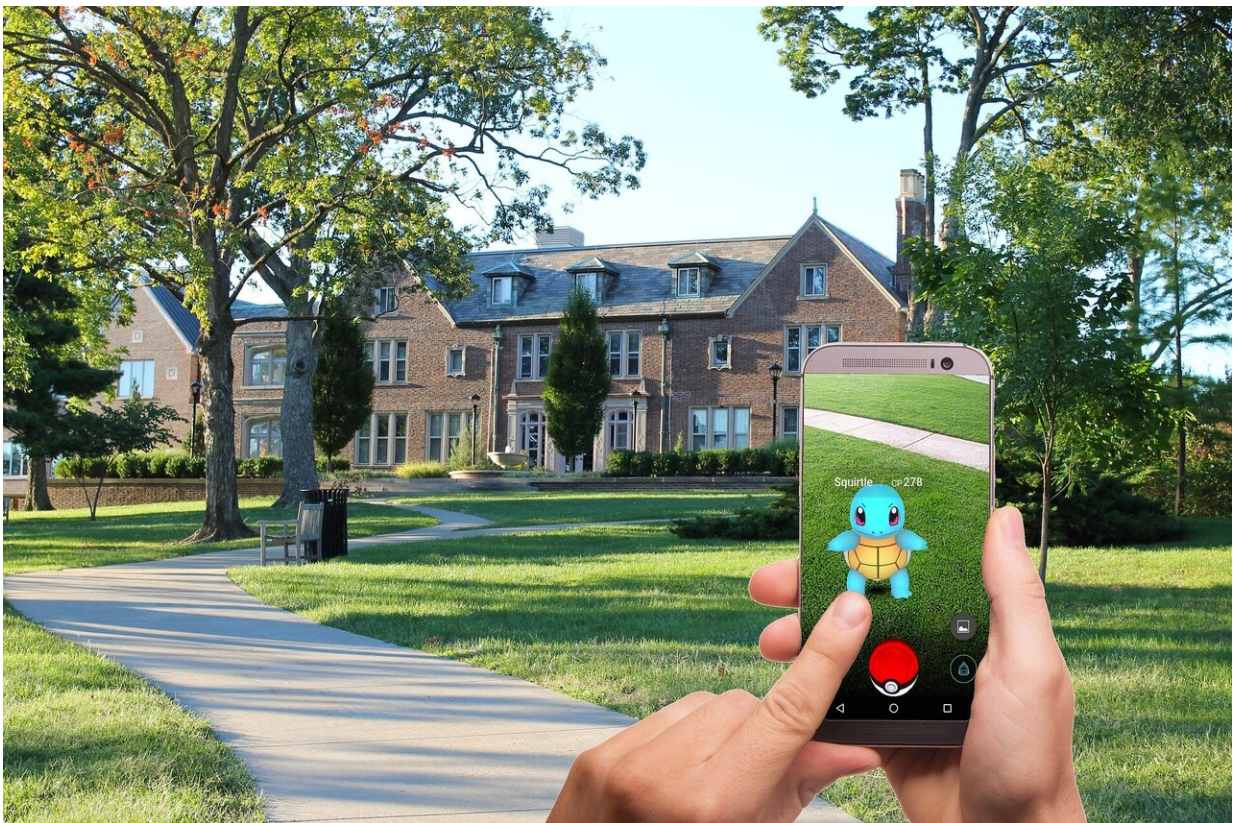


Buddy Adventures and Niantic Wayfarer coming to 'Pokémon Go'

November 14 2019, by Gieson Cacho



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Augmented reality has always been a key component to "Pokemon Go." It was a major feature when the mobile game was released, and over time, Niantic has expanded that element and refined it.

Moving beyond capturing pocket monsters in AR, the developers have allowed players to take pictures of them from all angles using the technology at hand. Now, Niantic is letting players share their Pokemon with others using Buddy Adventure (working title). According to the company, it leverages real-time AR networking to allow players to have two creatures in "Pokemon Go" interact on the same screen.

This can be used for group photographs of a Snorlax, Togetic and Pikachu. It advances the AR experience by adding a social element. Players get together to see how their creatures interact. Buddy Adventure is meant to be used in intimate settings, said Diana Hu, Niantic's head of augmented reality platform. That means it's for small gatherings. The demo showed at least three Pokemon huddled together for a photo at San Francisco's Cupid Span. It's not apparent if that's the limit, but don't expect to hold Community Day photos with dozens of Pokemon all at once.

Bolstering this experience is a "Pokemon Amie"-type mechanic. Players can hand feed (sort of) their pocket monsters using their favorite berries. Players can hold it out in front of them and they'll amble toward the treat. It looks like another way for players to interact and bond with their Pokemon. On top of that, they can pet them similar to the hand-held Nintendo games.

As for the nitty gritty from the video Niantic showed, Buddy Adventures also appears to add a new item called a Poffin. That could be an additional treat or place-holder item. The clip also shows that feeding your Pokemon a berry is a requirement for having it join your adventure. The other notable element is that it appears a QR code is used to get other trainers to join an AR social session though that may be pure speculation on my part. Buddy Adventure is scheduled to arrive on "Pokemon Go" in the months ahead.

Hu also showed up more advancements to their other AR technologies. Niantic is using computer vision so that AR can understand the local environment and create occlusion, which is the visual trick where moving objects can hide behind walls and corners. It's a way to maintain the illusion that the virtual characters exist in the real world.

On a larger scale, Niantic says it is expanding the available location of its games with the Wayfarer program. It will be available next week to "Pokemon Go" players who are level 40. It has potential to expand the number of Pokestops and Gyms. Members will be able to introduce potential spots to explore in the community and back it with photos, a title and additional information such as historical details. Other users will have to support the nomination or reject it.

It sounds comparable to what Google Map did with user-created submissions. That's not surprising seeing as how Niantic CEO John Hanke helped create the service before moving on to his own company. It's a way to crowd-source data for up-to-date information and locales.

Localizing the experience even more, Niantic is opening up the sponsorship program to small- and medium-size business. This means mom-and-pop stores can use "Pokemon Go" to attract foot traffic to their businesses. Head of product and sponsorship Carla Li said that many trainers play the [game](#) while doing errands and a business that uses the service can draw those players to its shop or restaurant with raids and other minigames.

In addition, those businesses can offer promotions themselves—think of coupons or deals—that may show up on the app, Li said. All of this is meant to drive consumers to local businesses. Hanke describes it as the anti-Amazon move. Instead of buyers going online to pick up their products, the game can draw consumers to Main Street. They'll come for the "Pokemon Go" raids and perhaps stay for the deals. Niantic said

businesses will have some control over these events and do things such as add them during off hours to boost traffic.

Lastly, Niantic offered the last piece to their AR vision. It is pushing a Niantic Creator Program, which gives developers the tools that the company uses for its games so that others can create AR and location-based projects. To prove how effective this can be, they invited 10 teams to create their own games over four months. They produced a diverse array of projects and earned honors from Niantic for their work.

"Run to My Heart" by JCSoft was the winning entry for the program. It's a game that encourages players to run through gamification. In this world, a mysterious disease has turned people into potatoes. As part of a rescue squad, players will have to run to factories that hold potions to turn victims back into humans.

The game incorporates audio as a way to motivate players and give them information about sites around them while they're out on a jog. "Run to My Heart" also cleverly uses boss battles at the end of a session to push players to stretch and reduce the chances of injuries. Add in a social element with players joining others for run missions and this title offers a different take on location-based gaming.

The hope for the Niantic Creator Program is that it will encourage others to create games. The company is even offering \$10 million through a Beyond Reality Fund to invest in developers. The effort sounds a lot like what Epic Games is doing with its own Unreal Engine.

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