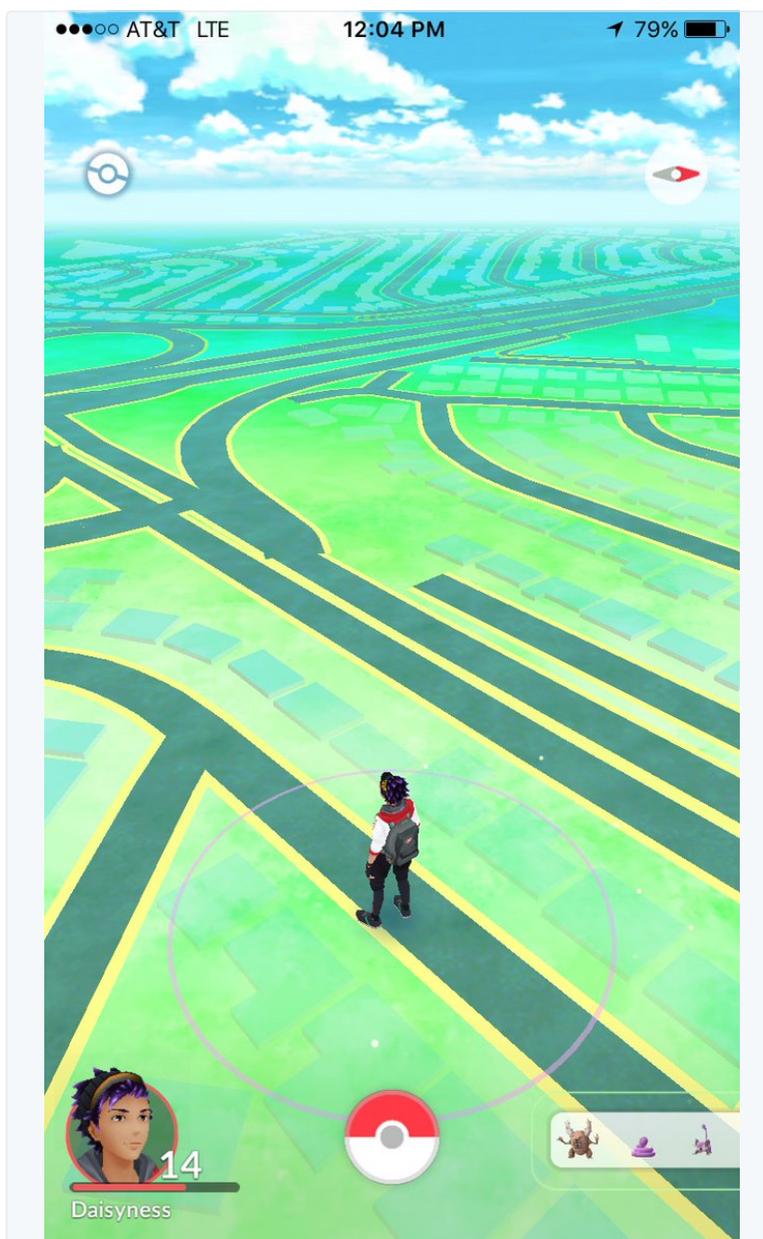# Is Pokémon Go racist? How the app may be redlining communities of color

Allana Akhtar, USA TODAY   *3:35 p.m. EDT August 9, 2016*

(Photo: Stefan Heunis, AFP/Getty Images)

SAN FRANCISCO — While playing the popular augmented-reality game Pokémon Go (/story/tech/nation-now/2016/07/11/how-pokmon-go-hooked-millions-just-days/86969202/) in Long Beach, a city that is nearly 50% white, Aura Bogado made an unsettling discovery — there were far more PokéStops and Gyms, locations where people pick up virtual goods or battle one another, than in her predominantly minority neighborhood in Los Angeles.
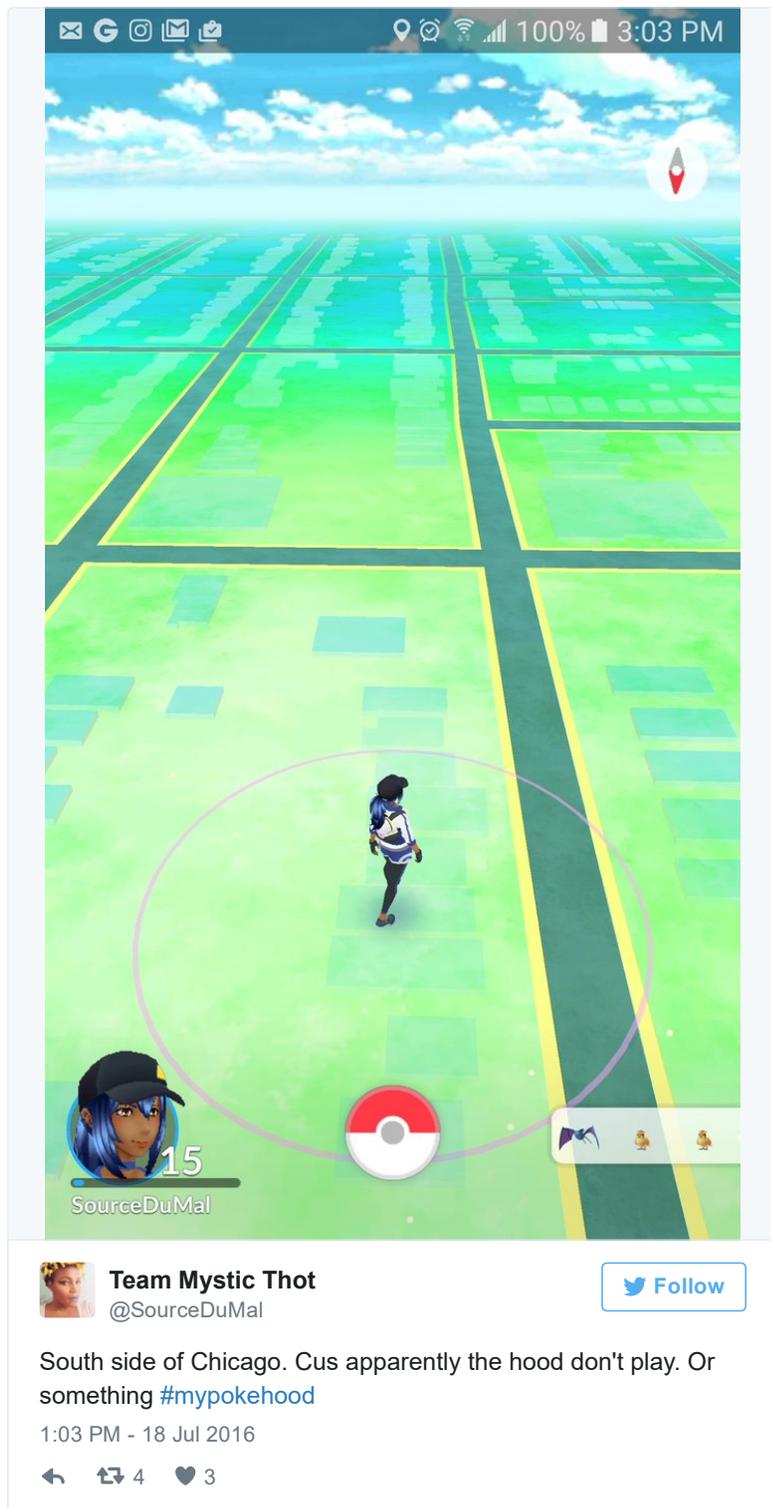

Daisy
@_daisyness_

[Follow]

@aurabogado Outer section of East Oakland. African American, inner city, and low income. Spotty cell. #mypokéhood

1:16 PM - 18 Jul 2016

↩   ⇄ 2   ♥ 1

So Bogado, who writes for environmental news outlet Grist, created the Twitter hashtag #mypokehood (https://twitter.com/search?
q=%23mypokehood&src=typd) in July to crowdsource the locations of PokéStops. The results that poured in from across the county, and research
from The Urban Institute (http://www.urban.org/urban-wire/pokemon-go-changing-how-cities-use-public-space-could-it-be-more-inclusive) think tank,
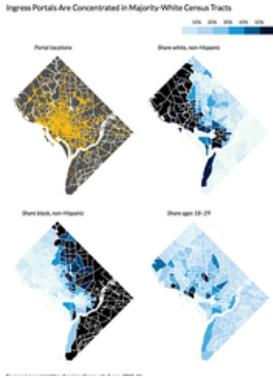bore out her experience.

Team Mystic Thot
@SourceDuMal

🐦 Follow

South side of Chicago. Cus apparently the hood don't play. Or
something #mypokehood

1:03 PM - 18 Jul 2016

↩   ⟲ 4   ♥ 3

Urban Institute researchers found an average of 55 PokéStops in majority white neighborhoods and 19 in majority black neighborhoods. The *Belleville*
News-Democrat (http://www.bnd.com/news/nation-world/national/article89562297.html) found that pattern repeated itself in African-American sections
of Detroit, Miami and Chicago.

Similarly, New York boroughs Brooklyn and Queens, both of which have high numbers of Hispanic and black residents, had significantly
fewer PokéStops than in Manhattan and white and Asian neighborhoods.

"It turns out Niantic, which makes Pokémon Go, relied on a map from a previous augmented reality game called Ingress

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isJRL7Nd3ek), which was crowd-sourced from its mostly male, tech-savvy players (http://www.bnd.com/news/nation-world/national/article89562297.html)," she wrote in a blog post (http://grist.org/justice/gotta-catch-em-all-its-a-lot-easier-if-youre-white/). "The result is a high concentration of PokéStops in commercial and downtown areas of some cities, while there are typically fewer PokéStops in non-white or residential areas, if there are any at all."

The Urban Institute says the racial divides in the game amount to redlining (http://www.bostonfairhousing.org/timeline/1934-1968-FHA-Redlining.html) — a term used when a community is cut off from essential services based on its racial or ethnic makeup.

The dearth of PokéStops and Gyms make it tougher for residents of these overlooked communities to participate in the game. They also lose the benefits to gamers that come with a multitude of virtual stops that dispense critical items for free such as Poké Balls, used to catch Pokémon, or egg incubators to grow new monsters.

"We now have a game where it looks like people who are already disadvantaged are playing it, now also are the more likely candidates who have to pay to play it," Bogado said.

According to data compiled by the Urban Institute, Gyms and PokeStops in the augmented-reality game Pokemon Go tend to

appear more in white areas than in black and Latino ones. *(Photo: Urban Institute)*

USA TODAY

Playing Pokémon Go while black: Fear stifles the fun

(http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2016/07/12/playing-pokemon-go-while-black/86989554/)

'THIS IS NOT A NEW STORY'

This isn't the first time that structural inequities in the physical world have played out online.

Amazon's same-day delivery service Prime initially overlooked predominantly black and poor areas (/story/tech/news/2016/04/22/amazon-same-day-delivery-less-likely-black-areas-report-says/83345684/). Google's high-speed Internet service Fiber got dinged for doing the same (http://www.wsj.com/articles/google-fuels-internet-access-plus-debate-1408731700).

"This is not a new story in terms of a product having some type of — whether intended or unintended — discriminatory effect," says Safiya Umoja Noble, professor of information studies and African-American studies at UCLA.

Reinforcing these inequities on the digital plain has implications that go far beyond Pokémon Go, says Jeffrey Vagle, executive director of the Center for Technology, Innovation and Competition at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

USA TODAY

The bad and the ugly of Pokémon Go

(http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/gaming/2016/07/21/bad-and-ugly-pokmon-go/87378730/)

"Yes, Pokémon Go is just another silly smartphone game. But through its popularity and usage patterns, we can see the very real boundaries of poverty and racism that continue to be reinforced when we should be using our technologies to dismantle them," he wrote in a blog post (http://cyberlaw.stanford.edu/blog/2016/07/technological-redlining).

The makers of Pokémon Go — which was downloaded more times during its first week than any other app in App Store history (/story/tech/gaming/2016/07/22/pokmon-go-sets-download-record-apples-app-store/87446714/) — didn't deliberately set out to disadvantage certain communities.

Niantic CEO John Hanke told _Rolling Stone (http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/why-pokemon-go-sucks-in-the-suburbs-w430342)_ that Pokémon Go uses the same locations for PokéStops as in its previous augmented-reality game, Ingress. In Ingress, players would submit locations based on where they wanted to put "portals," or battle spots.

The problem: The demographics of Ingress players — mostly white, young and English-speaking, according to informal surveys of the community in 2013 and 2014 — shaped how the game unfurled in the real world.

Niantic spokesperson Chase Colasonno did not comment on the disparity of PokéStops and Gyms in predominantly black or white areas, but said in an email that the game is not yet processing user requests for additional PokéStops. He said Niantic would "readdress this topic after the game is fully launched worldwide."

Colin Regan, 16, left, Tyler Venzen, 16, Andres Espinoza, 17, and Aileen Bravo, 15, play Pokemon Go at the Kensico Dam Plaza in Valhalla, N.Y., on July 12, 2016. _(Photo: Frank Becerra Jr., The (Westchester County, N.Y.) Journal News)_

Overall, Hispanics and African Americans are not well represented in tech. They make up 6% and 3% of the Silicon Valley tech workforce, respectively, according to an analysis by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. At Google — which housed Niantic before the gamemaker struck out on its own — Hispanics make up 3% of the workforce; African Americans, 2%. In non-tech firms in Silicon Valley, Hispanics and African Americans hold 22% and 24% of positions, respectively.

"Technology largely developed by white men is full of assumptions that are just not true or helpful when used in more diverse or complex environments," Nathan Freitas, a fellow at the Berkman-Klein Center at Harvard University, said in an email.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Technology companies such as Niantic need to hire more software engineers of color, UCLA's Noble says. They also need to hire people with social science degrees to work alongside programmers and enhance their understanding of how the tech they are building will influence society, she says.

USA TODAY

At Google, women and minorities still lag

(http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2016/06/30/google-diversity-numbers-2016/86562004/)

"People who have critical minds and orientation to looking at social problems could be hugely valuable in technology development," Noble said.

People who have critical minds and orientation to looking at social problems could be hugely valuable in technology development," Noble said.

The subtle inequities in a game such as Pokémon Go can seem minor against the backdrop of larger issues of societal racism, but Bogado says it's critical to combat racism in the digital world, too.

"Inequity is not just in one police shooting, it's not just in one prison, it's not just in 100 potholes in one certain area on the black side of town — it's everywhere," Bogado said. "It's built into the fabric of society, and increasingly built into our technology."

Read or Share this story: http://usat.ly/2aZxSrn

Fullscreen