

IT'S JUST NOT NATURAL

The more fun and engaging technology gets, the closer we come to the end of humanity

Patrick Metzger | September 22, 2016



📷 Living through location tags. (Reuters/Radu Sigheti)

Humans need nature in their lives. Spending time outdoors has been linked to a slew of [physical and mental health benefits](#), including [stress relief](#) and is [restoring mental clarity](#).

But ever-more-engaging technology is making us increasingly detached from our environment. Rather than marvel at the array of colors and calls of birds, we make them into cartoons and slingshot them into pigs. Rather than look for shapes in the clouds, we lazily scroll through pictures of other people's lives. If we don't shake ourselves out of this self-induced stupor, we could swipe, tweet, and snap ourselves into a [mass extinction](#).

Climate change is [one of the greatest dangers we face as a species](#). Its effects can only be mitigated—as it's [too late to reverse](#)—if we wake up to the importance of nature and take [immediate action](#) (as [this recent xkcd comic](#) beautifully and terrifyingly illustrated). Yet despite this very real threat, people [literally can't imagine](#) how bad climate change is and how drastically we need to immediately alter our way of life.

Instead of changing our lives, we're allowing our smartphones to take us further away from them. Technology has begun to mimic our need for nature while simultaneously removing our want for it. Our interactions with search engines, Twitter, and Wikipedia all [play on our ancient hunter-gatherer instincts](#)—we now forage for information, leaving our food to be [delivered to us by Amazon](#). Because of this, we have [little understanding of where our meals come from](#), and with [60% of our daily calories coming from ultra-processed foods](#), it is easy to think that food has nothing to do with nature.

Some digital experiences intentionally incorporate elements of nature into their design metaphors. For example, FarmVille diverts our desire to cultivate plants into the cultivation of a relationship with native advertisements, and Minecraft turns outdoor exploration into a decidedly indoor activity. If you have a candy-colored imitation of nature at your fingertips, minus the dirt, why bother with the real thing? [Metaphors are powerful in digital design](#). But when they begin to replace the reality of physical experiences entirely, we must ask ourselves what our priorities are.

It's theoretically fun and exciting to make an engaging app that thousands of people download or a game that millions of people play. But if engaging digital experiences disconnect people from the natural world and decrease their quality of life, we may be encouraging our own self-destruction.

What will this future look like? In the worst-case scenario, great app and experience designers will inadvertently continue to fuel humans' massive withdrawal from nature. Following a [50-year trend](#) of increased time in nature, Americans have been spending [drastically less time outdoors since 1987](#). People stay in cities, happy with their life in concrete. They forget what the experience of nature is like and think it's unimportant. They ignore any damage they may be doing to the environment, instead seeing it as a foe to be conquered.

Pokémon Go is the latest app to cast a strange light on our relationship with nature and technology. It sits right at the nexus between achieving a net good for society (getting us wandering around outside) and providing us with more digital stimulants (...while staring at our screens). There have been [amazing stories of mental-health benefits](#) experienced by users who were reclusive for years before suddenly having a reason to leave the house to explore green spaces and socialize with other players. Pokestops in your neighborhood might lead you to discover landmarks you've never seen, parks you've never visited, and community spaces you hadn't explored. It also gets more butts out of seats—excessive screen time has been associated with [obesity](#) in children, [poor mental health and academic outcomes](#), and [decreased sleep duration](#).

However, just because Pokémon Go gets people out in nature doesn't mean they're reaping its benefits. In fact, there's evidence that apps like these “[claim what was previously considered 'non-mobile time.'](#)” While [deaths and violent crimes as a result of the app](#) are at the extreme and incredibly rare end of that spectrum, there is a certain all-consuming quality to Pokémon Go that tends to promote a willful ignorance of your surroundings. You may happen to be standing in a park while

playing it, but [as neuroscientist Colin Ellard points out](#), “We are not likely garnering the same emotional and physiological benefits as we would on a technology-less walk.”

But all is not lost. In the sea of digital experiences trying to convince us to keep our eyes on our screen and disconnect with nature, there are some apps out there that encourage us to unplug or use our screens to help us better understand the natural world.

For example, [Merlin Bird ID](#) is a birdwatching app from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology that can help you identify birds based on their features and location. [My Garden Answers](#) and [leafsnap](#) are image recognition apps that help identify flowers and leaves based on your photos of them. At the astronomical level, stargazing apps like [Star Chart](#) and Google’s [Sky Map](#) are handy for learning about the vast expanse of cosmic material floating around us.

Other apps are ironically helping us remember that sometimes we don’t need screens at all. Desktop software like [Look Up](#) and [Time Out](#) encourage regular breaks from your screen. Similarly, [Offtime](#) and [BreakFree](#) are mobile apps that track usage and give you reminders to take breaks from certain apps—and from your phone altogether. [Lechal](#) is a company making vibrating footwear that also takes a typically phone-heavy task—following directions from A to B—and moves it offline through providing haptic feedback via walking directions without the need for a screen or audio.

No one of these technologies will save the day, but a cumulative sea change could conceivably take place in which we slowly make conscious efforts as a society to regain our connection to the natural world, without which we would not exist. Whether at a nonprofit, a startup, or a Fortune 500 company, designers are changing lives with the experiences they decide to put in the hands of this planet’s citizens. The creators of these digital worlds must deeply consider the ramifications of the things they build.

But the onus is on us, the users, too. We have to decide that nature is a priority and seek it out. Rather than choosing to fill our minutes and hours with Bitmoji, let's spend more time interacting with real people and real things. Because a #nofilter #sunset will never beat a no-filter sunset.

You can follow Patrick on Twitter at [@PatrickRMetzger](#). We welcome your comments at ideas@qz.com.