

What augmented reality reveals

By [David Williams](#)

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It's been the hum and buzz of the last few days, a welcome change of focus from the toxicity of our culture.

Pokemon GO, it's called, a bit of augmented reality silliness that builds upon the warm simplicity of the Pokemon universe. Pokemon games, both electronic and card based, have always involved wandering around a virtual world in search of Pocket Monsters to find, catch, and collect.

It's a game that has succeeded by scratching that primal itch to both hunt and gather.

Only now, rather than sitting on the basement sofa with their DS, Pokemon hunter/gatherers are out there in the world. Pokemon are cast out everywhere, found not in some mythical far-off land but "inhabiting" our neighborhoods.

It's the Thing of the Summer, it really is, and it's simple fun. But it's also something else.

It's a measure of the health of a culture.

If a human culture is healthy, Pokemon GO works.

In a healthy culture, you can wander the streets being harmless and silly and social, and do so without folks getting anxious. In a healthy culture, a cluster of teens or young adults can walk the streets late on a summer night, and not fear either assault or an aggressive law enforcement response. In a healthy culture, adults don't anguish over every possible terrible thing that might happen should you leave the safety of their carefully constructed control.

So against that standard, how are we doing?

It's been a mixed bag.

There've been heartening stories of folks just out being social, and connecting across racial and class lines. Love of Pokemon crosses all of the divisions of our identity-obsessed culture. It goes deeper. There've been stories about this getting people with depression out into the world, and getting us up and moving.

And then there've been the stories of fear, as we fret about crashes and muggings and assaults. There've been the stories of anxiety over viruses and people crashing into things.

There's been legitimate worry, particularly among African American gamers, that they'll be viewed as a threat if they wander into anxiety-suburbia, or viewed as easy prey in crime-riddled neighborhoods.

This may be an unanticipated collateral impact of augmented reality.

Just by taking that slight step outside of the reality we inhabit, and seeing it through a different lens, we reveal its nature perhaps even more clearly than if we remained mired within it.

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