

Of Pokemon and angels

By [David Keck](#)

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In Pokemon Go, fantastic creatures pervade the “real” world. Equipped with a smartphone, players can find a Pokemon in a park, a coffee shop, or even a church. Looking through the phone’s camera, players see the sidewalk in front of them, but they also see a collectible imaginary creature digitally superimposed on that sidewalk.

Responses to this astoundingly popular “augmented reality” game include the utopian (people getting exercise and exploring their communities together), the dystopian (the inexorable corruption of youth by corporate technology), and the bemused (what will they think of next?). For their part, some churches are taking advantage of their new status as Pokemon sites by welcoming these strangers (the players, not the creatures) with bottled water and invitations to Sunday worship.

Why is the game so captivating? Nostalgia for previous versions of the game (both as a card game and as a typical video game) is part of the answer, as is the niftiness of the technology.

But there is something else as well: the re-enchantment of the world. Sociologist Max Weber noted that the modern world had become disenchanted by, among other things, bureaucracy, industrialization, and technocratic efficiency. The theological correlate to this was Rudolph Bultmann’s quest to demythologize the New Testament for a contemporary audience. Moderns just don’t believe in a world of angels and miracles.

By contrast, digital technology’s augmented reality seems to improve or even enchant the world we live in. Generally speaking, AR overlays the physical world with computer-generated displays that (usually) enhance a person’s understanding of her surroundings. A fighter pilot might be able to see runways more clearly or track potential threats in the sky more effectively. In the case of Pokemon Go, AR adds a layer of fantastic beings to the quotidian reality of the workaday world. The dreary bus stop is a special place after all.

In the solace of play, a digital illusory creature can be accepted as real enough, especially if we find ourselves—as so many of us do—in a rather flattened reality where we are increasingly skeptical about whether “progress” can improve anything. We continue to be hungry for depth and meaning, especially as we wonder if there is anything more to life.

What might we learn from this?

In a way, Christian theology represents a form of AR. Whenever we listen to a story and ask, “Where’s God in this?” we are attempting to see a dimension that is not readily apparent. As Christians our experience of sensory, material reality is augmented by faith. Those who no longer look at the world from a purely human point of view (2 Corinthians 5:16) see that God is indeed at the bus stop. There is more to life—behold! God is making all things new! Mystics see more clearly than the rest of us, but each of us sings the truth that we were blind but now we see.

Worship is perhaps the quintessential experience of our Christian augmented reality. There we learn to see that what appears to be bread is in reality the body of Christ, that people from different parts of the planet are in fact brothers and sisters, and that the Kingdom of God is right there in our midst. There we join our voices with all the choirs of heaven, the angels and all the saints, and sing “Holy! Holy! Holy!”—even though we cannot see or hear them.

It’s not surprising that a game might help us see how the sacramental claims of worship are a form of AR that re-enchants (or better, sanctifies) physical stuff like water and wine. As Johan Huizinga notes in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, both worship and play set aside space and time for a specific purpose, with specified rules for participating. Each creates a new, extraordinary order in the midst of the very ordinary (as our current experience of the Olympics illustrates). Jürgen Moltmann’s *Theology of Play* further helps us discern the similarities between the liberating delight of play and the freedom we experience in joyful Christian worship.

What can we learn from Pokemon Go? We do not proclaim illusions, but we do invite people to see differently. Perhaps our preaching, teaching, and singing can be emboldened by the world’s apparent longing for a richer reality, indeed an augmented one—a reality of rejoicing where God’s victory is clear to see.

As for fantastic creatures in our midst—maybe, just maybe, we are indeed entertaining angels unawares (Hebrews 13:2).