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Table of Contents

01 **Religion to Go – Introduction**
Simone Heidbrink & Tobias Knoll

05 **'Judaism to go'** – Hastening the redemption through Web 2.0
Christiane Altmann

18 **Pokemon Go** – How Religious Can an Augmented Reality Hunt Be?
Sonja Gabriel

32 **Learning with tablets in a church** – Experiences of augmented reality in religious education
Mari Huotari & Essi Ikonen

42 **Mobile Liturgy** – Reflections on the Church of England's Daily Prayer App
Joshua L. Mann

60 **RELab digital** – Ein Projekt über religiöse Bildung in einer mediatisierten Welt (Deutsch)
Ilona Nord & Jens Palkowitsch-Kühl

93 **RELab digital** – A Project on Religious Education in a Mediatized World (English)
Ilona Nord & Jens Palkowitsch-Kühl

125 **Pope Francis in Cairo** – Authority and branding on Instagram
Theo Zijderveld

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Pokémon Go

How Religious Can an Augmented Reality Hunt Be?

Sonja Gabriel

Abstract

This article deals with the Augmented Reality (AR) smartphone game Pokémon Go which caused a hype among players in summer 2016. The author shows by citing results of an extensive online media search that various churches and religious communities reacted to the game, either praising or condemning it. In the beginning, the article will discuss the origin of the Pokémon series, showing that there are some parallels to Shintoism. When having a look at public reports about the game, it can be seen that some churches tried to profit from the AR game hype whereas others regard playing the game as blasphemous. Examples of both categories will be discussed. Players, however, have their own opinion about the game and so some communities have developed dealing with Pokémon Go as kind of religion of its own. Finally, the term techno-animism, its roots and consequences will be introduced.

Keywords

Augmented reality, religion, game, techno-animism

1 Introduction

Pokémon Go which was released in July 2016 has been in the center of interest for many different groups. The augmented reality (AR) smartphone game, which continues the success of the franchise from the 1990s, started a hype among players. One year after release of the game (July 2017) Pokémon Go has been regarded as the most successful AR game so far: Within the first two months the game was downloaded by more than 500 million people and it generated more than one billion dollar within one year (Hegemann 2017). The success of the game is a combination of new technology and using well-known game characters. Pokémon attracted players of various age

groups – many adults grew up playing Pokémon on Nintendo or swapping Pokémon cards. And, children and teenagers love using their smartphones. This article is going to look at some of the (religious) implications of the game on society and on religious practices, citing examples and discussing the influence of a game on people's way of life.

The hype was source for many discussions about the pros and cons of the game. On the one hand, Pokémon Go, which asks players to find, catch and train various Pokémons within augmented reality surroundings, was seen as a breakthrough regarding mobile games. As Denyer-Simmons states, the game can be regarded as the first occurrence of augmented reality use by a mass audience having "physical world consequences" (ibid. p. 56). On the other hand, many institutions, groups and individuals voiced their criticism as well. Only few days after the game had been released, numerous articles regarding the advantages and disadvantages of Pokémon Go were published worldwide: warnings against danger of accidents (when playing the game while driving or entering dangerous areas like cliffs or military zones) or praises as children and teenagers play outside and get much exercise. What is more, there has never been a similar case of a game that has fueled such a lively discussion whether it should be forbidden or praised – or if it can even be seen as a religion of its own. While some religious leaders welcomed the hype around Pokémon Go as this would lure more visitors to their churches (as these might serve as Pokémon gyms or PokéStops within this location based augmented reality game), others see the game much more critical. Even nine months after the game was released in July 2016, media as well as social networks are still full of reporting and discussing positive and negative impacts of this AR game. It can be said that Pokémon Go is a special case of a game that interferes with people's real surroundings in many ways and therefore also affects their religion and their religious habits.

2 The origin of Pokémon

The story of success began with the franchise publishing video games for the original Game Boy in 1995, adding more video games, trading card games, animated television shows, movies, comic books, and toys and becoming well-known worldwide. The name Pokémon basically is a contraction of the Japanese brand Pocket Monsters and refers to the little creatures that can be found in the Pokéworld – in the case of Pokémon Go in the players' surroundings. The animal-like monsters are seen to be rooted in Shintoism (cf. Allison 2006a). The water/ground Pokémon Whiscash for example is quite similar to namazu which is a catfish found in Japanese mythology (Gould 2016). Shinto is centered around invisible spiritual beings which are called kami. These spirits are concerned with human beings and reward being treated properly with health and success.

However, they are not regarded as gods as they are neither omnipotent nor perfect. What is more, they live in the same world as human beings and are part of nature. The similarity of Pokémon to Shintoism is topic of many forum discussions (cf. Charizardpal 2007, Tsuchiyama 2016). That is also seen as the reason why some Pokémon can only be found in water, others in forests or meadows. However, as not all in-game characters can be traced back to Shintoism, there are other explanations to be found on the internet as well.

Sullivan (2014) presents the origin of 17 different Pokémon, some of them said of being Japanese origin, others, however, also being from other cultures like Native Americans. No matter which Pokémon game, film or comic was published, soon fan and game websites or forum postings were full of explanations tracing back figures, places and stories to specific religions or discovering mythological references (cf. Stank 2011). However, Satoshi Tajiri, who is the creator of Pokémon, also had another reason for designing the creatures as animal like and putting them in nature: In his childhood, he used to collect insects and crayfish and he was longing for living in nature and interacting with other children (Watanabe 2015)[1]. Moreover, he wanted Japanese children who often are "mobile kids" (Allison 2004, p. 41) to have at least a virtual companion. Therefore, he aimed at creating a world populated with imaginary creatures children can interact with. Allison (2004, p. 43) reports that children who she asked to describe what a Pokémon was, "they almost always did so in terms that emphasized the relationships they had with them".

3 Pokémon Go to draw people to churches?

Without any doubt, Pokémon Go includes some references to Asian religions like Shintoism. However, that is not what it made so widely discussed in media. PokeStops (buildings and landmarks players need to visit to get more Pokéballs or other objects for in-game use) or PokeGyms (buildings and landmarks where players can train and battle their Pokémon) are often connected to places of worship like churches, cathedrals and so on. This means, players need to walk around and explore their surroundings to collect the creatures as well as other important in-game objects. Therefore, many organizations praised the game for making players walk around and thus staying healthy. The American Heart Association (2017) published a study showing that people playing Pokémon Go were twice as likely to take 10,000 steps per day. Especially people who had a low-activity-level or were overweight before playing the game benefited a lot. But not only bodily health was seen as beneficial for players of the augmented reality game, also positive consequences for the soul were expected by some churches. Many places within the game which take over the role

1 For a detailed analysis of Pokémon and its worldwide success, see Tobin 2002.

of PokeStops or PokeGyms are situated in religious places of worship. The reason therefore is that the game designers needed to be able to send players to places with public ownership – and most places of worship can be accessed by the public. "It echoes Emilie Durkheim, the sociologist and religious studies scholar, and his view on what makes sacred spaces' sacred – it isn't that they belong to the priest, shaman or Imam, but that they belong to all in the village, and so it is the social that makes it sacred" (Ahmed 2016). Due to this in-game map leading people to religious places and churches, some churches hoped to make gamers not online interested in the churches as part of the game but also interested in religion. Before the craze of Pokémon Go churches also discussed Pokémon games, films and comics. The Vatican as well as the Church of England approved of Pokémon (Yano 2004).

A few days after the game was released, the Church of England (2016) posted on their blog an article called "Why your church needs to know about Pokémon GO" explaining the basic principles of the game but also giving some pieces of advice how each church can profit from the game. So, it is recommended to place welcome signs outside the church, enable players to use the church's Wi-Fi, speak to players about the game. The game should be seen as a possibility to get people into church that would otherwise not come. There are even examples of Pokeparties: Christ Church in Stone offered a two hour Poképarty with lures (in-game mechanics to attract more Pokémon to a certain place), free food, Wi-Fi and charging points[2]. After having 120 people coming to this Poképarty, Christ Church organized two more events in July 2016. So, it can be said that Pokémon Go was successful in luring people to church which might not have come to a traditional church event – especially young people in their 20s are an important target group. According to Wyatt (2016) the event was visited by people who had never been inside a church or at least had not been for years. St. John's Church even asked people to send their photographs with Pokémon via their Facebook page to be published on the church's website[3]. Birmingham's City Road Methodist Church even put up a sign on the building that the church is a Pokémon Go Gym (James 2016) hoping to get some of the people driving or walking by and catching Pokémon into church. In the USA, some churches tried to attract church-goes by displaying funny messages on church signboards referring to Pokémon (Universal Life Church Monastery 2016). Also many Jewish sites – which are also often included in the game as Pokéstops or PokéGyms – try to attract audience (Mendelowitz 2016). Khan (2016) also shows a lot of examples of what happens when a commercially successful alternate reality game meets religion – there are twitter postings referring to churches and Pokémon Go, internet memes and signs on churches. All these cases show that churches tried to make use of augmented reality mobile games like Pokémon Go as kind of cheap marketing when the hype started. There are many examples of guidelines what churches can do to

2 https://www.facebook.com/events/246500169067368/ [09 July 2017]
3 http://www.tisburyparishchurch.org/pokemon-go/ [10 July 2017]

connect with players, some of them being only positive, others also showing that the craze over Pokémon does not only bring advantages (Earls 2016). However, after the first hype was over, fewer and fewer churches wanted to take advantage of the game. As Dixon (2016) argues churches should rather "understand the value of the games they play" than just hoping that people would come (and stay) because of Pokémon inside the church building.

4 Playing (with) Pokémon Go

There are groups of players who share two of their passions in online forums or websites: their faith and their love to video games. As Luft (2014) stresses these people often discuss games and playing from a different perspective compared to the usual game websites. One of these websites is gamechurch.com – it describes itself as being there "to bridge the gap between the gospel and the gamer". In their article "Gamechurch's 2016 Games Jesus Loves" Pokémon Go is discussed as well. The authors discuss the positive effects as the game makes people exercising, seeing the world and socializing. "Most churches are also Pokéstops within the game, allowing for random people to stop by a church to collect Pokéballs, eggs, and more. How could this not be a gift from God?" Thus, the game is praised for the fact that religious sites are included and above all that enables people to get into contact with others.

Internet memes also include Pokémon Go and relate them to religious topics, mostly biblical stories. Most of these memes were published soon after the game was released in summer 2016. One of these memes that can be found quite often in different variations is one about Noah's Ark depicting animals flocking to Noah's ship and giving the headline "Gotta Catch 'em All?" which is Pokémon's motto. Below the picture, it says "Did it. Twice". Some websites even collected Pokémon Go Memes connected to religion[4]. As Bellar et al. (2013) state internet memes rely on well-known icons or media images as well as language patterns that are recognized by viewers. Therefore, the religious scenes and the Pokémon chosen are popular ones. Jenkins (2006) called this process of drawing from different sources and creating something new which is again the basis for new remixes. Bellar et al. (2013) analyzed religious memes to divide them into several categories. As far as Pokémon Go internet memes are concerned, examples of nearly every category can be found – some of them are critical of religion, others "construct a bricolage of online images, sayings and texts drawn from various popular culture canons and religious sources to present a new message containing a diversity of interpretations" (ibid. p. 17). As Campbell (2012) argues these internet memes belong to "Lived Religion" and therefore act as resources to present popular beliefs

4 Cf. for example Utahvalley306 2016 or http://geek.cheezburger.com/pokememes/tag/religion [10 July 2017]

about religion. By combining Pokémon with religious scenes and topics, creators can either provoke discussions, make people aware or draw their attention to religion.

5 Is playing Pokémon Go blasphemic?

While European and US-Christian churches have mostly been looking for ways of how to benefit from Pokémon Go, other religions do not see the game that harmless. Of course, there have also been incidents in European Christian churches and places of worship where the game was not welcome because of players disturbing the site. Cases have been reported where Pokémon chasers disrupted funerals (Withey 2016) or church ceremonies. Some places have even asked the creators to remove their sites as Pokestops or Pokegyms like the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. as players behaved in a disrespectful way (Akhtar 2016). In Brunei, the Ministry of Religious Affairs "advised Muslims to respect places of worship" (Othman 2016) by stressing that mosques are there for praying and not playing. An Italian bishop wanted to take legal action against the game as he regarded the game was "diabolical and alarming" (McKenna 2016). Apart from these cases, there are several examples, which show that Pokémon Go is regarded as incompatible with certain religions. However, Pokémon has been criticized by religious leaders outside Japan before the AR-version was published. As Yano (2004, p. 112) states on religion in Japan "religion acts as an enabler, facilitating the smooth flow of daily life, more than a monitor strictly censoring and directing its activities". More conservative Christian groups also argued at the beginning of the 21 century that Pokémon was a link to occult practices and evil in itself (ibid. p. 126). Pokémon thus is said to promote non-Christian concepts like ghosts, violence, evolution, reincarnation and occultism (ibid.)[5].

In summer 2016 many online (and print) newspapers, magazines and communities reported about Saudi Arabia having renewed the fatwa against Pokémon. The religious edict (number 21,758) that warns Muslims against playing Pokémon was first issued in 2001 based on the card swapping game because of Pokémon violating Islamic prohibitions against gambling which is the fourteenth greater sin according to Islam. This is based on the Pokémon card game where trading cards with other players is part of the game and players never know if a trade might turn out to their disadvantage. Another point made is that "People must not waste their time by playing so much that cannot be regarded entertainment" (Questions on Islam 2013) or that players forget about Allah and praying (Al-Islam). Additionally to gambling, the fatwa also mentions that Pokémon promotes the

5 Yano (2004) collected several examples of Christian critics and their arguments why the Pokémon series should be kept away from children and adults alike.

theory of evolution as nearly all creatures can be developed by players. And finally, symbols, logos and animations like the six-pointed star, the cross, angles and triangles as well as symbols of Shinto are used. Thus, they promote devious religions and might harm players. Although the fatwa does not mention Pokémon Go explicitly, there were a lot of questions regarding the AR smartphone game. Many Western and European articles and postings discussing the fatwa are full of accusations towards Islam and Saudi Arabia – people do not understand why anybody would see something bad in the game. Users talk about Saudi Arabia and Islam not wanting people to have fun and some of the postings can be regarded as extreme islamophobic[6]. Interestingly, as Yano (2004, p. 128) discusses, many of the objections against Pokémon mentions are also voiced by Christianity. There is nearly no larger magazine or news portal that has not reported about Pokémon and the fatwa in summer 2016. However, not many of them give more detailed background information. Quite often, the piece of news is very short[7] giving only part of the information needed to understand its meaning. In many countries, the fatwa is not regarded as law by Muslims but as a piece of advice that might be followed or not. Indonesian players for example "are not letting religious decrees or security warnings get in the way of their mission to catch their next cartoon creature" (Danubrata 2016).

Saudi Arabia is not the only country that made it into news because of its intolerance of the game and especially gamers who try to catch Pokémons no matter where they are: A Russian Pokémon Go player was charged because of posting videos of himself where he is seen chasing Pokémons in a local Orthodox church. The 22-year-old was found guilty of "inciting religious hatred" (Atack 2017) and had to spend nine months in jail and house arrest. Amnesty International protested against the arrest whereas the Russian Orthodox church called the gamer's behavior blasphemy. Again, most articles do not mention that the video the Russian blogger put online contains strong language mocking Christianity, comparing Jesus Christ to a Pokémon as well as saying that he would play the game within the church because he had heard on the news that people doing this could be fined or jailed. The Russian Orthodox Church has also prevented that an episode of the cartoon series The Simpsons that deals with Pokémon Go and Homer Simpson playing the game in a church from being aired in Russia (Martinelli 2017). The episode, of course, refers to the case of the Russian blogger.

Another point of religious conflict is seen in the fact that Pokémon Go players find and hatch eggs to obtain more Pokémon. This fact leads to some people claiming the AR game hurts religious sentiments of Hindus and Jains. Like many other religious buildings are also temples quite often Pokéstops where not only Pokéballs but also eggs can be gathered. The lawyer who filed the case in Gujarat High Court says that the eggs that can be hatched by players within the game are

6 Cf. for example https://myanimelist.net/forum/?topicid=1535393 [11 July 2017]
7 Cf. for example f. ex. http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-36848175 [11 July 2017]

blasphemous in places of worship – temples – as eggs are non-vegetarian food. However, it is not only the religious side that is problematic for the lawyer – the game also infringes upon the players' privacy and puts their lives at risk. The same argument was also given by Saudi Arabian officials (besides the blasphemous contents). The news, however, provoked many critical postings on social media, "with Pokemon Go trending on Twitter in India" (BBC 2016). In contrast to the cases of Russia and Saudi Arabia, public reactions are neither against the religious or political leaders. Most of the people posting online make fun of the case, even Indians.

6 Pokémon as a religion of its own?

As Miah (2017, p. 5) states "virtual reality resonates with our desire to inhabit other stories". An international survey wanted to find out why players are so fascinated by Pokémon Go. Götz, Bulla & Mendel (2016) asked 1,661 active players between 12 and 71 years from 55 countries. The main reasons are different ones: Older players link memories of their childhood and playing former versions of Pokémon with the game. A second group likes the game as it motivates players to leave the house, play together with friends and family or even to socialize with strangers. The basic principle of collecting, developing Pokémon and leveling up one's own avatar makes a simple but effective game principle. Due to AR technology and the cute appearance of the Pokémon as well as the possibility to compete the game appeals to male and female players alike. The last reason Götz, Bulla & Mendel found out is that older adults enjoy the game because of seeing and experiencing their surroundings anew. For some adults, it is also a relaxing experience. The positive and negative influence – at least for some time – on many people's every day and social life is evident. As shown above, also faith and religion were influenced by the game or tried to influence players. Pokémon and its fans have frequently been said to have an invented religion of their own due to Pokémon's world references to real religious and mythological topics and creatures (Steffen 2017). The center of this religion refers back to the Twitch-channel broadcasting Pokémon games in February 2014 where thousands of gamers took part in one Pokémon game[8]. A definitive religion chart[9] was created showing the development of religion, trying to put things into a history. There are the Anarchists serving the "Great Helix Fossil"[10] and "Bird Jesus" as well as those players following the "False Prophet" Flareon, worshipping the Dome Fossil (American Religion in America 2014). Most elements of this fantasy religion are borrowed from Christianity. Fans created various pieces combining Pokémon with "its" religion: There are for example Pokémon chosen which are given

8 https://www.twitch.tv/twitchplayspokemon [12 July 2017]
9 http://i.imgur.com/wIKOzXN.jpg [12 July 2017]
10 Within the game the helix fossil is used to resurrect Pokémon.

characteristics of Gods or religions[11] and many memes[12] were created by members of the Facebook website Twitch Plays Pokémon[13].

With the release of Pokémon Go articles about the game and their fans creating a religion of their own revived. Gould (2016) discusses in her article techno-animism – a term used by Allison (2006a) meaning that boundaries between humans, animals, spiritual and mechanical beings are ignored. "What emerges is a fantasy of perpetual transformation (humans who morph into rangers, icons that "grow" into virtual pets) that, extended into the cyber frontier, promises (new age) companionship and connectedness, albeit in a commodity form" (Allison 2006b). Today's society which is characterized by an overflow of information, fast paced living and spending much time in anonymous public spaces (Gerold 2016, p. 3) is longing for flexibility, mobility and individuality. Due to fast changes as well as global conflicts many people feel insecure and instable. Therefore, humanizing objects has become a priority for many product designers giving consumers the feeling that objects are enlivened. This feeling is even increased by giving objects a very cute design (kawaii). Thus, techno-animism is not necessarily a Japanese particularity of religious behavior but can be regarded as reaction to post-modern society (Wagner 2009). According to Allison (2006b) two components are responsible for children getting hooked on games like Pokémon. First, it is the high degree of interactivity so that playing is even more customizable and mobile than ever before. Second, "nomadic humans finding new kinds of transhuman attachments whether with digitalized pets, ironicized Pokémon, or monsterish trading cards" (ibid. p. 20). This statement is also true for Pokémon Go as this AR smartphone game can be played everywhere – and people tend to take their smartphones with them all the time – as well as an even higher attachment to the digital characters as they seem to appear in the player's personal surroundings. Pokémon Go no longer is a game only appealing to children – as Götz, Bulla & Mendel (2016) show in their survey, fans can be found in all age groups, male and female. However, techno-animism in Pokémon Go is accompanied by capitalism as Niantic earns millions of dollars by offering in-app purchases for Pokéballs or other game objects. According to Gould (2016) it therefore depends on the player if Pokémon Go is regarded as kind of religion:

11 http://alister-amelda.deviantart.com/art/Pokemon-Religions-209173403 [12 July 2017] gives 10 different Pokémon a religion each.

12 For example: https://www.facebook.com/pokemontwitch/photos/a.659093160804128.1073741827.659088520804592/659297147450396/?type=3&theater [12 July 2017] or https://www.facebook.com/pokemontwitch/photos/a.659095930803851.1073741828.659088520804592/965834030130038/?type=3&theater [12 July 2017]. The second meme even accompanied by a text revealing the story of "the holy Bird Jesus".

13 https://www.facebook.com/pokemontwitch/ [12 July 2017]

> Of course, the idea that all or most Japanese genuinely believe their world is inhabited by gods is as ridiculous as the suggestion that all Pokémon Go players do. Not all Shintoists believe kami really exist, and not all Christians believe communion wine and bread are the actual blood and body of Christ. What each groups of devotees have in common, however, is that they act as if these beliefs were true.

If Pokémon Go can really be regarded as religion of its own, remains questionable. There have been several examples of videogames, films or books providing fans with fantasy religions which offer to fulfill the longing for a different spiritual world (Masci & Lipka 2016) before this AR game was released. As per Wagner (2013, p. 250) digital games are more like religion compared to other forms of digital interaction as they offer more certainty and they enable players to build their own world. This is the reason, players get attached to the world within the game. However, that does not necessarily mean that changes in religious behavior outside the game really take place.

Although there are many news articles about Pokémon Go and their consequences for people and their religion, there is hardly any research (especially no large-scale studies) dealing with questions if Pokémon Go influences religious behavior of players.

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