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**A POSSIBLE GUIDE
FOR CHRISTIANS**

POKÉMON GO: A Possible Guide for Christians

POKÉMON GO is here.
Can we play it?

WHAT POKÉMON GO is:

- It is based on the Pokémon franchise
- It is available for those with Android and iPhone devices
- It involves walking around different places to find and “catch” imaginary creatures called Pokémon (short for Pocket Monsters).
- “There are two main goals of the game.
 - The first is to “Catch em All”-which is to log all 148 (as of the present version of the game) Pokémon in your Pokedex (like an encyclopedia of Pokémon)
 - The second is to battle for control of Pokégym. Successful wins reward: the player with in-game currency which can be used to purchase power-ups and other in game items. There is no “ending” to Pokémon Go. It is a sandbox/scavenger hunt type of game that can continue indefinitely”. (Lim Zhong Yong)

PROS of the Game

1. Exercise: You have to walk around to play it. For sedentary people, this is a plus.
2. Social interaction: to a certain extent if you are not over focused on your phone- you meet new friends and need to cooperate with them in some parts of the game (i.e. battling for control of a Pokégym)
3. It’s fun and there’s a thrill of having clear structure, immediate feedback and attainable goals. For those with depression and social anxiety, this can be beneficial in some ways.
4. You begin to notice and appreciate your surroundings around you as you navigate around the roads.
5. Some churches use it for outreach especially if their churches are Pokéstops or Gyms of the game
6. You become like a child again, engaging in fantasy and using your imagination.
7. It can be a platform for talking about spiritual realities that we cannot see.
8. It is “Augmented reality. Augmented reality overlays the fantasy objects into a real world scenario using your camera and/or GPS so you are still grounded in the real world i.e. it does not transport you into a new space but keeps you in the real world. (Virtual reality does the opposite).

CONS of the Game

1. Safety issues:

- Some people become unaware of real world hazards eg traffic
- Some people trespass into private and secure areas as they play the game
- People with less than good motives –eg abusers (abductors, pedopiles), terrorists – can lure people into certain places where they can be harmed.
- Privacy can be compromised (remember to opt out of sharing information when you sign up. This option seems to be now available to players)

2. Addiction issues

- Compulsive obsession
- Over indulgence leading to buying more apps and games, trading cards etc. linked with the game
- Distraction from the real world : game taking over our lives
As Ps Benny Ho says, “Those who have not started in gaming, don’t do it now because the moment you start; you may not be able to end...”

3. Health issues:

- Person is in a heightened stress state while playing the game. Adrenalin high all the time.
- Those who can’t separate fantasy from reality can get sucked into the game and become unbalanced mentally and socially.

4. Spiritual issues: “techno-animism”

The worldview promoted by the game is “eastern in its spirituality”. It is linked to its creator Satoshi Tajiri’s background in Shinto religion which believes that the world is inhabited by thousands of kami (mystical creatures) who reward good luck in business, studies, health and can create problems for those who do not respect or do their bidding. Pokémons can be summoned by incense and lure modules. The gamer seeks to control and capture Pokémons to do his/her will – especially those who can gift one with time, money, resources, energy. Gamers use them to battle each other; and they use potions to heal and restore them to life. However, there is no need to battle them if the player chooses not to. “The psychic forms of Pokémon have the power to read minds, teleport, hypnotize, consume people’s dreams, cause confusion and evolve. These forms of control do have occultic themes that may influence players when they evoke on the Pokémons. In the long run, it conditions the mind of Christian players to believe that they can turn to hidden agents to help them instead of running to God for help”. (Pr Wendy Chiang)

Note prohibitions in the Bible re dangers of linking with spirits:

- “Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the LORD your God”. (Leviticus 19:31)
- “Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD; because of these same detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the LORD your God...” (Deuteronomy 18:10-14)

Instead, the Scriptures tell us this:

- “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ²Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (Romans 12:1-2)

So can you play the game?

MY TAKE

I know from experience that when I was a child and listening to wuxia (swordfighting) stories by Ong Toh on Radio Rediffusion (in Hokkien), I was very upset when my mom’s friend told her to stop me from listening to it. She was fearful that I might think people can fly from mountain to mountain without any equipment and fight with balls of energy developed from secret martial arts skills. (Even at that age, I was saying, “Hey, I not that stupid leh...I know what is fantasy and what is real life...!”). While she might have succeeded in preventing me from listening to the stories, she could not remove my interest in that genre of literature. The game is here to stay. People will play it. Most teenagers will play it especially if parents say NO to it. Forbidding people to play can be counterproductive.

My advice is:

Those who can clearly separate REALITY from FANTASY – play if you wish but

1. Do not be addicted to it.

Stop and ponder regularly even as you play. Pr Wendy Chiang suggests: Ask yourself regularly, “Does my time, invested in this game, help me please the Lord? I would add: “Does it help me grow in holiness of heart and life (which is the calling of all Christians and in particular, Methodists...)? 1 Corinthians 6:11-12 reminds us: “But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. Everything is permissible for me, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.”

2. **You might have an open door to the spiritual world** by the fact that you have dabbled with the occult before and have been oppressed. It would be best if you abstain from this game as it might be another open door. Be careful that you do not ‘cross the line’ because you might be exposed to and be more familiar with occultic language in playing the game.

3. **Be alert to the Lord’s leading.** Even if there’s nothing wrong with this game or some other game or exercise...He can see dangers you cannot see and He knows you better than yourself. If He tells you to STOP when you play the game, would you be willing to do so? Will you obey Him?

4. **Be aware of the world view and values you might embrace as you play the game:**
 - Does this game lead you to believe in pantheism (“God is everything and everyone and everyone and everything is God”- www.gotquestions.org) and polytheism (there are many gods, some greater, some weaker...but all with magical powers.)? Does it lead you to believe that ‘all gods are the same and the Christian God is just one of these.’? Does it encourage you to seek ‘magic powers’ in other deities for yourself? (cf Exodus 34:14 “You must worship no other gods, for the LORD, whose very name is Jealous, is a God who is jealous about his relationship with you”.)

 - Some gamers who are familiar with the old Pokémon stories and even the 1990s’ Tamagotchi game, lament that this game is ‘less relational’ in that it does not tell a story of sacrificial friendship (of how a boy won the trust of his creature) nor build upon the faithful care the gamer gives to the creatures. There is no building of ‘digital empathy’. (cf “The Problem with Pokémon Go no one is talking about” by Rahef Harfoush)

The game is just about levelling up and winning. What is a bit disturbing is the Pokémon’s are poached from their natural habitats, confined forcibly in Poke Balls, fed and empowered so that they can be released for a gym fight that is no different from a cock-fight, a dog-fight or a gladiator-fight. Their lives simply become your possession to utilize for your own pleasure. When they are of no use (you have too many of them), they can be exchanged for valued items without a thought. Someone calls this ‘digital dogfighting’. Be sure the game does not lead you to treat your pet or another person – in real life- as A MEANS TO AN END. They should be respected as valued beings of intrinsic worth, to be cared for simply because they are God’s creation.

5. Playing in church?

- Unique landmarks and buildings are designated by the creators of the game to be PokeStops (where gamers can gather supplies eg lures and eggs) and PokeGyms (where they can train and battle Pokémon's). Churches are not exempt. Our church is a designated PokeStop and Faith Methodist Church has been classified as a PokeGym. Should we play the game in church? Should we allow people to play the game on our premises?
- Some pastors eg Rev Raymond Fong of Faith Methodist Church and Rev Daniel Foo of Bethesda Bedok Tampines Church take the position that as God's house is a sacred place, set aside for reverent worship of Him, gamers are asked not play it in church.
 - "Be focused on giving God your best during worship..." (Rev Fong)
 - "...to be good examples to the younger generation, adults are also advised not to play the game within the church" (Rev Foo)The Pastors at Aldersgate Methodist Church agree with them.
Please DO NOT play the game in Church. Let us honor God's presence in this holy place.

- Rev David Ho underlined that there's a security issue at stake here: i.e. the schools and the after school care are located where we are at. There's heavy human and vehicular traffic here too. Not safe for children with some strangers walking in and not safe for the gamers who might get hit by cars and buses. We will be asking the Pokémon company (Niantic Inc.) to delist us for these reasons. But the ultimate decision is with the company.
- However, wandering gamers to the open areas of the church should not be rudely pushed away but befriended as part of Christian hospitality. They should be encouraged (in a nice way) to respect the boundaries of the schools and church as well. Who knows? God might use this opportunity to bring them to Himself....

6. As you are probably aware, different churches and pastors hold different positions re: the Pokémon game. It varies from great openness (eg " hey, it's an opportunity to welcome people who won't step into church otherwise!") to "Don't touch it! Its' demonic." What is important is that we keep three principles in mind:
 - a. **Don't bear false witness against the game and one another.** Always check the sites we post in Social Media. There's one that claims that the Pokémon creator came up with the game to spread satanism. Please see the original post which someone had twisted to give the false information.

- <http://www.snopes.com/pokemon-satanist-anti-christian-inverview/>
- <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2040095,00.html>

b. **Don't be easily frightened when you encounter imaginative genres in literature or games.** Our God is the creator of our minds and He has given us creative powers to use different genres and 'languages' to express deep longings and ideas. But you are uncomfortable with some of these genres, then don't take part in it.

- The imaginative books and movies on LORD OF THE RINGS as well as THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE (albeit seen by many Christians as "Christian parable stories") can also be accused of animism and spiritism. Popeye the Sailor man can be accused of dabbling in the occult because he becomes a supernatural strongman after eating spinach (the magical potion in his case). The list goes on and on. Beware of spiritual paranoia.
- Many anti-Pokémon sites talk about occultic associations found in the symbols of the game characters eg lightning bolts, the "all-seeing eye". Anything can be linked to any symbol eg Lightning bolt? It's part of God's handiwork and it's a symbol of a political party. "All seeing eye" has been used as a symbol of our God in Christian liturgical tradition. There might be other questionable symbols but not all symbols should be tarred without due checking.

c. **Guard the unity of the spirit (Rev Raymond Fong).** Avoid the spirit of condemnation and judgementalism. Do not let differences in opinions regarding this matter, harden your heart against your brother or sister in the Lord. Guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23). Follow the maxim, "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity".

When in doubt, please consult your pastor or youth leader. God bless.

- Rev Dr Lorna Khoo
Pastor in Charge, Aldersgate Methodist Church

SOME RESOURCES CONSULTED AND UTILISED:

- <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/kids-and-technology/parenting-pokemon-go/pokemon-go-what-parents-should-know> POKEMON GO: WHAT PARENTS SHOULD KNOW
- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/urban-survival/201607/the-psychological-pros-and-cons-pok-mon-go> THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROS AND CONS OF POKEMON GO
- <http://www.soulatrest.com> THE POKEMON CONVERSATIONS CONTINUE/WHEN SHOULD POKEMON GO GO?
- <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2016/07/21/focus-on-the-family-warns-parents-that-pokemon-go-includes-evolution-of-creatures/> FOCUS ON THE FAMILY WARNS PARENTS THAT POKEMON GO INCLUDES EVOLUTION OF CREATURES
- <http://www.jonathancarl.org/2016/07/are-pokemons-demons-spiritual-warfare.html> ARE POKEMONS DEMONS?
- <http://www.dailydot.com/parsec/pokemon-go-catch-them-all/> THE PROBLEM WITH POKEMON GO NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pok%C3%A9mon_Go WIKI on POKEMON GO
 - Aldersgate Pastoral Team
 - Rev David Ho, Pastor, Aldersgate Methodist Church
 - Pr Wendy Chiang : Senior Pastoral Staff, Aldersgate Methodist Church
 - Mr Lim Zhong Yong : Aldersgate Methodist Church member who knows quite a bit about these games
 - Rev Raymond Fong: Pastor, Faith Methodist Church
 - Ps Benny Ho, Senior Pastor, Faith Community Church, Perth
 - Ps Benjamin KC Lee, Focus for the Family Singapore/ Hope International Ministries
 - Writeups from Bethesda Bedok Tampines Church (Rev Daniel Foo); Maranatha Bible Presbyterian Church re: the Pokemon Game (Rev Jack Sin); St Hilda's Church (Ven Wong Tak Meng)

FOR FURTHER READING:

If Pokémon Go feels like a religion, that's because it kind of is

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jul/12/pokemon-go-addictive-game-shares-much-with-religious-devotion>

Will O' The Wisp: Techno-animism gets a global facelift with Pokémon Go

<http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-editorials/will-o-the-wisp-techno-animism-gets-a-global-facelift-with-pokemon-go/>

Are Pokémon Demons? A Christian Spiritual Warfare Understanding of Pokémon

<http://www.jonathancarl.org/2016/07/are-pokemons-demons-spiritual-warfare.html?m=1>

How Should Christians Respond To the 'Pokémon Go' Craze?

http://www.prophecynewswatch.com/article.cfm?recent_news_id=491

Ps Daniel Khong (Faith Community Baptist Church)'s article on POKEMON GO

<https://www.facebook.com/Daniel.Khong/posts/10154289145671287>

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