Pokemon Go and the future of footpath walking

The new mobile phone game, Pokemon Go, gives us an insight into future options for walking, running or riding on footpaths, as well as for route finding. I am not suggesting that we will all be playing games on our phones as we walk, but the type of interactions that are possible with Pokemon Go give an idea of how augmented reality (AR) can enhance the way we enjoy walks and enrich our experience.

Many of you may not know much about Pokemon Go so let me give a very brief description. It is an app that you run on your mobile phone which has a database of locations in which to find imaginary Pokemon creatures. As you approach a place shown in the database, your mobile phone starts to give you clues (e.g. a sound of rustling grass) to let you know you are near a Pokemon. When you find the right spot, the figure of the Pokemon appears on your phone screen and you can swipe the screen in certain ways to "capture" it. Players can collect sets of Pokemon and train them to compete against other people's Pokemon.

The game has caught on like wildfire for a combination of reasons: there are a whole generation of young adults who grew up playing Pokemon on games consoles and they are nostalgic for the games and the characters; it is also a competitive activity and you can compare your success against your friends or others you meet; and thirdly, it is social — lots of Pokemon are "located" at points of interest (e.g. Mayfield War Memorial) so people meet while seaching for them or while competing against others at places called Pokemon "gyms". Who knows how long the craze will last? But for the moment it has many people getting out in the fresh air rather than sitting inside in front of their screens.

The idea of Pokemon Go may not interest many people, and may actively turn off even more; however the concept of something popping up on your mobile screen at specific locations while you are out on a route has many other interesting applications.

Firstly, it could be used to provide information on points or objects of interest. For example, there is the site of a medieval hunting lodge in Hawksden Park Wood, 2 miles from Mayfield. With no remains visible, it is hard to imagine what it would have looked like. But an app on your mobile phone could superimpose a picture of its likely look and structure on the screen when you point the phone at the site. An even more ambitious project would allow you to see today's peaceful woods in the area as the bustling industrial sites they would have been during the age when Wealden was the centre of the English iron industry.

Displays on your mobile need not be limited to historical details. They could show flowers in detail or how they change during the seasons; or take birdsongs and show pictures of the birds themselves.

For those who need encouragement to get out and discover the delights of the countryside (maybe some children), then games could be the way forward, with items to find along a route or games to play at various points — for example, pointing the phone at a tree and having to select what type of tree it is from a list.

For orienteers, the phone could show when you have reached checkpoints, so that checkpoints no longer need to be real. Similarly for "hare and hounds" races, the markers could be shown on screen.

These are just a few ideas. No doubt there are many more that can, and will, be thought of.

For those of us who appreciate the wonder of the countryside

through which we can walk, jog, run, cycle, or ride, the important thing will be to develop and use those apps which increase our knowledge, appreciation and care for the areas where we go, rather than just taking us into virtual worlds that just happen to be outside.