Resist Pokémon Go

If *Pokémon Go* could resemble the best of childhood, it might have some value. What it actually does is very different.

by **Sam Kriss**

Culture, according to a certain strand of grouchy leftist criticism, is turning us all into children. The dominant forms, the ones that not only rake in the most money but code the cultural terrain itself, are video games, which are for children, and superhero films, which are also for children.

It's not just a question of genre, though: these forms demand a particular type of engagement, that of a vicious, sticky-fingered child — you're to not just pay the price of admission but *support* the culture-commodity uncritically, identify with its characters, buy the action figures, nurture an obsession verging on the pathological. Act, in other words, with the rapacious glee of a dull child.

Any other mode of engagement is tacitly forbidden. Look at the fury of the fans when someone tries to approach mass culture with any critical judgement. Why are you being so serious about this, so pretentious; it's just a film or a game, it's meaningless — but at the same time, how dare you, you're ruining my fun.

For many critics, we're living out an apocalyptic scenario. This is about *Pokémon Go*, of course it's about *Pokémon Go* — how else could you describe a world in grown adults in their millions are milling about aimlessly, staring at their phones, collecting digital rats, reliving a stupid childhood, and shrinking all the while into inattentive sugar-zapped brats?

All this is a strong critique of the game, but it's not the one I'm interested in pursuing. Never mind the infantilized adults; what do children, actual children, do?

At play, in their masses and unmediated by anything other than the imagination, they do something spontaneous and incredible: they create new worlds.

These worlds are generally not in the form of a pure escapist fantasy, but a radical reinterpretation of actual existence — the invention of new ways of mapping and systematizing reality, a series of experiments in the plasticity of space.

Start with sidewalks: if you step on the cracks, something horrible will happen to you; you'll break your back, or a bear will eat you up. Sometimes the floor is lava, and a pyroclastic code transforms the dull world of objects. Sometimes a gang of children will turn into astronauts and aliens; parked cars swell to the size of planets, falling leaves thunder past as treacherous asteroid fields.

Everything is alive with potential significations, the world exists to be knocked down and rebuilt. And this is the promise of *Pokémon Go*: all you need to do is download the app, and you're suddenly thrust into a different world, a bright and energetic version of reality stalked by incredible monsters.

All this should be of interest to the Left; after all, one of the most enduring revolutionary slogans of recent times states that "another world is possible." As Marxists, we should be interested in changing the world — not just altering government policy, or even swapping one ruling class for another, but swapping the human experience of reality from one that is alienated to one that is liberated.

In his *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx describes the subject-object relation that results from unalienated labour: "The object of labour is the*objectification of man's species life*: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created." In Heidegger the condition of Dasein (the human Being) is *Geworfenheit*, thrown-ness, of being pitched into the dejectedness of what indifferently is.

Marx sees a way out of alienation in the intentional exercise of consciousness on the world. And this free, spontaneous, transformational exercise of species-being really does take place all around us. For all the terrors and cruelties of infantile phenomenology (and we shouldn't valorize children too much — after all, another

almost inevitable feature of their play is the systematic bullying of the weak), nobody could see in children pretending to be explorers or bank robbers the chains and drudgery of alienated work.

If something like *Pokémon Go* really could turn adults into children again, it might have some value. What it actually does is very different.

Obey

Abdelhafid Khatib was a writer, theorist, and a member of the Letterist and Situationist Internationals. He was also an Arab. In the late 1950s, the Situationists were attempting to develop their practice of psychogeography, a kind of *flânerie* in which people would "drift" through urban environments according to no prescribed route, finding new ways to reshape and reinterpret space.

As Andrea Gibbons documents, Khateb was assigned in 1958 to carry out a psychogeographical report on the district of Les Halles in Paris — but this was in the middle of France's vicious colonial war in Algeria; all Arabs were under curfew, and Khateb's efforts saw him arrested twice.

His report was nonetheless eventually published, with a short coda to explain the difficulties he incurred producing it, but it does not usually appear in collections of Situationist texts. Khateb's comrades in the International did not allow his findings to inflect their theory; they didn't want their fun to be spoiled by the realities of racial oppression.

There's a similar problem in *Pokémon Go*; the way its new, fun, playful map of the world can smash against other, more established realities: race and class, history, danger, and death. As one player pointed out, the game might be very dangerous for young black men.

A player wandering blithely through a white neighborhood, maybe passing several times in front of the same houses in pursuit of a grinning cartoon tortoise, would be subjected to a very different form of the mapping and systematization of reality: they could be read as suspicious, and being read as suspicious can get young black men killed.

There are other stories of realities intermeshing unpleasantly: the girl who found a dead body in a river while chasing imaginary creatures; the armed robbers who set "lures" to attract not only Pokémon but players to a specific location, where they were relieved of their phones; the Holocaust museum whose halls were found to contain a Pokémon called Koffing, a jolly purple sphere that emits poisonous gas.

The remapping of reality carried out by *Pokémon Go* is unresponsive and indifferent to social existence; it's an objective fantasy, abstracted, centralized. It's the objectivity that's the problem here, not the fantasy — there wouldn't be anything wrong with the game if it simply gave us a fake world to run around in, but the world it shows us is a real one, and its constraints stifle us everywhere.

The map of your neighborhood you see when you play the game is a GPS map, something originally designed to help steer guided missiles. It's the Google map, its deathly grey replaced by a virulent green that's just as blanketing and all-consuming with or without some fluffy clouds in the upper screen. Buildings show up as blank, squat oblongs. This could be a skyscraper or a hovel, it makes no difference. The game casts its eye over the world from a military satellite far up in outer space, utterly indifferent to sensuous experience, utterly foreign to human life.

Childhood play figures the world as an adventure; what is reconfigured is sensuous experience, which reveals unseen dimensions through successive regimes of signs. Here there is only one: all routes are already set, all eventualities accounted for, all points of interest marked and immutable; there's not even the possibility of a purely idle wandering, not when *Pokémon Go* creates its map and its territory all at the same time.

Where I live, in southeast London, I find Poké Stops at Nigerian churches and local greengrocers; the National Rail station is a gym. All fantasy coalesces around fixed

points of interest. We're back to Heidegger: this is a world into which I've been thrown.

The power to actively impact this augmented reality belongs only to the company's executives, and the power of children's play has been subjected to another round of primitive accumulation and alienation. Our world does not become entirely other; instead, a new stratum is added to slot effortlessly into the tedium of daily life.

For the player of *Pokémon Go*, the injunction is to obey. Real human bodies are tamed and directed by dangling virtual lures: businesses can buy in-game items that will tempt customers into their establishments; the state could probably quell an uprising by scattering hundreds of rare Pokémon away from the central square. If they wanted to, the game's creators could send people leaping willingly off cliffs, dawdling on train tracks, running into forest fires.

It's a technology of biopolitics, something that speaks in one voice to the atomized millions and in its own small way helps to direct their lives. For the moment its injunctions are mild, but their mildness is that of the bourgeois ideal raised to an imperturbable universal.

Walk around. Explore your neighborhood. Visit the park. Take in the sights. Have your fun. *Pokémon Go* is coercion, authority, a command issuing from out of a blank universe, which blasts through social and political cleavages to finally catch 'em all. It must be resisted.