

# Pokemon Go players aren't ignoring reality. We're changing it

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I for one welcome our new overlords CREDIT: KAZUHIRO NOGI/AFP PHOTO

If you don't play Pokemon Go, you probably feel like you're in the middle of a Demon Headmaster novel right now. Everyone you know is enchanted with this weird new social phenomenon, which is spreading with astonishing speed. You go to work and everyone is into it. You come home and your spouse has it too. Surely something sinister is afoot? Surely it's part of some kind of plot to take over the entire country?

*I worry that we will all become similar to those people in the Matrix: supine, drip-fed images to keep us docile, while being milked dry.* Liz Jones

If so, it's already too late. The wildly contagious "augmented reality" app, which uses GPS signals to layer its game world over the physical one so that you have to walk around with your actual feet in order to get anywhere, is now luring millions of people into lamp posts in pursuit of a Blastoise or Gengar. It has even taken over Telegraph HQ: once (long, long ago) a

journalist long absent from their desk could be safely assumed to be boozily lurching a possibly fictional client, whereas today it's more likely they're chasing monsters in the park.

Not everyone is infected, though. In the Daily Mail, Liz Jones declares the game “one more excuse to gawp at your phone and ignore reality”. Our own Alex Proud hints at something similar when he laments “groups of people sitting around tables, ignoring each other”. And this is a common response to Pokémon Go – that it's blinding us, isolating us from the real world. Just another excuse for today's snowflake generation to bury their heads in the sand.

With respect to them both, it's nonsense.

The sociologist Nathan Jurgenson has a phrase for this kind of thinking: "digital dualism". That means the belief that things which happen on the internet are happening in a separate realm to the alleged “real world” – that they are less real and less important by implication.

But what those who object to these games should remember is that our entire lives involve seeing the world through lenses just as tinted and just as selective as the screen of a smartphone. They're called our eyes – and when plugged into our brains, and the perceptual shortcuts we use to process what we see, they're often woefully deficient.

To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle  
George Orwell

We're all familiar with the phenomenon of “autopilot” – the way we completely tune out what we already know how to navigate, driving to work without seeing or remembering what we drive past. Adam Smith once walked outside in his nightgown in an intellectual reverie and walked 15 miles before being woken by church bells, while a study in 2011 showed students chasing a researcher across campus often failed to notice a staged fight taking place along their route.

Conversely, in his book *The Burglar's Guide to the City*, architect Geoff Manaugh shows how criminals uncover aspects of our most intimate spaces to which we are completely blind, turning drains into doorways and walking through walls. The point is that our movement through the world is utterly transformed by the purpose we bring with us. Children know this when they treat floors as lava and armchairs as islands. And Pokémon Go is certainly a transformative purpose.

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there

Guy Debord

In this it is an unlikely heir to Guy Debord, the French radical who wanted to overthrow capitalism by “turn[ing] the whole of life into an exciting game” (making “adroit use of currently popular means of communication”, I might add). Advocating urban exploration as a form of revolution, he told us to drop our “usual motives for movement and action” and allow our “drift” through the streets to uncover flows and currents our hurry to work might obscure. I’ve already found, near my home and workplace, murals and facades which I’d never noticed before. Other players are uncovering everything from dead bodies through cheating boyfriends to way American police officers react when they find two young black men meeting one middle-aged white man in a park at 3am.

In fact, as that story hints, the game can also be a tool of anthropology. Pokémon Go’s locations are drawn from two sources: a crowdsourced historical landmarks database bought by Niantec in 2011, and contributions from players of a previous game, Ingress. Most of these people were affluent early adopters, and it seems that most of them were white, because Pokestops in major US cities are clearly concentrated in majority-white areas, and very sparse elsewhere.

We see a similar thing in rural Britain, where broadband and mobile internet access is rightly a political flashpoint – ironic, considering Pokémon was originally created out of sorrow that urban kids did not collect insects anymore. Like the patterns the sea leaves over thousands of years as it laps against the rocks, the ebb and flow of smartphone users has left a pattern which sheds new light on our society – a geotagged snapshot of cultural and technological inequality.

But not content with describing the world, Pokémon is also, as Marx recommended, changing it. Everywhere there are stories of adults marvelling as perfectly sober young people congregate at previously neglected plazas, libraries, and war memorials. Armed robbers are waiting at game locations to lure easy victims. And when a rare Pokémon appeared in a park in Washington DC it produced a chaotic temporary carnival.

Are we who live in the present doomed never to experience autonomy, never to stand for one moment on a bit of land ruled only by freedom? Hakim Bey

Again, there is a bizarre resemblance here to Leftist theory – specifically Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zones, areas of brief egalitarianism which elude normal hierarchies. Certainly authorities have always worried about large groups of people congregating in public no ordinary reason, seeing them as a challenge to the ownership of the law over that space. And the fleeting encounters created by the game have the character of the magic forests in Shakespeare's comedies – places where lines of age, class, and race, are transgressed and maybe made to look silly.

So is Pokémon Go a demonic plot after all, and Nintendo actually dangerous Communists? Not quite. For by hooking its players into an endless chase for imaginary goodies, Pokémon Go resembles BF Skinner's most optimistic fantasies of behavioural control. In many ways it's less like Guy Debord's free-flowing flaneurship and more like some nightmare vision from the mind of William Burroughs, of humans routed hither and thither like electrical currents on a circuit board by the iron whim of a machine.

No wonder some people believe the app might actually have been commissioned by US intelligence agencies. Want photos of a particular home or business? Spawn a rare Pokémon and let players be your unwitting informants! Indeed, this very possibility has led Indonesian officials to brand the game a “national security threat”, lest it lead people into restricted military areas. When you consider the saga of “Cuban Twitter” back in 2010 – in which US aid workers introduced a new social network to the island deliberately to spark unrest – they might not be totally mad.

[The game provider] doesn't recognize restricted areas. They just put Pokémon monsters [wherever it wants]. The policy is just to protect our bases, which house many important installations  
Maj Gen Tatang Sulaiman

More generally, this carnival's relation to the waking world is complex and ambiguous. In the middle of rural Kansas there is a farm whose occupants have been repeatedly harassed and threatened by complete strangers simply because its position near the geographic centre of the USA means it is regularly linked to IP addresses used by hackers and scammers. Point is, when the internet's clean lines get tangled up in material geography, things can get messy – and if Pokémon Go players are still engaging with geography that also means they are still affected by its politics and its dangers. One man quit his job to hunt Pokémon; could everyone afford to do so? Pizza restaurants and other businesses are dropping "lures", in-game items which attract Pokémon; how is the game affecting business owners? A church in Birmingham is taking well to the crowds it now attracts, but it can't be long before the Daily Mail carries a

story about some innocent suburban couple whose lives are now a living hell due to the Snorlax in their front garden.

Yet whether Pokémon Go is a radical challenge to the status quo, a mass market tranquiliser, or some mixture of both, it is clearly more than just escapism. Like every other way of seeing and engaging with the world, it filters out some things and makes others more visible. Pokémon Go players aren't ignoring reality; we're discovering it differently, and in some cases, we're changing it. The really important question is: how?