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# Live in the moment: the Situationists & *Pokemon Go*

By Jeff Sparrow

12.Jul.16

15 Comments

Over the last few days, the streets have filled with Situationists, as *Pokemon Go* sends its legions of players out on prolonged *dérives*.

OK, the comparison's slightly ridiculous. Yet consider Situationist pioneer Guy Debord's description of the *dérive*, the psychogeographic technique his coterie was trialling in Paris in the fifties:

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. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.

Anyone who's downloaded *Pokemon Go* knows exactly what that's like.

The game's buggy. The app empties your battery and it eats your data and its servers are constantly overloaded. Yet for all its flaws, it manages – at least temporarily – to set you wandering a city

landscape that's been re-enchanted, a place where monsters appear in everyday streets and where familiar landmarks serve new purposes according to the logic of a different universe.

Look at the photos *Pokemon* users are uploading.

An Avian Duodo poses outside a KFC restaurant; a Psyduck sits at the bottom of an aquarium. Two senior citizens wander unknowingly into the path of menacing creature twice their size. A Bulbasaur frolics in a university lecture theatre.

That's the beauty of *Pokemon Go*'s augmented reality – it defamiliarises and thus repurposes the places that we know.

'We are bored in the city,' writes Ivan Chitchevlov in his 'Formulary for a New Urbanism', 'there is no longer any Temple of the Sun. Between the legs of the women walking by, the dadaists imagined a monkey wrench and the surrealists a crystal cup. That's lost. ... We are bored in the city, we really have to strain to still discover mysteries on the sidewalk billboards. ... A mental disease has swept the planet: banalization.'

The augmented reality of *Pokemon Go* offers, we might say, a downloadable alternative to that banalisation, presenting players with startling juxtapositions between the city as is and the city as dreamed. Hence the remarkable testimonies circulating about the game's effects, with, for instance, *The Mary Sue* collecting tweets from those afflicted with depression and other mental illnesses discussing how they've been inspired to leave the home and socialise.

Look, for instance, at the photo posted by reddit user Haloi, an image showing dozens of *Pokemon* players gathered at 11pm on Friday evening on the steps of the State Library of Victoria, drawn there by a number of active 'lures' – an in-game version of Debord's 'currents, fixed points and vortexes'.

The building's a beautiful piece of architecture, with a rich and fascinating history. But Melburnians take the library for granted, and young people don't, as a rule, hang out there on Friday night. Suddenly, though, it's become the locus for a temporary community, invisible to all the non-players passing by.

Of course, that's only part of the story.

'If you visit the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory site while using *Pokemon Go*,' tweeted @BenRegenspan a few days ago, 'you get three free Pokeballs.'

The comment crystallised some of the unease I'd been feeling walking around Melbourne and observing the virtual city springing up alongside the real. The system incorporates prominent landmarks – buildings, sculptures, statues, etc – into its gameplay, retooling them as PokéStops and gyms.

On the one hand, that's way cool – suddenly, the old pub near your house is inhabited by monsters.

On the other, there's something faintly distasteful about the recuperation of specific real histories into a billion-dollar corporate mythology. Nearly 150 people lost their lives when the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory burned to the ground, entirely needless deaths caused by the atrocious working

conditions of the garment trade. The tragedy became a rallying point for the trade union movement, the name of the factory, a shorthand reference to employers' greed.

Now, though, it's three free Pokeballs.

We might also say, then, that, even as the game leads players to embrace the *derive*, it also offers a remarkable demonstration of the phenomenon that Debord critiqued.

'The whole life,' he wrote, 'of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.'

In particular, Debord emphasises the remarkable ability of the modern city to destroy its own past.

'The "new towns" of the technological pseudo-peasantry,' he argues, 'are the clearest indications, inscribed on the land, of the break with historical time on which they are founded; their motto might well be: "On this spot nothing will ever happen – and nothing ever has." Quite obviously, it is precisely because the liberation of history, which must take place in the cities, has not yet occurred, that the forces of historical absence have set about designing their own exclusive landscape there.'

Augmented reality might defamiliarise urban banality but it does so by colonising fantasy for multinational branding: nothing says 'forces of historical absence' like an elaborate mythos accreted by years of corporate marketing.

Then again, why should it be otherwise? Capitalist banalisation inevitably seizes every aesthetic critique of capitalist banalisation, while utopia and dystopia always shadow each other.

And there's something still deeply attractive about a game that invokes, even for a minute, the new kind of urbanism about which Chtcheglov mused:

The architecture of tomorrow will be a means of modifying present conceptions of time and space. It will be both a means of knowledge and a means of action. Architectural complexes will be modifiable. Their appearance will change totally or partially in accordance with the will of their inhabitants.

Isn't that the vision that makes *Pokemon Go* so addictive – the momentary glimpse of a world that might be?

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**More by [Jeff Sparrow](#)**

## Comments

1. From John Bailey on [12 July 2016 at 11.39 am](#)

This reminds me of de Certeau's assertions (deCertions?) that walking in the city is always a tactical negotiation with The City as imposed from above – that the walker's shortcuts, lingering pauses, switchbacks and jaywalking exceed the rules that planners, corporations, governments etc try to give concrete form in the built environment. As with the derive, there's at least a hint of potential resistance in these descriptions, right? Especially in that mid-to-late 20th C. French mode. Sous les pavés, la plage!

Then again... Pokemon GO makes merdeloads of money by selling your data, including precise GPS location, and on iOS devices it requires full access to everything in your Google account, which seems less conducive to strategies of resistance.

And at least one writer has pointed out that the privilege of GO-style urban exploration doesn't extend equally to all:

"Pokemon GO is a Death Sentence if you are a Black Man": <https://medium.com/mobile-lifestyle/warning-pokemon-go-is-a-death-sentence-if-you-are-a-black-man-acacb4bdae7f#.1160payup>

***Reply***

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2. From Tom on [12 July 2016 at 1.04 pm](#)

At least geocaching involves some creativity.

***Reply***

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3. From Yes, but on [12 July 2016 at 6.49 pm](#)

It's a fad, an informal thing that will soon be formalized – a craze, vogue, trend, fashion, mode, enthusiasm, passion, infatuation, love, obsession, mania, rage, compulsion, fixation, fetish, weakness, fancy, taste, novelty, whim, fascination, preoccupation – for see-through products that will be over in the blink of an onion.

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***Reply***

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4. From [Anthony Hayes](#) on [13 July 2016 at 9.56 am](#)

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Jeff, I think you are right to say that the comparison between Pokemon Go users and Situationists is ridiculous. For Debord and other members of the Situationist International the drift entailed not just an aimless walk through the city but the attempt to use the city in ways that sharply contrasted with some of its more usual uses – namely wage labour, shopping and commuting. Indeed the Debord and Chetglov pieces you quote from reveal another aspect of the drift that was singularly important: it was a deliberate criticism of the current uses of the city, both in the drift itself and in later attempts to write up and generalise these experiences.

Of course this is not to say the comparison cannot be made, and I recognise that you do attempt a more nuanced argument than mere comparison. But without the critical ideas and practice that encompassed and supported the Situationist idea of the 'dérive' (drift) the comparison risks being an empty – so much name checking for those in the know. Certainly I agree that it is possible for a Pokemon Go user to get a 'momentary glimpse of a world that might be' while playing the game, but I am not sure that they are more likely than anyone else to get this glimpse while using the city (or is it the city using us?). Insofar as the Poke hunt is so much downtime from work or study, how would we really turn it into something that was more than just a momentary escape?

More obvious recuperations of the Situationist drift have already been attempted on the smart phone. Back in 2011 an app called 'Situationist' was launched for the iphone. The app allowed its users to set up a profile and pick from a list of acts like 'hug me for 5 seconds exactly' or 'wave at me like a long lost friend'. When other users came in range the app alerted you to let you know which situation you were meant to engage in. The app also allowed you to suggest your own 'situations'. Apparently apple shut it down within a year citing that the app used users' locations in an unauthorised manner. The blog I got this info from suggested more sinister reasons, associated with some of the situations proposed by users (e.g. 'Ask me what I think of the war' or 'Destroy the nearest TV').

Perhaps the lesson we can draw from this is that users of Pokemon Go, or for that matter any app or even other non-electronic methods designed to reproduce the capitalist social relation, can be wrecked or diverted from their intended uses. It's just a question of turning these 'glimpses' into a more concrete vision of another world.

### **Reply**

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- From jeff on [13 July 2016 at 2.28 pm](#)

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Hi Anthony,

I kind of take that point. But I also think the original arguments by Debord and co are quite confused and contradictory; that their own experiments were pretty underwhelming; and that the whole business was more interesting as a provocation than as a practice (the capitalist city really isn't that bothered by a bunch of intellectuals wandering around in it). That's why I do think the comparison has some value (though it was supposed to be tongue in cheek: you did get a sense that, last weekend, at least, people were using the city against itself in a funny sort of way. I reckon that's kind of over though – it was partly merely a result of novelty.

### **Reply**

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- From [Anthony Hayes](#) on [13 July 2016 at 10.17 pm](#)

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The Situationists' experiments were underwhelming! Jeff, at this point I am more convinced of you comic chops than anything else. I wonder what your criteria for

judgement of the situationists are. Few serious students of modern French history question the profound influence they exerted on the French student movement in the mid-late 1960s. Indeed the Situationist International were able to exert this influence through the organisational and theoretical practices they elaborated around their journal throughout this period. As to their ideas being confused and contradictory – which ones? Their pioneering criticism of the capitalist city was in essence taken up by Henri Lefebvre (among others) and repetitively worked over in a series of books between the mid 60s and 70s – but few accuse Lefebvre of being confused and contradictory. Indeed I would argue that the confused, contradictory and underwhelming practice of the situs was more effective than anything you or I have been involved in. After all only a mere 11 years passed between the founding of their organisation and the near revolution of May 1968. Indeed if we judged our own sometime shared activist past using your mysterious criteria I believe we would both be left beneath underwhelming.

***Reply***

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- From [Gerald](#) on [14 July 2016 at 9.47 pm](#)

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Yes I agree with Anthony that it is very slack to point at a group and claim their ideas are contradictory and or ambiguous without actually even naming any contradiction or ambiguity. Even if Jeff offered a hint at what he meant in his reply to Anthony it would be better than nothing. It could make a difference between a humorous use of ideas, and a flippant use. We are reminded that in institutionalised cultural studies some ideas go unquestioned and others can be mocked without argument. The Situationists denied that thinking and creativity should belong only to the few we find in these institutions, just as they denied that thinking and creativity should be a (virtual) commodity. So perhaps, for some, The Situationists are a bridge too far in the great derive of ideas.

***Reply***

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- From [Rebekah](#) on [15 July 2016 at 8.49 pm](#)

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I think the point is valid, that Pokemon Go can, and ought to, be compared with Situationist logic. I don't know the Situationist literature well enough to get into the argument above, but I contend that the logic of crossing boundaries with respect of how a place is utilized, and how we then form further mental associations with the place, is being approached in a way that is not as ridiculous as it may at first have seemed. What Pokemon Go reminded me of, after hearing about it via building site gossip, was the treasure hunts that use online clues, and have engaged hunters in potentially illegal activities of venturing into far fetched places, (eg underground sewers). I think there is a lot of potential in such uses of the internet. Also the safety factor of Pokemon Go, in that it apparently challenges no legislative principles neither specific legislation, enables persons who are not otherwise challenged, to become intellectually challenged without seeking to so become. Phenomenon like Pokemon Go, will stand or fall on the merit of how the game is utilized rather than the

any commercial merit that funded the idea in the first place. I think it is in general very slack of all of us who have a Marxist education, to look at the potential for change in mainstream pop culture, and think of it as too minimal to have enough impact for the changes that are needed. We have to remember that the mainstream is full of folks whose education will possibly never allow them to consider left wing ideas and ideals, and certainly are not likely to want their children challenged to think differently than a similarly biased education. But a child's mind can become radically challenged and changed by very minor input. Therefore, those who produced and promote Pokemon Go, will neither want it to be compared with Situationist perspectives. Let theirs be the ridicule.

**Reply**

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- From [Anthony Hayes](#) on [16 July 2016 at 6.12 pm](#)

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Rebekah, I agree that any human practice can be brought into comparison with another. What I found problematic with Jeff's article and comments was whether or not such a comparison was fruitful in this case. As another commentator on this article pointed out urban drifting has a longer history than the Situationists. However by my reckoning what marked out the Situationists was their attempt to both understand the accelerating transformation of industrial cities after the Second World War under the guise of "urbanism" (in France in particular) and the development of a theoretical and practical critique of this urbanism. By all means read the Situationists if you can, they are well worth it. What I think you may find of particular interest was their hostility to the merely academic or intellectual criticism of the city, considering they were staunch advocates of criticism being generated at the level of everyday experience. So yes I agree that anyone can begin to develop their own critical practice and in fact do, to greater or lesser extents. Nonetheless it is great when we find bodies of knowledge that have developed previous to our own discoveries, or in tandem. As you point out the question is one of how to turn any of the products or ideas we find at hand toward the contemporary criticism of capitalist life to help chart a way out of this mess.

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5. From [Short turn](#) on [13 July 2016 at 10.15 am](#)

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This is the future for elections, for sure. The AEC needs to get working on their Election Go app, now! (Good business for Uber taxis too!!)

**Reply**

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6. From [RR](#) on [13 July 2016 at 1.08 pm](#)

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We have virtual reality and the HoloLens and it took Pokemon Go for you to finally put AR and the Situationists together? Do better

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**Reply**

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7. From Sceptic on [13 July 2016 at 1.55 pm](#)

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“...cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones”

They're called doors and gates.

**Reply**

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8. From [Jess Kilby](#) on [13 July 2016 at 10.56 pm](#)

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While I wholeheartedly agree that the Situationist project was underwhelming, confused and contradictory (and May '68 is generally considered a failure, if that's their legacy), I also disagree that playing Pokemon Go is drifting. I'm not a fan of Debord's particular spin on a practice that is as old as cities themselves (De Quincey etc), particularly in his call for “rapid passage” through the city and “the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities”, but even the Situationist drift is still ostensibly an undirected activity – or rather, directed by the psychic currents of the city itself. Whereas movement through the city while playing Pokemon Go is directed by factors that are utterly divorced from the player's autonomous experience of their physical environment. The game developers are directing, through their placement of items for collection. And all the reports of accidents and injuries imply that people are actually less aware of their surroundings while playing, which again is hardly a drift.

**Reply**

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o From [Anthony Hayes](#) on [14 July 2016 at 1.35 pm](#)

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Jess, it is true that hunting for Pokémon and the Situationist drift have little in common, but even Jeff admitted that the comparison was largely ridiculous. What I find more perplexing is that given the chance to expand on Jeff's casual putdown (i.e. the arguments and experiments of the situs were underwhelming, confused and contradictory, etc.) you copout with an equally casual “I wholeheartedly agree”. Why do you agree and what is the substance of your agreement? The Situationists never claimed to have invented the urban drift – indeed such a claim would be ridiculous. What they did claim, however, was to have pioneered a criticism of “urbanism” as an ideology, on the back of such practices as the drift (as they conceived it). Consider Debord's early, 1955 piece ‘Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography’ (<http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/urbgeog.htm>). The situs (and in the latter case Debord the pre-situ) argued, based on their experiences in the Paris of the 1950s in particular, that something new was happened in the cities of the post-war world. Under the name of “urbanism” cities both old and new were being rebuilt and reconceived to the end of better “integrating” the population around the twin poles of capitalist production and consumption. They wagered that such a new approach, which had some of its roots in the avant-garde architecture of the 1920s and 30s, was also a reaction to the revolutionary waves of 1917-37 (although this argument became much clearer later in the early 1960s). My point here is to argue that the situs must be criticised with an eye to their historical specificity, not to mention that this specificity speaks to us today perhaps more pointedly than more distant urban drifters like Thomas de Quincey (i.e. that the “urbanism” the situs



criticised is not only still with us, but has been expanded upon considerably since their day). Indeed they often cited Thomas de Quincoy as an inspiration, détourning his idea of a search for a 'northwest passage' through London.

For me what is most interesting about the situs is the idea that the critique of everyday life, and in particular the everyday life of modern capitalist urbanism, is potentially within the reach of all. Unfortunately today it seems to have suffered the fate of so much of what passes for radical criticism, relegated to a niche topic within the academic and institutionalised left – at least in terms of the scholarly study of the Situationist International. Nonetheless the critique of everyday life continues to be rediscovered, under different names and even in complete, glorious ignorance of the situs. In this sense such a critique may even begin in the middle of a Poké hunt.

***Reply***

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9. From Nerissa Marcon on [22 July 2016 at 12.35 pm](#)

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I wrote my Master's thesis on using Minecraft for literacy learning. Now I'm hooked on PG, I feel a journal article on its use in the English classroom brewing. Using games that are part of youth culture enables teachers to bridge the divide between formal and informal literacy practices. While I stew on the Apps potential use, and would love to write more here, I have a Kingler to catch before it escapes!

***Reply***