PokÃ©mon Go versus Ingress

Description

Everyone is talking about Pokémon Go. So I may as well join in. While on holiday last week in the town of Menton in the south of France I aimed my mobile phone camera at a cat in a laneway. Two young d by, and I distinctly heard one of them utter the word

I laughed and repeated the word. Then followed a brief exchange in which I complained that the game wasnâ??t yet available in the United Kingdom. They said you could get it in The Netherlands by various means.

So itâ??s true what the papers say. PokÃ©mon Go provides opportunities for strangers to meet and talk, in this case even when the game is absent.

A day later the app was available for download to UK subscribers. I got to a wifi point and can attest to feelings of solidarity as I too contributed to Nianticâ??s server delays while downloading the free app â?? as reported in the press.

Enchantment

The anthropologist Hannah Gould has done a good job in a *Guardian* article of explaining PokÃ©mon Go in terms of *re-enchantment*. The game seems to revive dormant animistic tendencies by populating the world with invisible creatures detected through the magic of your smartphone as you move through the landscape.

As explained in many Youtube commentaries thereâ??s an economy in play as you capture these critters (pocket monsters), give them strength, watch them evolve and eventually pit them in contests against other peopleâ??s monsters.

Itâ??s a free app, but there are in-game purchases, advertising, and retailers can attract PokÃ©mon Go players to their physical premises by scattering a virtual confetti that lures PokÃ©mons, and hence players, and perhaps customers. It is consumer-oriented game mysticism inflated to the scale of fully fledged global capitalism.

PokÃ©mon Go belongs to a genre of multiplayer games and artworks that rely on geolocation. Colleagues and I were involved some years ago in a project on branding. In 2011 Mark Wright and I, with others, ran a hackathon from which emerged the idea of a geolocated Monster Swapp game. Even then, we thought of the danger for kids chasing across busy streets after virtual monsters.

At the time we worked with a company called Mobile Acuity that specialises in mobile phone applications. The company were already innovating in these areas, especially apps that deploy image matching. Also see Spellbinder link and a tweet by Anthony Ashbrook.

Ingress

On first sight of PokÃ©mon Go I thought I would wait for a more adult variant that didnâ??t feature cute cartoony pocket monsters. As is well known to location-based game enthusiasts there is such a grown-up game, namely Ingress, by the same company Niantic. It is a precursor to PokÃ©mon Go but has yet to enjoy the same runaway success.

In Ingress you join one of two globally dispersed â??factions,â?• the Enlightened or the Resistance, and attempt to capture territory by laying down virtual markers, making claims on behalf of your faction, and subverting the attempts of the opposition.

The Ingress developers have geotagged monuments and sites around the world that feature in the game play. These sites are then â??portalsâ?• that have to be joined up to advance the conquest. The Ingress graphics on your smartphone are futuristic and high-tech, which is to say luminous and laser-like. Itâ??s a kind of serious war game (a variant of capture the flag). Importantly, there are no cartoon creatures.

On inspection Ingress is a bit too close for my taste to the spectre of a divided world and real-world conquest. It turns the globe into a game board. This is all more more poignant, or sinister, as Niantic was a spinout from Google. Controversy erupted in 2015 when people discovered that holocaust museums and ex-Nazi concentration camp sites were included as portals amongst the historic monuments (see Zeit Magazin article).

As yet there are no laws preventing anyone from placing a virtual marker anywhere on the planet, including private property. A virtual geo-located object is positioned simply via its grid reference coordinates. There is nothing there. Itâ??s just a map reference that activates something on your GPS enabled smartphone if you are within range.

Thanks to the crude â??augmented realityâ?• graphics you may see something overlaid on the screen of your device as the app software deployâ??s the deviceâ??s motion and direction sensing technology. Of course, for a popular game such geotags encourage visitors with cameras, and even physical trespass.

The video promoting Ingress tells you, the player, that â??this is not a game.â?• In this and other respects the geographical specificity of the game cuts a little too close to reality for the average gamer â?? at least for me.

Harmless fun

So perhaps thatâ??s one of the superior attractions of Ingressâ??s younger sibling PokÃ©mon Go. Itâ??s a similar technology, just as sophisticated, but obviously quirky, juvenile and game-like. It involves hunting for little critters instead of questing after world domination. PokÃ©mons are styled on domesticated pets after all â?? harmless, cute, quirky little things that pose no real threat to our existence. See blog post: Cute and cuddly.

By another reading, PokÃ©monâ??s cartoony gamification conceals a whole lot of seriousness. As pointed out by the earliest video game critics, gamers are being further indoctrinated with the imperative to attach numbers to everything (scores), to develop fast response skills ready to fire weapons, and of course indulge the perpetual presence of contest, one-upmanship and conspicuous consumption.

From my reading of Jean Baudrillard we also encounter the charge that in overlaying the world with game-board veneers we are rendering conspicuous what we think of as a game, while underneath it all we are still subject to the truth-denying unreality and unaccountability of capitalism. Capitalism is the real game, concealed by the veneer of obvious game-like simulations such as PokÃ©mon Go.

Critter critique

Ingress and Pokemon Go invite critics to extend their objections to capitalismâ??s hegemonic game scenarios. These games illustrate and reinforce how the whole of geography falls subject to Cartesian spatial dictates, as lamented by Henri Lefebvre. We subdue space when we abstract space in mathematical and relational terms.

The danger of spatial abstraction is that we miss the bigger picture: â??The dominant tendency fragments space and cuts it into pieces. It enumerates the things, the various objects that space containsâ?• (89). The PokÃ©mon world is populated by game tokens that inevitably fracture the world into discrete objects.

Needless to say, many of those objects are weird animals, to be hunted and captured, amplifying our objectification of nature.

Certainly the inevitable reduction to objects in Pokemon Go renders my neighbourhood in Edinburgh the same as the place I encountered in the South of France a few days before. Though the augmented setting behind the critter is whatever you see through the lens of your smartphone, thereâ??s no regional variation in the graphics.

I understand that if you are near water then you are more likely to capture a fish (Goldeen), but itâ??s the same fish whether you are by the Mediterranean or the Water of Leith. The streets also look the same as your over scaled avatar jogs across the two dimensional PokÃ©mon map.

Reader comments attached to Hannah Gouldâ??s Guardian article show the widespread misgivings many have about such games. The immediate criticism targets safety. In order to capture a PokÃ©mon you have to knock it out by swiping at the screen to activate a virtual billiard ball. In my short foray into the genre I was soon invited to stagger into a busy street as I tossed the ball towards the taunts of a PokÃ©mon Raticate.

Then there are data and personal privacy concerns as the app transmits what your phoneâ??s camera sees, as well as your geo-coordinates, to the company server. Some critics also express contempt for anything so brashly commercial, popular, and of course digital as PokÃ©mon Go.

For some itâ??s a good way to get game addicts moving, exercising and into the world. For others its a further distraction from the benefits of communing with nature. One correspondent â??couldnâ??t help but wonder if our lack of human contact these days, as well as our apparent lack of desire to, you know, WALK anywhere, is leading us to some kind of â??Wall-Eâ?? future that weâ??re too blind to see.â?•

PokÃ©moptimism

For my part, while taking on board the critique, I think it is interesting to see how such gaming phenomena catch on, and what they imply. Iâ??m not prepared simply to dismiss PokÃ©mon Go. I think there are two interesting corollaries to the craze â?? whether the fad persists or fades.

1. Hannah Gouldâ??s article refers amusingly to someone staring at a real bird on the pavement and wondering out loud what itâ??s â??combat powerâ?• is. So I return to the cat in the lane. The people observing me photographing someoneâ??s pet as if a PokÃ©mon resonates as a kind of joke. But itâ??s common enough for technologies, games, and artworks to invite adjustments to our view of the world even when those things are absent. Ardent skateboarders see city spaces as ramps and hazards, carpenters see a world full of offcuts to be salvaged for the next job, gardeners see flowers and trees before they notice buildings, geo-gamers think everyone else, like them, is on a scavenger hunt, and Pokemon Go players see cats and sparrows as ready to be captured, scored and inventoried.
2. But then self-aware enthusiasts exhibit a countervailing tendency: I can go places my skateboard wonâ??t permit; there are things I canâ??t put a nail to; itâ??s warmer indoors than in the garden; sometimes I can wander without looking for anything in particular; and look, the bird flies, the cat purrs and is furry to the touch. The constraints of the digital have the capacity to highlight the

properties of the rest of the world, and even enhance our appreciation of what we might choose to identify as the worldâ??s power and richness.

References

- Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan press
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Trans. D. Nicholson-Smith. Oxford, UK: Blackwell. First published in French in 1974.
- Stallabras, Julian. 1996. *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture*. London: Verso

Notes

- For a discussion of the problem of geotagging private property see an interesting article: What can you do when PokÃ©mon Go decides your house is a gym?
- On gaming also see posts: Go outside and play, Letâ??s play, and Play anywhere. On augmented reality see: Obliquitous computing. On the capacity of works of art to reveal through difference see: Art challenges life. On pets see: The wisdom of animals, Stupidities, and Why cartoons have animals.
- For a critical review of the legacy of augmented reality gaming see The Tragedy of PokÃ©mon Go by Ian Bogost.

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. Baudrillard
2. game

3. geolocation
4. GPS
5. place
6. play
7. simulation

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