

Pokéwalking in the City: Pokémon GO and the Ludic Geographies of Digital Capitalism, A View from Jaffna, Sri Lanka

daniel dillon

Abstract

This article uses the author's play of Pokémon GO while conducting dissertation research on mobilities and masculinities in postwar Jaffna, Sri Lanka as a starting point for a wider consideration of ludic geographies and their increasing entanglement with digital capitalism. While new advancements in mobile and digital technologies present exciting new possibilities for occupying and moving through public spaces, we should not forget that the driving force of capitalism is to produce profits nor should we ignore the continuing social inequalities of race, gender, and caste, which also impact access to the possibilities these new technological developments represent.



Figure 1. Meltan, the Hex Nut Pokémon, was first teased through a Pokémon GO promotional event in September 2018. Image from Bulbapedia: [https://bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net/wiki/Meltan_\(Pokémon\)](https://bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net/wiki/Meltan_(Pokémon))

“Quick, quick! This way!” I whisper-shouted to my companion as I powerwalked along side streets and alleys in the heart of Jaffna’s market district, crossing significant social boundaries surrounding caste and thus breaking numerous local norms of public comportment. But there was a special event happening in the digital space of Pokémon GO at the time and Meltan, a mysterious new creature, was popping up randomly on the in-game radar (McWhertor 2018). As a long-time fan of the franchise, the chance to discover the first app-specific monster was exciting in a way that revived me after long hours of ethnographic fieldwork with the community of rickshaw drivers we had just we left.

Dinali, my friend and sometimes research assistant, had never heard of the game or the Japanese pop culture phenomenon on which it is based. But she followed, amused by the unfettered glee I was deriving from chasing imaginary creatures even as she was concerned that I was

perhaps departing too far from what she deemed safe areas and prudent watchfulness. We walked hurriedly down streets that I had never travelled, despite over nine months of work researching in the city. I had prided myself on being a quick study of the local geography, but had never wound down these particular paths. It was a reminder that I still had much to learn as I conducted ethnographic research for my dissertation on gender, cultural geography, and mobilities in Sri Lanka.

What I could not immediately perceive, I later learned was that these streets were lined with Dalit households, a group of communities that have historically been treated as slave castes in Jaffna (see Wickramasinghe and Schrikker 2019). That is, even though many of these families would be classified as part of the local middle class (Durné 2008), this was not a “good” part of town. Nor were these through streets, which I soon realized was one way of spatially dividing caste communities in Jaffna (Kuganathan 2014). The only real-world use for these paths, for most people, was to navigate to or from these residences, and there is good reason to believe these caste-based spatial divisions have become increasingly rigid since the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War(s) (Thiranagama 2018).¹

I was not considering these social realities so much as looking at the two-dimensional map on my phone screen, spurred on by my digital proximity to the new Pokémon. I encountered a Meltan, only for it to reveal itself to be a Ditto, a creature capable of transforming into near-perfect copies of any other. Frustrated, I begged Dinali to humor me and we tracked down another radar ping not far away. In the process, we crossed into a neighborhood that was majority Muslim households, another marginalized group in the local social hierarchies. But I was unconcerned with tracks and neighborhoods and propriety; I just wanted to catch the cute little monster. My gaze and my stride were both redirected by the hunt for a new digital prize.

But in exploring my physical surroundings to produce encounters with creatures that appear in the game’s digital space,² the spatially embed-

¹ In the West, the island’s conflict is generally described as a singular, protracted war between two clear parties. It is more accurate, however, to follow local custom and differentiate several periods of open conflict, punctuated with as many intervals of relative peace, between different constellations of forces.

² This physical/digital hybrid is commonly referred to as “augmented reality,” and some features of the game foreground this hybridity, such as the “AR mode” photography feature that allows players to make pictures of their digital possessions superimposed on physical space.

ded memories of Jaffna's troubled past were pushed aside or, more literally, coded over. The seeming inescapability of Jaffna's traumatic past has influenced the tone and focus of much of my larger project on mobilities and masculinities in postwar Sri Lanka (see Thiranagama 2013). But this also makes Jaffna a poignant setting for this article's concern with the potential of playful movements to remake public space. Jaffna is certainly a place that could benefit from the social and political possibilities that can emerge from playful engagements with its geography.

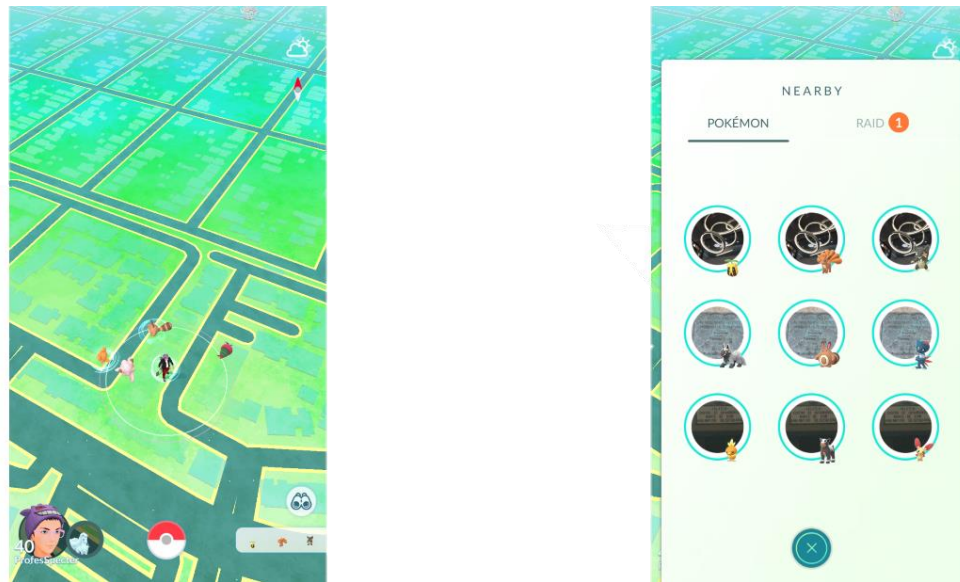


Figure 2. Two screenshots of Pokémon GO. On the left, a game map centered on the author's avatar while at his home office. On the right, the in-game radar showing nearby Pokémon displayed relative to the nearest in-game location.

On the hunt for Meltan, however, Dinali and I had lost confidence after discovering three more Ditto-doppelgangers. It was quickly turning dark outside, and we did not want to risk being stranded once night fell. We were each feeling less and less comfortable being so conspicuously out of place; being a Tamil woman out with a white man, she did not want to get a reputation for "impropriety," and I had already had some uncomfortable run-ins with the local police during the last several months of my research. We agreed that we had pressed our luck enough for one day and hailed a rickshaw to take us back to our flats.³

³ Rickshaw drivers are disproportionately low-caste and low-class meaning, ironically, we were ideally located to quickly catch a ride from a driver familiar to me from my dissertation research. But even this highlighted the segregated nature of Jaffna, as his route to my flat was a steady visual progression of greater affluence.

A few days later, the Pokémon Company released statements through Twitter and the in-app news that the new Pokémon would be featured in an upcoming game for the Nintendo Switch and the whole event was, in fact, a promotion designed to spur interest (Frank 2018).⁴ The game, which would have two versions per franchise tradition, would be a reboot of the earliest games in the series. Meltan was just one tweak being made to capitalize on the popularity of the Pokémon GO app, which would help to entice new, as well as veteran players, to revisit a franchise classic.

The new monster was a clever marketing strategy that bridged generations of games and fans, creating new webs of meaning and re-inscribing memories of gameplay. The Pokémon Company often utilizes media entanglement and overlapping time-images as brand building “memory mechanics” invoking nostalgia, desire, and a ‘fear of missing out’ to blend past, present, and future temporalities (Mallindine 2017). When these mechanics are applied to Pokémon GO, a more overtly embodied and spatial dynamic becomes entangled as well. As players continue to experience them anew through Pokéwalking, new associations are mapped onto existing memories and cultural geographies, reworking relationships to real-world times and places as well as digital ones. The end goal is, of course, to spur consumption.

But I was not considering the ramifications of digital capitalism or the suddenly urgent spatial tactics involved in trying to catch this new Pokémon. I was quite satisfied to rush around the streets and alleys of Jaffna’s market district as if on some Tolkienesque quest for the precious “Hex Nut” creature. My critical ethnographic lens fell away as I got wrapped up in the imperative to participate in the game and to consume Pokémon. I momentarily forgot my embodied habits of how to behave as a foreign, white man in Jaffna. In many ways the digital realm--linked to, but not equivalent to, the physical geography--made the more compelling demand on my attention. It led me to inhabit physical locations I would have likely never encountered in my analog travels through the city. In what follows, I would like to examine how Pokémon GO not only encourages players to “get up and go” out into the world in new ways but does so by linking mobility to digital consumption.

⁴The announcement was quite involved, including a video uploaded to the Pokémon Company’s YouTube channel in which several game characters discuss the mysterious appearances and hint at upcoming in-game tasks that players would need to complete to learn more. The video can be viewed in the cited Polygon article.

The success of Pokémon GO, which earned nearly a billion dollars in 2019 (Chapple 2020), relies on the way the Pokémon franchise has long deployed capitalist logics to encourage play. In her study of millennial Japanese pop culture, Anne Allison notes how Pokémon became a bonafide social phenomenon through the built-in necessity to interact and exchange creatures with other players (2006: 197-201). This converts the creatures into something of a cross between gifts and commodities that, in their variability, are imminently collectable and thus valuable.⁵ Further, as the creatures are often only available in certain kinds of places, the franchise has long been connected to modernist cartographic principles, imploring the player to explore in order to discover and obtain as many Pokémon as possible (Allison 2006: 212).



Figure 3. A screenshot of the games' compendium of known Pokémon. Unknown creatures are represented with a numeric placeholder. Discovered but uncaptured creatures are shown as a silhouette. The uncaptured creatures shown here can only be obtained in Africa (second row from top) and the small islands east of Australia (fourth row).

⁵ The Pokémon Company does not rely on this collectability alone. The franchise has also developed methods for establishing affective ties between players and Pokémon, such as Pokémon GO's "buddy" feature. This allows players to travel with a chosen companion Pokémon (Santry 2019). At the time of writing, this feature has been further expanded so that developing higher levels of "friendship" with a buddy generates in-game rewards.

In expanding these logics from the private realm of handheld gaming devices to the augmented reality of the game-space, Pokémon GO converts essentially the entire globe into an encounter zone. This is easily the most criticized aspect of the game. It has drawn everything from curiosity, confusion, and ridicule, to legal challenges from property owners who wished their reality to remain un-augmented (see Desatoff 2019; Padilla 2020).⁶ Nonetheless, this ambitious move redefined the spatial dynamics of places across the world by popularizing new ways of interacting premised on technological developments. A full discussion of these new geographies is beyond the scope of this paper, but other scholars have already begun this conversation (Henthorn, Kulack, Purzycki, and Vie 2019; Hjorth and Richardson 2017; Kilday 2018). Instead, in what remains of this paper, I want to outline how this new gaming technology offers a model for reimagining and inhabiting the space of the city.

Pokéwalking in the City

It is my contention that we are entering a new era and new media are again reworking the space of the city and the experience of urban mobility. Advances in digital mapping, mobile (phone) technologies, and internet connectivity have laid the ground for “augmented reality” games like Pokémon Go—not the only example, but the most popular and commercially successful to date some four years after launching in July 2016.⁷

To echo Nigel Thrift, these technological developments expand the repertoire of spatial practices and facilitate new forms of techno-embodiment; what we might call cyborg mobilities (see Randell 2017). Critically, these new tactics and modes of being relate directly to the physical space of the city, but without being so strictly beholden to classic forms of flânerie and capitalism, which offer freedom of movement, but

⁶ One of the more interesting responses came from Magnum photographer Thomas Dworzak, whose documentary photography of dark tourism led him to wonder what the game’s augmentation might mean for solemn sites like cemeteries and war memorials (see Havlin 2016).

⁷ Other games of this kind abound. Ingress (also developed by Niantic), a sort of geotagging-based game of “capture the flag,” laid the ground for much of the code infrastructure for Pokémon GO, while other popular franchises like Jurassic Park and Harry Potter quickly developed games in hopes of replicating Niantic’s success with Pokémon.

only to an elite few (Featherstone 1998; Sassen 1996). The irony of these human-tech hybrids, of course, being that players are freed from older forms of pedestrian mobilities only by forming attachments to the technologies that enable them. As Donna Haraway wrote in her famous essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” the cyborg “is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence” being “resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity” (1991: 151).

The rise of Pokémon GO points to the potential of geographies of play and digital consumption to bring about new and unexpected encounters (not unlike my frenzied search for a Meltan in the heart of Jaffna Town) by manifesting new ironies, intimacies, and relationships through the playful and possibly erratic mobilities of a horde of human-smart phone cyborgs. To understand the somewhat paradoxical possibilities inherent in “Pokéwalking” and similar physical-digital mobilities, I turn to Michel de Certeau’s “Walking in the City” (1988) and Thrift’s homage to that work, “Driving in the City” (2004). These essays, combined with insights drawn from my own play of Pokémon GO (and my formal research in urban mobilities in Jaffna, Sri Lanka), gives reason for a hopeful reading of the “politics of Pokéwalking.”

de Certeau’s analysis is largely focused on “the politics of mobility” (Cresswell 2010), though long before the mobilities studies framework was developed (Sheller and Urry 2006). Writing of New York City, he notes the contrast between a god’s eye view afforded him from the World Trade Center and the bustle of bodies making their way through the busy streets. Of walking, he says that the millions-strong chorus of footsteps taken as people crisscross the city comprise an “innumerable collection of singularities” that, in their layering, shape the space through which they move (de Certeau 1988: 97).⁸ Likening movement to language, he argued that pedestrians spoke with their feet, often in violation of prescribed routes. But even when these routes are followed, there are qualitative differences in each pedestrian’s movements that cannot be represented through a map.

These ephemeral, resistant steps (he calls them “an appropriation of the topographical system” [de Certeau 1988: 97]) correspond with what he elsewhere called “tactics,” “calculated action[s] determined by the absence of a proper locus (1988: 37); one can walk up a downward escalator, but the tactic lasts precisely as long as the movement is

⁸ de Certeau used his own conceptions of place and space that are today virtually opposite of the dominant usage developed from the work of geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977). I follow the latter to avoid confusion.

maintained. In contrast, the more stable, formal “strategies” of urban planners, government officials, and other such authoritative figures are the very structures that delimit a place and attempt to set out its proper meaning and use (De Certeau 1988: 36). Walking in the city, then, is a constant stream of tactical appropriations: spaces are occupied only as long as one’s body remains immobile; mobile gains are abandoned as quickly and constantly as they are accumulated.

Nigel Thrift reads in this “a sense of invention as a means of opening out sites to other agendas, so producing some degree of free play in apparently rigid social systems” (2004: 43). This insight is important to Thrift’s revision, as the materialities of driving are more rigid than those of walking.⁹ While the automobile may have revolutionized everyday movements from its invention in the early 20th century, the pinnacle of its influence came only with large-scale infrastructural projects to create “driving spaces” (Merriman 2007; Shelton 2017). Additionally, the less visible aspects of “the system of automobility” (Urry 2004), such as fuel supply lines, repair technicians, civil engineering, road maintenance crews, etc., have actively reshaped the landscape (Larkin 2013; Simone 2004).

For Thrift (2004: 49), the rise of automobility presents “a studied extension of the spatial practices which consists of the production of quite new material surfaces which are akin to life, not objects, and thereby new means of bodying forth” (2004: 49). In other words, automobility creates a hybrid,¹⁰ a “driver-car” cyborg that requires a synchronization of organic and mechanic components (Dant 2004).¹¹ Put more simply, the rise of automobility, premised on technological advances in transportation and facilitated by wide-scale infrastructural projects throughout the 20th century, fundamentally altered the experience of walking in the city *and* supplanted walking with driving as the most common medium of movement (and, as media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously exhorted, the medium is the message [McLuhan and Fiore 1967]).

⁹ Ironically, we attribute “autonomy,” the “auto” in “automobility (Featherstone 2004), to the elaborate social and infrastructural systems that facilitate driving and *not* the relatively little needed for guerilla pedestrian movements.

¹⁰ Thrift refers to a “transubstantiation” (2004: 49-50), but I prefer to avoid that word’s religious overtones.

¹¹ This collapse of the boundary between car as object and driver-car as a mobile assemblage is precisely what lies at the heart of much recent work on “car cultures” and how vehicles act as extensions of the self (e.g. Miller 2001).

Ludic Geographies and Digital Capitalism

I want to make more of Thrift's use of the word "play" above, which offers a contrast to the notion of "intimate alienation," in which the modern city becomes oppressive and isolating, or alienating in the Marxian sense, despite the density and abundance of humanity (Fuji 1999). Unlike the isolating effects of automobility, the digital infrastructure of apps like Pokémon GO (re)enchant the city (Harvey & Knox 2012), expanding the "magic circle" of private play through playful spatial tactics in public space (Malaby 2007; see also Leorke 2019). This coincides, I contend, with the creation of new modes of being together as players walk about the networked space of a city that is both tangible and intangible all at once (Castells 2004).

This brings me to the notion of "ludic geographies" (Woodyer 2012),¹² which offers a framework for thinking about this kind of ludic pedestrianism by highlighting how playful movements and gestures are inherent in everyday experiences of urban space.¹³ Further, this framework foregrounds how playful movements and gestures are not immune to the influences of *habitus* and various power structures; that they are, in other words, inherently political, indicating the potential of "play as resistance" (Flusty 2000; Woodyer 2012).

Ludic geography is, however, largely non-representational, being "non-cognitive and more-than-rational, [with] its embodied nature, its heightening of the affective register, its momentary temporality, its intersection between being and becoming" (Woodyer 2012: 319).¹⁴ Thus, while there is great potential for playful movements to lead to new and

¹² I prefer this phrase to "ludic mobilities" (Richardson 2010), though it is worth highlighting Richardson's insight that the corporeality of the playful movements I'm discussing are fundamentally constituted through one's relationship with a mobile device. This is especially important when noting the differences in players' experiences.

¹³ There is a metro-centrism to this line of thinking, as there is in most of the writing I reference here. It is worth noting then, that the difference between urban, suburban, and rural spaces is not of presence or absence of play or other phenomena but one of relative density, part of which has more to do with how data is collected more than anything else (Halberstam 2003). Pokémon GO is an apt example, as many noted the radical difference in play experiences between urban and rural players, highlighting assumptions in the code infrastructure (Hilgenberg 2019).

¹⁴ This is not unique to ludic geographies as Thrift notes that De Certeau seemed to anticipate non-representational theory in ways that resonate with aspects of automobility (2004:43), but ludic mobilities are perhaps an extreme case as play may be facilitated by representational technologies but is not reducible to them (Sutton-Smith 1997).

unpredictable encounters between habitants of the city, in isolation it is not likely to transition from mobility to mobilization (Sopranzetti 2012). In the case of Pokéwalking, this inertia to mobilization may be further solidified by the game's encouragement of digital consumption through the now commonplace 'freemium' model, offering basic features at no cost but granting access to extra features only for those who offer up real-world capital.¹⁵

However, the developers seemed aware of this potential and have actively sought to counter it; one can play the game alone, but it would not be as fun. The developers of the app have regularly sought to make the game more social and to establish a sense of community among players through the addition of: "raids" that require the teamwork of several players to defeat a powerful opponent; the planning of monthly "community days" that feature strong and often difficult to acquire Pokémon; the organizing of regular "safari zone" events that draw players from around the world to a designated city; features that encourage the development and maintenance of in-game relationships; temporally-bounded and generally thematic events that seek to motivate one kind of play (e.g. walking, battling, trading).

Furthermore, certain "species" are only available when accessing the game in different global regions, encouraging both travel and exchange between players who must assist each other to fulfill the longstanding quest to "catch 'em all." This expands the reach of the game into other digital realms, especially social media, where players trade tips and advice, coordinate group play, and share in the pains of failing and the joys of accomplishing a significant goal. The game thus creates a broad contingent of players, which no doubt consists of a multitude of more localized contingents—the casual players, the nostalgics, the questers, the battle junkies, etc—sub-communities who often congregate in order to collectively pursue their preferred form of gameplay and sociality.

Some Final Reflections on the Politics of Pokéwalking

It was approximately 8:00 P.M. on a Sunday night when I received a notification in Pokémon GO, which I had open on my phone as I prepared to go out to get dinner. The banner at the top of my screen told me that a Pokémon I had left to defend the gym at the railway station—where I

¹⁵ There are limited ways to earn, through play, in-game currency that can be exchanged for commonly used/needed items. However, premium items granting one-time bonuses or exclusive access require monetary purchase.

was conducting my dissertation research—had been defeated and returned to me. I was incensed! For months I had been spending my days on the aptly named Station Road living and working alongside the drivers who parked their rickshaws just outside the station to earn hires from arriving passengers. In all that time, my digital presence at the station was rarely challenged. But that night someone had pushed me out!

Since the station was only a small detour on the way to dinner, I decided to ride my bicycle rather than hire the corner rickshaw driver to take me into town. As I approached the station, I saw the silhouettes of three young men clustered together just inside the always-open gate, their heads lowered toward the smart phones in their hands and their fingers furiously tapping away. The telltale stance of a Pokémon GO player battling an unseen beast. Not wanting to startle them, I dismounted my bike and walked toward them, trying to be noisy.

“Aiiyo!”¹⁶ I said, just loud enough that they could hear. “Someone has taken my place.”

Hearing this, the three turned and glanced over at me, no doubt surprised to see a white man walking the streets of Jaffna at night while muttering Tamil to himself. We quickly struck up a conversation. They were university students returning from a weekend in Colombo, where they had partied and hung out with friends, including a little Pokémon GO near the city’s small public beach. Apparently, the trip had made them wonder if there were any good sites in their own city, prompting them to open their apps after disembarking from the train. After accounting for their presence at the station, they asked me to do the same. Why was a foreigner at the station long after the last southbound train had departed? I explained that I had been living in Jaffna for many months doing research with the rickshaw drivers of Station Road. Once this was clarified and confirmed, they asked me a favor.

“Please, sir. Do not attack this gym [now]. We need the coins. Give [us] some hours before taking” they pleaded in English, both a gesture toward their education but also, I suspected, a way to garner the good will their request required.

¹⁶ This is a common exclamation of surprise in Tamil that roughly corresponds to the English phrase “oh my.”

“Okay, okay. I will take it only in the morning. [You will get] full coins,” I replied in Tamil, intended as a sign of my sincerity and a show of respect for their claim to the space.

Then we went our separate ways, never to see each other again, but regularly claiming and reclaiming in-game locations from one another for the remainder of my residence. The next morning, when I returned to Station Road for my regular research work, I passed the rickshaw stand and opened the game on my phone. A few of the drivers followed to join me under the shade tree in the courtyard, looking over my shoulder as I quickly dispatched the students’ chosen defenders. One of the men asked me what I was doing, not recognizing the creatures.

“Just a game,” I said, not sure how to make it legible to him.

This was the moment when I realized one of the core truths of the digitally augmented and enchanted city: it is only enchanted for those with a certain kind of access, possession of a smart phone being the most fundamental requirement. These working-class men had those, but what they did not have was an unlimited data plan or lived experiences compatible with imagining their city as a digital playground (Harris 2013; Salazar 2011).¹⁷

It was only some months later that the increased movement of soldiers offered the ideal way to explain my animated reactions to drivers who noticed me playing. Apparently, a fair number of the (Sinhalese) troops transferring in and out of the region played the game, and it became common for the gym to change hands when they traveled by train. The drivers of Station Road never seemed to understand the game, partly because I struggled to find appropriate words in Tamil and partly because they clearly had not been exposed to a significant amount of Japanese pop culture.¹⁸ But when I explained that the army had pushed me out of the game version of “our place” (*engal idam*), my continued play (or at least some of its stakes) was apparently made clearer to them.

¹⁷ In my dissertation I chronicle a series of deeply disturbing incidents shared among a community of drivers, incidents that shed light on the largely unspoken history of police surveillance, harassment, and even outright torture of Sri Lankan Tamils.

¹⁸ I confirmed this in conversation with many of them, asking for stories of the kinds of films, music, and games that were most influential in shaping them as young men (see Nakassis 2016). Tamil cinema stars, Bollywood songs, and cricket were all common influences (Hollywood and US/British music less common), but Japanese culture and other similar soft power exports were not mentioned by anyone.

Periodically, some of them would ask if the station gym had “been hit” (*thākkappaddathu*), and if so would encourage me to quickly reclaim it.

Playing Pokémon GO revealed things about the city of Jaffna, about social geography in general, that my formal research did not, and perhaps could not, demonstrate. I often justified my play as relief and/or “timepass” between moments of serious research (Jeffrey 2010), but the time I spent at play was fundamental to my work. In fact, a chapter of my dissertation discusses the significance of play in creating and maintaining a sense of community among the drivers of Station Road, noting how such play is gendered and thus also allows these men to play with masculinity as well. My own play of Pokémon GO has convinced me that similar gestures are possible in all manner of ludic contexts, even those like my impassioned pursuit of Meltan.

However, as I celebrate the joys of Pokéwalking and the potential it creates for new, exciting encounters between players and between player and city, I want to explicitly note that this remaking of urban space is one among many layers of spatial practices, one that is not equally open or legible to all (Massey 2007). Still, it is a new and compelling way to (re)imagine public space around the world. As this anecdote suggests, it is one that can foster chance encounters and unexpected connections. While this anecdote did not evolve into something obviously subversive or resistant (Flusty 2000), it did affect my conception of the space of the station, as it perhaps did for those students. It is easy to see how these types of playful encounters could gradually form the grounds of shared purpose that is necessary for solidarity, a precursor for any mobilization, but especially those of a resistant nature (Jegathesan 2019).

The possibilities of mobilizing playful resistance will always be unequally accessible to different communities, and it is important to remember the role of intersecting identities and oppressions in who is able to do so successfully. In this regard, I am struck by recent developments in the game, where Niantic has fundamentally altered core features to allow for “socially-distant” digital proximity in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. In altering the basic fabric of the digital space of the game, Niantic may very well be facilitating more equitable access and thereby increasing the odds of more chance encounters by more fully integrating external social media into the broader experience of the game.

I am also struck by recent protests for racial justice (even amid a global pandemic) in the US, with demonstrations of solidarity coming from around the globe (Peiris 2020). I think especially of the unexpected role

Tik Tok, a video sharing app, played in organizing a largely digital effort to frustrate President Trump's June rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma (Coscarelli 2020), a use the developers most certainly had not anticipated. These developments point to the variety of possibilities for *jugaad*, a South Asian term that is equally apt for a skillful hacking, a clever improvisation, or a subaltern reworking of a dominant structure, especially when using digital technologies (Rai 2019).

It would be too much to expect something as unambiguously political and protest-like from Pokémon GO, but having witnessed the events of the pandemic, the protests, and now the presidential campaign (both in Sri Lanka and the United States), I am increasingly convinced of the potential of playful inhabitations of the world to unsettle oppressive structures and restrictive norms. I do not wish to oversell this potential, as unequal access and the logics of digital capitalism will surely work against such appropriations. But that may be where the ludic is especially effective. It provides extra incentive and momentum for creative new modes of being, which, when paired with desires for social change, offers just one model for how we might collectively reimagine the world.

Works Cited

- Allison, Anne. 2006. *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Castells, Manuel. 2004. *The Network Society*. London: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Chapple, Craig. 2020. "Pokémon GO Has Best Year Ever in 2019." *SensorTower.com*. Jan 9, 2020. <https://sensortower.com/blog/pokemon-go-has-best-year-ever-in-2019-catching-nearly-900m-usd-in-player-spending>.
- Coscarelli, Joe. 2020. "Why Obsessive K-Pop Fans are Turning Toward Political Activism." *NY Times*. June 22, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/22/arts/music/k-pop-fans-trump-politics.html?searchResultPosition=3>
- Cresswell, Tim. 2010. "Towards a Politics of Mobility." *Environment and Planning D* 28 (1): 17-31.
- Dant, Tim. 2004. "The Driver-Car." *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (4/5): 61-79.
- De Certeau, Michel. 1988. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Desatoff, Sam. 2019. "Niantic Settles 2016 Class Action Trespassing Lawsuit." *Yahoo! Finance*. September 6, 2019.

<https://finance.yahoo.com/news/niantic-settles-2016-pokemon-class-194800175.html>.

- Durné, Steve. 2008. *Globalization on the Ground: Media and the Transformation of Culture, Class, and Gender in India*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Featherstone, Mike. 1998. "The Flaneur, the City, and Virtual Public Life." *Urban Studies* 35 (5/6): 909-925.
- Featherstone, Mike. 2004. "Automobilities: An Introduction." *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (4/5): 1-24.
- Flusty, Steven. 2000. "Thrashing Downtown: Play as Resistance to the Spatial and Representational Regulation of Los Angeles." *Cities* 17 (2): 149-158.
- Frank, Allegra. 2018. "Pokémon: Let's Go! Introduces New Pokémon, Meltan." *Polygon*. Nov 19, 2018.
<https://www.polygon.com/pokemon/2018/9/25/17900778/new-pokemon-meltan-pokemon-go>.
- Fuji, James. 1999. "Intimate Alienation: Japanese Urban Rail and the Commodification of Urban Subjects." *differences* 11 (2): 106-133.
- Halberstam, J. 2003. "The Brandon Teena Archive." In *Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, edited by Robert Corber and Stephen Valocchi, 159-169. London: Blackwell Publishing.
- Harris, Tina. 2013. *Geographical Diversions: Tibetan Trade, Global Transactions*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Harvey, Penny and Hannah Knox. 2012. "The Enchantments of Infrastructure." *Mobilities* 7 (4): 521-536.
- Havlin, Laura. 2016. "The Dark World of Pokémon GO." *MagnumPhotos.com*. August 18, 2016. <https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/society-arts-culture/thomas-dworzak-the-dark-world-of-pokemon-go/>.
- Henthorn, Jamie, Andrew Kulack, Kristopher Purzycki, and Stephanie Vie, eds. 2019. *The Pokémon Go Phenomenon: Essays on Public Play in Contested Spaces*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.
- Hilgenberg, Josh. 2019. "Pokémon Go Devs are Trying to Make Improvements for Rural Players." *Comicsbeat.com*. October 23, 2019.
<https://www.comicsbeat.com/pokemon-go-rural-improvements/>.
- Hjorth, Larissa and Ingrid Richardson. 2018. "Pokémon Go: Mobile Media Play, Place-Making, and Digital Wayfarer." *Mobile Media & Communication* 5 (1): 3-14.
- Jegathesan, Mythri. 2019. *Tea and Solidarity: Tamil Women and Work in Postwar Sri Lanka*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Jeffrey, Craig. 2010. *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*. Stanford, CA: University of Stanford Press.

- Kilday, Bill. 2018. *Never Lost Again: The Google Mapping Revolution that Sparked new Industries and Augmented our Reality*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Kuganathan, Prashant. 2014. "Social Stratification in Jaffna: A Survey of Research on Caste." *Sociology Compass* 8 (1): 78-88.
- Larkin, Brian. 2013. "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42: 327-343.
- Leorke, Dale. 2019. *Location Based Gaming: Play in Public Space*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Malaby, Thomas. 2007. "Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games." *Games and Culture* 2 (2): 95-113.
- Mallindine, Jayme. 2017. "Pokémemory: Time-Images, Transmedia, and Memory." *Transmissions* 2 (2): 122-141.
- Massey, Doreen. 2007. *World City*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore. 1967. *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*. New York: Bantam Books.
- McWhertor, Michael. 2018. "A Never-Before-Seen Pokémon appeared in Pokémon Go Today." *Polygon*. Sep 22, 2018.
<https://www.polygon.com/2018/9/22/17889718/pokemon-go-new-mystery-pokemon-891-ditto-chikorita>.
- Merriman, Peter. 2007. *Driving Spaces: A Cultural-Historical Geography of England's M1 Motorway*. Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Miller, Daniel, ed. 2001. *Car Cultures*. Oxford and New York: Berg.
- Nakassis, Constantine. 2016. *Doing Style: Youth and Mass Mediation in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Padilla, Mariel. 2020. "Pika-Who? How Pokémon GO Confused the Canadian Military." *NY Times*. Jan 1, 2020.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/01/world/canada/pokemon-go-canada-military.html>.
- Peiris, Harim. 2020. "Black Lives Matter: Sri Lankan Style." *Groundviews*. June 13, 2020. <https://groundviews.org/2020/06/13/black-lives-matter-sri-lankan-style/>
- Rai, Amit. 2019. *Jugaad Time: Ecologies of Everyday Hacking in India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Randell, Richard. 2017. "The Microsociology of Automobility: The Production of the Automobile Self." *Mobilities* 12 (5): 663-676.
- Richardson, Ingrid. 2010. "Ludic Mobilities: The Corporealities of Mobile Gaming." *Mobilities* 5 (4): 431-447.

- Salazar, Noel. 2011. "The Power of Imagination in Transnational Mobilities." *Identities* 18 (6): 576-598.
- Santry, Elle. 2019. "Pokémon and the Environment." In *The Augmented Reality of Pokémon Go*, edited by Neriko Doerr and Debra Occhi. 17-40. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Sassen, Saskia. 1996. "Whose City? Globalization and the Formation of New Claims." *Public Culture* 8: 205-223.
- Sheller, Mimi and John Urry. 2006. "The New Mobilities Paradigm." *Environment and Planning A* 38 (2): 207-226.
- Shelton, Kyle. 2017. *Power Moves: Transportation, Politics, and Development in Houston*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Simone, Abdou Maliq. 2004. "People as Infrastructure." *Public Culture* 16 (3): 407-429.
- Sopranzetti, Claudio. 2012. "Owners of the Map: Mobility and Mobilization among Motorcycle Taxi Drivers in Bangkok." *City & Society* 26 (1): 120-143.
- Sutton-Smith, Brian. 1997. *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Thiranagama, Sharika. 2013. *In my Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Thiranagama, Sharika. 2018. "The Civility of Strangers? Caste, Ethnicity, and Living Together in Postwar Jaffna, Sri Lanka." *Anthropological Theory* 18 (2-3): 357-381.
- Thrift, Nigel. 2004. "Driving in the City." *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (4/5): 41-59.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. 1977. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Urry, John. 2004. "The 'System' of Automobility." *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (4/5): 25-39.
- Wickramasinghe, Nira and Alicia Schrikker. 2019. "The Ambivalence of Freedom: Slaves in Jaffna, Sri Lanka in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries." *Journal of Asian Studies* 78 (3): 497-519.
- Woodyer, Tara. 2012. "Ludic Geographies: Not Merely Child's Play." *Geography Compass* 6 (6): 313-326.

About the Author

daniel dillon (he/him and they/them) is a queer, feminist ethnographer whose dissertation centers the everyday experiences of a community of rickshaw drivers on Jaffna's Station Road in northern Sri Lanka. After being awarded their PhD, in South Asian Cultures & Languages, from the University of Texas at

Austin, dillon plans to continue working at the intersections of ethnography, fiction, and cultural studies while seeking permanent employment in or adjacent to academia. In his free time, he enjoys tending to his house plants and balcony garden, reading queer, female, and BIPOC authored science fiction and fantasy, and playing Pokémon GO when the Texas weather permits.