

Gotta Catch 'Em All?: Pokémon GO and the Spatiality of Risk

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INTRODUCTION

COVID19 has permanently impacted and altered our lives: from our working, learning, and socialising arrangements, to health practices, and perceptions of safety and wellbeing. The threat of infection coupled with lockdown policies (including travel distance restrictions) radically reconfigured our understandings around and uses of public and urban space, foregrounding the tensions between populated spaces as places of pleasure and leisure, and as spaces bearing the risk of ill-health. Niantic's successful augmented reality game Pokémon Go has frequently been framed and promoted as a route to physical and mental health, and as such its marketing, player discourse, and game design choices, presents an intriguing case study where, during the height of political and public anxiety about the pandemic, these two understandings of public space – as a place of pleasure and of danger – came together.

This paper will analyse Pokémon GO within a framework of risk (Beck, 2011) and risk communities (Robinson, 2023). It will look at how communities are created and divided by perception and response to risk. We will argue that the pandemic is far from the first instance of risk becoming a core issue within Pokémon GO, risk evaluation has been an active issue for many players since the game's initial release. The heightened risk for players of colour, women, and people in poorer areas has been well established in the literature (Layland et al., 2018; Salen Tekinbaş, 20174). It is within this context that we analyse Niantic and the Pokémon GO playing community's response to the pandemic. In particular we will be examining the unprecedented changes made by Niantic to Pokémon GO's game mechanics during the height of the pandemic which made the game easier to play remotely and the player community backlash to the removal of these mechanics. We will look at the discursive framing of these changes in press releases and popular media, and the player community response to this. In doing so we will explore the complex and varied ways in which risk is perceived and acted upon, and the way in which urban

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and public space is understood and engaged with. We will highlight the significant transformation of the spatial narratives of pleasure and risk that happened with COVID19, where for many individuals, and at a policy level, cities shifted from lively to dangerous, vibrant to infectious. In analysing the implementation of Pokémon GO's COVID changes and the debates surrounding their removal within a framework of risk we look to unpack the competing economic, political, and cultural logics that circulate around and through our conceptualisation of space and risk.

This paper is part of a broader project around spatiality, crowd sourcing, perceptions of risk, and mobile media that we are undertaking.

BIO

Dr Rowan Tulloch is a lecturer in digital media and video gaming in the Department of Media, Communications, Creative Arts, Language and Literature at Macquarie University, Australia. His research looks at the technological and cultural logics embedded within practices of interactivity and play: from the neoliberal rhetorics of choice and agency in video gaming, to the surveillance architectures of gamification. He seeks to understand the relationship between play and power, and explore the systems that shape our leisure practices and preferences.

Associate Professor Nicole Matthews teaches in media and cultural studies at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. Her research explores the nexus between digital media, education, disability and deaf studies. Her most recent book, written with Naomi Sunderland, is *Digital Storytelling in Health and Social Policy: Listening to Marginalised Voices* (Routledge, 2017). She published on lived experience narratives in broadcast, digital and social media, and their uses in professional education and healthcare contexts.

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