

Chapter Title: Mobile Frontiers Pokémon after Pearl Harbor

Book Title: The Race Card

Book Subtitle: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities

Book Author(s): Tara Fickle

Published by: NYU Press. (2019)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1f885vr.9>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



NYU Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Race Card*

Mobile Frontiers

Pokémon after Pearl Harbor

Playing and mapping go hand in hand. To play is to make space—in the day, in the mind, in the earth—for playing; to mark space—as “playtime,” as “make-believe,” as a “playground”; and to map on these spaces a different set of rules, a different way of seeing, navigating, and measuring. To play is thus to reorient oneself within a new world; but it is also, as we discussed in the last chapter, to Orientalize that new space, to understand it as spatially, temporally, and metaphysically antithetical yet complementary to reality as we know it. Play is “not real,” and reality is “not a game”: the map, in short, is not the territory.

Or is it? It is no coincidence that the games that have most troubled our existing ludic definitions—namely, those “gamified” or “augmented reality” apps that starkly expose the precariousness of the play/real life binary—tend to be those that make the greatest use of modern mapping and location-based technologies. Obviously, without a GPS-enabled device and adequate cell phone reception or Wi-Fi, one cannot “check in” at a restaurant on Yelp, nor “capture” a wild Pikachu in *Pokémon GO*. But more important, there *is* no restaurant to “check in” at, no Pikachu to capture, if there is no map on which these entities appear. The restaurant itself may still exist as a physical eating establishment, but if there is no listing for it on Yelp—if it cannot be located through the app’s interface—then from the perspective of the player (as opposed to the diner) it effectively does not exist. There is no game, no badges or bragging rights to be earned. Conversely, there may be no physical Pokémon to capture “out there” in the world, but because they appear on the game’s map the creatures acquire a cartographically—and hence metaphysically—“real” existence.

This conceit, in fact, drove the global phenomenon of *Pokémon GO*, which began life as nothing but a Google Maps “hoax.” It started in 2014

as just one among many April Fools' Day jokes the Silicon Valley giant had begun annually embedding in its products, a tradition inaugurated in 2000 with the release of "MentalPlex," a service that ostensibly allowed users to search the web telepathically.¹ The 2014 Google Maps "Pokémon Challenge" was a complex affair, comprising three distinct but carefully synchronized conceits. On the developer side, a team led by software engineer Tatsuo Nomura had secretly scattered throughout Google Maps a number of cute, cartoonish "pocket monsters" from the Japanese Gameboy games and *Pokémon* animated television show so popular among American adolescents in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Concurrent with the rollout of this developer "update," a promotional video appeared on the Google Maps blog and YouTube channel in the early evening hours of March 31, ostensibly prompted by the discovery that "dozens of wild Pokémon have taken up residence on streets, amidst forests and atop mountains throughout Google Maps."²

The slickly produced two-minute video opens on a scene of a young man clad in hiking gear, smartphone in hand, bushwhacking his way through a dense forest. As a voice-over extolls the adventurous spirit of "Pokémon masters"—a title the millennials in the audience would immediately recognize as the coveted objective of the original Gameboy games and TV show—we see the man come face-to-face (or rather face-to-screen) with a ferocious, dragon-like Pokémon: a Charizard in its cave. Crouched behind a rock, the man hurls a small red and white "Poké Ball" (the device used to capture the creatures in the original games). The fire-breathing monster vanishes mid-roar as an on-screen message appears over the darkened mouth of the now-empty cave: "GOTCHA! Charizard is caught!"

The scene is replayed several more times with different combinations of players and outdoor settings, intercut with shots of Brian McClendon, then vice president of the Google Maps team, announcing the search for the "world's best Pokémon master"—and Google Maps' newest team member. Interested parties were then directed, for further details, to the third and final piece of the April Fools' fiction: a job listing posted on Google's official blog.³ The skills associated with the "profession" of Pokémon master are, it turns out, the very same qualities Google looks for in its employees—"risk-taking," "detail-oriented," "deep technical knowledge," and the ability to "navigate through tall grass to capture

wild creatures.” The ad jocularly invited prospective candidates to submit their qualifications via a newly developed “training tool,” which turned out to be simply the most recent version of the Google Maps smartphone app. The objective, as job seekers were informed upon downloading and opening the updated app, was to search the Google Maps interface for Pokémon, leaving “no city unzoomed,” and to “capture” the creatures they encountered by taking a screenshot.

A handful of static images might seem a rather anticlimactic payoff for what was, from the perspective of all parties involved, an extremely time- and labor-intensive undertaking. Such a dismal calculus is, perhaps, part of the very nature of hoaxes: the fun is only meant to last as long as the illusion does. But if the pleasure of April Fools’ Day jokes lies in perpetuating the deception only in order to eventually expose it—and the victim—as an April Fool, then the Pokémon Challenge was both a terrible prank and a brilliant one. Terrible in the sense that it was not intended to deceive but to titillate: the video included an express disclaimer to that effect, while the job posting’s facetious tone and the lack of functionality associated with the updated app accomplished the same. But brilliant in the sense that it had fooled people into thinking that they were the masters, the ones playing rather than being played. The ultimate “GOTCHA!” was not that there were no “real” Pokémon to catch, but that *because* there was no “real” job being offered at Google no labor was being performed on the part of the would-be candidates. Indeed, as the April Fools’ Day jokes became ever more elaborate and expensive with each passing year, Google users increasingly came to see themselves as the beneficiaries of a spectacularly gratuitous labor expenditure that the company had undertaken purely for its audience’s annual enjoyment.⁴

But such self-deceiving egotists were the true April Fools. For they cleaved to the illusion that the jokes were transitory ends in themselves, and in doing so failed to see the “hoaxes” as the means to larger and less innocent ends: that is, the perpetuation of the perception of Google itself as a fun-loving, creative-thinking maverick of just the sort ostensibly being sought in the Challenge. If the video tool was, in that sense, a genuine corporate recruitment tool disguised as a fake one—one aimed at securing not new employees but the image of the employer—the job posting on the blog was somewhat less subtle, although no less effective,

in its efforts to maintain and expand the Google consumer base. The company had long ago learned to appreciate the value of the carrot over the stick when it came to influencing user behavior, whether through the appeal of an exclusive, “invite-only” email service like Gmail or the perceived scarcity of a “one-day only” April Fools’ Day event. The latter, when combined with millennial nostalgia for a childhood game, was so strong as to make thousands of users leap to update to the latest version of the Google Maps app, making the hoax a far more effective tactic than those pesky “update available” app notifications. Equally effective was the job posting and video’s seemingly offhand mention that the latest Challenge “hints and tips” would be made available to Google Maps’ social media followers on Google+, Facebook, and Twitter.⁵

The Challenge, such as it was, ran for less than forty-eight hours. Yet the Pokémon’s abrupt departure on April 2, 2014, turned out to be only a temporary hiatus. Two years later, they returned to Earth—or, rather, to Google Earth—in the form of a stand-alone mobile game that was essentially the Pokémon Challenge made playable. *Pokémon GO* was a collaboration between the Tokyo-based Pokémon/Nintendo company and the San Francisco-based Niantic Labs—whose CEO, John Hanke, had been a Google Maps employee at the time of the April Fools’ joke. The game seemed to be the Google hoax realized: now players could, like the “digital explorers” featured in the original promotional video, travel to real (i.e., public, outdoor) places to capture Pokémon instead of just passively scrolling through the Google Maps interface. While users might be required to leave their living rooms and pound the pavement in search of Pokémon, however, it was not quite the experience portrayed in the Challenge: after all, the gameplay still took place entirely on the screen. There was no physical Poké Ball to hurl, no real risk of being singed by a Charizard’s fiery breath.

In fact, what seemed like a hoax made real might ultimately be understood merely as the expansion of the hoax—and, in that sense, the marketing campaign underlying it. Indeed, *Pokémon GO* was an even more impressive showcase of Google Maps than the original Challenge had been, for the game demonstrated how GPS navigation technology could be used not just for the mundane purposes of obtaining driving directions or checking real-time traffic conditions—for the “work” of daily life in the age of smartphones—but also for the purpose of play. It

was, after all, the very same smartphone and satellite technology being used to locate the nearest gas station in Google Maps, on the one hand, and the nearest cartoon quarry in *Pokémon GO*, on the other. The difference was simply that what had been laminated within a single interface in the Pokémon Challenge had now been divided into two (apparently) distinct applications.

The functionality of Google Maps thus authorized the location-based fictions that made *Pokémon GO* so fun. Yet the implications of this authority—what we might call the punch line of the real April Fools’ joke—were not apparent until several weeks into the game’s release, when concerns about privacy and data mining began to surface. In order to play the game, users were required to create a Pokemon.com account—or to sign in with their existing Google account. The convenience of not having to remember yet another password—and the fact that the Pokemon.com site was quickly overwhelmed and for a time no longer accepting new users—led numerous players to opt for the third-party, Google sign-in method. While entering one’s Google credentials would have normally prompted a second screen in which users were asked to confirm the permissions they were providing—in this case, the granting of “full access” privileges to one’s Google account by Niantic, and vice versa—a bug in the initial game skipped over this authorization screen, leading directly into gameplay. The “glitch” was quickly patched, but this simply meant that anyone wishing to play was now required to manually agree to their geospatial data—that is, information about where they were and had been, for how long, what speed they were traveling at, and so forth—being collected and shared between Google and Niantic, not that such data was no longer being harvested.⁶

Pokémon GO was certainly not the first app to use geospatial data to monitor its users’ movements, nor to monetize that information—for example, by creating in-game incentives that directed players toward particular local businesses, as was the case with the three thousand McDonald’s restaurants in Japan that were converted to Pokémon “gyms” (important landmarks where players congregated in order to compete with other trainers) following the fast-food chain’s national sponsorship of the game.⁷ But the game was doing more than simply jumping on the lucrative data mining bandwagon alongside innumerable location-based mobile apps like Fitbit and Foursquare as well as navigation apps like

Waze and Uber. For Google Maps did not simply make *Pokémon GO*'s conceit possible or plausible: rather, its location-based functionality constituted the game's core dynamic. That is, game developers were using the very same GPS technology to track and collect data about players even as the players themselves used it to track and collect nearby Pokémon. If the prospect of Google Maps employment—of putting one's gaming skills to work—was no longer an explicit framing narrative in *Pokémon GO* as it had been in the original April Fools' Day joke, this was simply because it was no longer needed to incentivize users. Indeed, disguising that work-play connection proved a more effective approach: far more valuable than a single employee was the uncompensated, voluntary microlabor performed by hundreds of thousands of aspiring Pokémon masters willing to trade their personal data in exchange for a "free" dose of nostalgic fun. The April Fools' Day prank had paid off in spades.

The foregoing is both an example of, and evidence of the pressing need for, the type of critically responsible and responsive approach to game studies discussed in the previous chapter. There, we began with the striking parallelism between the way Huizinga's and Caillois's theories have been applied by contemporary game studies scholars to analyze games, and the way the theories have themselves been read *as* games in the sense of being analogously "free": that is, apolitical, universal, and empirically objective. Upon comparing the seemingly "free" content of the theories with the historically bound context of their creation, however, we discovered that the illusion of ludic freedom, which both theorists so emphatically insisted was an inherent quality of play, was itself a scholarly fiction.⁸ By turning to the academic and institutional sources of Orientalist authority from which Huizinga's theory of the magic circle and Caillois's taxonomy of games were derived, we found that these models not only reproduced, but fundamentally relied for their coherence and legitimacy on, the "natural"—that is, intrinsic and unbridgeable—differences between East and West. As the inheritors of this Orientalist legacy, game studies scholars face a dilemma: how might we continue to draw on and extend Huizinga's and Caillois's valuable ludic insights without at the same time unwittingly reproducing their ethnocentric biases?⁹

Let me briefly reiterate the historicist method proposed in response at the end of the last chapter, one which this chapter will demonstrate has

equally productive possibilities for the analysis of games as of game theories. It was suggested that the first step in addressing this blind spot—which afflicts not only academic but “commonsense” understandings of games—is simply to acknowledge its existence. (This is harder than it sounds, not least because, as we just saw with the April Fools’ jokes, the shards of our illusions may leave behind a disturbing impression of our own victimization, or worse, our unwitting complicity.) The second is to historicize the aporia: to contextualize the game theories—or, as in this chapter, the games themselves—within the particular national and cultural milieu, the political agendas and economic relations, the philosophical and methodological traditions within which they are both initially conceived and later consumed. This means acknowledging the porousness of the magic circle, the relationship between the game and the world from which it is supposedly isolated—or which it is seen to “realistically” reproduce. For then we can begin to consider the stakes of the a priori assumptions from which our games as well as our game theories obtain their veracity.

Historicizing *Pokémon GO* within its April Fools’ Day context is just one way of applying this method. From this brief essay we have already gleaned two valuable historicist insights: first, the inextricability of the game’s fictions from its material origins as a corporate PR campaign and Google Maps expansion; and second, how the explicit original fiction of a job opportunity became a disguised material reality through the labor of data creation and mining. The success of the deception was due in part to the widely held assumption that the “freemium” game, like the April Fools’ Day joke, was an innocent, pleasurable pastime—and thus, like the game theories of the previous chapter, an “end in itself.”

This chapter, like the last, seeks to explode that myth by expanding the scope of our scholarly map to include both sides of the Pacific, and both sides of the game/world binary. It attends to the postwar Japanese moment in which the original *Pokémon* franchise was produced as well as the late twentieth- / early twenty-first century moment in which *Pokémon GO* was consumed by global audiences. Doing so reveals a striking prehistory to the Google marketing campaign as an extension of a national rebranding effort that began in 1980s Japan, and which saw Pikachu and his “trainer” Ash Ketchum conscripted into service alongside characters like Hello Kitty and Mario. This approach also allows us

to recognize in the later game's use of GPS technology and the Google Maps framework the legacy of a broader cartographic tradition of ideologically charged map making—one which imperial Japan had already put to sophisticated use to disseminate and rationalize its expansionist agenda during the early decades of the twentieth century.

In demonstrating how the mid-century contestation for physical spaces in East Asia has its counterpart in the contemporary contestation over the way those spaces are represented in and through Japanese video games, this chapter augments existing discussions of the ludic's role in Japan's strategic postwar shift from "hard" to "soft" power—that is, from violently enforced national ideologies to voluntarily adopted "cultural" values. *Pokémon GO* is a ludo-Orientalist artifact not because the original franchise (and, in fact, the idea for the later mobile game) comes *from* Japan, but because it is at every level informed by the way Japan is *perceived* by, and how it wishes to be perceived by, the "West"—and the way the latter, in turn, has been used by Japanese companies like Nintendo as a seemingly neutral, universalist model for developing "global" consumer products. As Nintendo of America's Pokémon brand manager Gail Tilden put it, "We try hard to keep American children from thinking of Pokémon as being from Japan. This requires localization, not to hide the fact that Pokémon is made in Japan, but to convey the impression that these are global characters. Therefore, we do not want to make Pokémon American, either. We want Pokémon to become global characters that children all over the world will find familiar."¹⁰ Perhaps because they were already well versed in such ethnocentric perspectives, Americans have been especially receptive to such "performances of commodity white face," as anthropologist Christine Yano has called the Japanese marketing of Hello Kitty and other characters. The perceived non-Japaneseness of the cute and fanciful Pokémon may have facilitated their misrecognition as "American," in the sense that Yano means in suggesting that "what is interpreted as 'without nationality' is actually very much imbued with Euro-American culture or race—or at least one interpretation of it. To 'have nationality' is to exhibit traits that are distinct from Euro-America."¹¹

As a ludo-Orientalist artifact, *Pokémon GO* further offers a useful foil to *Homo Ludens* and *Man, Play, and Games* because the critical and popular receptions of both have tended to privilege issues of

content over those of context; hence questions of historical and national origins, racial politics, labor economies, and so forth have been seen as largely tangential or, as with the issue of data mining in *Pokémon GO*, an unfortunate contamination of the game as what should be, at least in theory, an end in itself. Beyond this, however, there is the strikingly similar role which Asia plays—or rather, seems *not* to play—in the cultural objects examined in this and the previous chapter. That *Pokémon GO* was a U.S.-Asian collaboration, and that the original franchise on which it was based was a Japanese export, these material conditions have since acquired the status of factoids, bits of trivia. Yet the very fact that Pokémon's Asian origins could be seen *as* trivial is nothing short of remarkable. For America's nationwide obsession with the game—initially reprising but ultimately eclipsing the “Pokémania” of the 1990s and 2000s, which had been largely restricted to an adolescent audience—points to a strain of Orientalism that seems markedly different from the essentializing, exploitative practice usually discussed in race and post-colonial studies. If, even today, the hint of an “Asian-sounding” name is sufficient to brand its bearer as a “perpetual foreigner,” how is it that Pikachu, Ryu, and Pac-Man have been so seamlessly assimilated into American culture, even and especially during periods of rampant anti-Japanese sentiment like the 1980s?¹² As scholars, gamers, and cultural consumers, we all “know” about the Asian origins of Tamagotchi or Yoshi, but why don't we care?

By “care,” I mean not so much a lack of global *interest* in the game's Japanese origins—there are whole websites dedicated to exhaustively documenting the Japanese-language equivalents or inspirations for each and every of the 802 Pokémon—but rather the lack of negative impact this knowledge has had on the game's popular reception among international, and particularly American, audiences. As an imported product, the game's being “made in Japan” has had no discernible effect on American consumers' interest in playing the game or purchasing the various products associated with the franchise. In American popular media or culture (with the notable exception of a *South Park* episode discussed below), representations of Pokémon are strikingly devoid of the racial stereotypes that have historically clung to all things Asian in America: if its Asianness signifies at all, it is far more often gently satirized as another example of Japan's “weird” cultural obsession with childish cuteness.

And finally, in scholarship, although many have rightly noted the role played by Nintendo's sophisticated branding strategies in facilitating the franchise's entry into international markets, such efforts on the company's part have on the whole been understood as either wholly ancillary to the game—like an ingenious “localized” translation of the sort Coca-Cola became famous for—or as something that goes no deeper than the level of visual style.

Yet, while Japanese-initiated branding efforts may have helped erase what Koichi Iwabuchi refers to as the foreign “cultural odor” of the Pokémon franchise, Americans have been curiously amenable partners in this venture.¹³ Indeed, U.S. disinterest in Pokémon's Japaneseness has at times bordered on selective amnesia. In the second week of *Pokémon GO*'s release, for example, military officials at Pearl Harbor issued a stern public warning to active-duty personnel stipulating that the game was “not authorized for use in restricted areas near [the base] or near entry control points” and promising disciplinary action against those found to be in violation of the policy. When questioned by reporters, the navy spokesperson reassured them that the game posed no “real security threat”; the matter was rather one of establishing behavioral standards befitting the armed forces. Neither in the official press releases nor in the many news stories that reported on the event was there even a trace of ironic recognition that a Japanese game had so suddenly and thoroughly captivated military personnel at the precise location where Japan had unleashed its surprise attack some seventy years before. It was as if the game had erased not only the “scent” of Japaneseness, but the whole history of U.S.-Japan antagonism.

But if the correlation between Pokémon and the events of World War II failed to register for Americans at even a purely coincidental level, this is certainly not because no such correlation existed. In truth, one cannot journey very far into the Pokémon world without exposing the precariousness of that ahistorical fiction. To take one example, many fans know that the original game, and most of its cast of characters, was inspired by creator Satoshi Tajiri's childhood interest in collecting insects. What is hardly ever mentioned in popular or scholarly commentary, yet immediately clear from interviews, is that this idyllic, “universal” picture of childhood dirt digging was in fact deeply inflected by the particularities of the war that had recently concluded—and in particular, the

atomic bombs that had hastened its conclusion. Born in 1965 in a suburb of Tokyo, Tajiri's entomological adventures regularly involved crawling through old bomb shelters in pursuit of rare specimens; the mythology surrounding the origin of the "pocket monsters," in turn, speaks tellingly of genetic mutations and alien viruses. Just as the Silicon Valley roots of the later game are clearly important to understanding its seemingly un-gamelike kinship with corporate profiteering, so, too, are the national and historical origins of *Pokémon GO*'s antecedent crucial to understanding Pokémon's politics—which is to say, in the first place, to recognizing that Pokémon *is* political.

The tendency to perceive Japanese video games as not being Asian in the same politically meaningful sense as has historically indexed the racial stigma attached to Asian bodies or spaces is perhaps the reason that Asian American studies has been slow to take up video games like *Pokémon GO*, despite a growing embrace of Colleen Lye's call to consider Orientalism and Asian American racialization as two versions of the same racial form.¹⁴ It is perhaps also why video game scholarship, too, has tended to approach these games in terms of their technological or aesthetic aspects rather than seeing them as expressly "political" in the sense that scholars like Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Ian Bogost have defined that term. Bogost has rightly pointed out that video games are—or at least have the capacity to be—powerful sites of political engagement and critique. This potential lies, for him, in their ability to render visually and conceptually accessible "the Logix that make up a worldview, the ideological distortions and political situations . . . how political structures operate, or how they fail to operate, or how they could or should operate."¹⁵

Yet the expansive potential for political change which Bogost ascribes to games is, like the theories of game realism we examined in the last chapter, hobbled by an overly narrow yet vague definition of what constitutes a "political game." While Bogost acknowledges that a game's politics go beyond aesthetics and visual representation—thus he excludes from the category of political games those that simply "apply a political skin to existing procedural mechanics"—he remains wedded to a self-determined notion of the political very much like the game-theoretical concept of sovereign choice we saw in chapter 2.¹⁶ For although "not all videogames about politics are political," Bogost's range of

examples presumes that all political videogames are in some way “about politics”—where “about” is used to designate an intentional and overt, often visually explicit message immediately grasped by the player.¹⁷ As this chapter reveals, however, political ideologies can inhere in games that don’t necessarily see themselves as political. Even more, our analysis of game politics must necessarily extend to the political agendas and uses to which the games are put by those other than the game developers—including, most obviously, politicians. By revealing as politically charged a game like *Pokémon GO* which is deliberately marketed as—and has largely been received as—wholly apolitical, this chapter augments our perspective on the relationship between games and politics at both the visual and the procedural level.

Although *Pokémon GO* was indeed new and different in important ways from the original *Pokémon* franchise—most obviously, in the augmented reality and GPS technology it employed—isolating those technologies from the existing context in which they signified risks fetishizing and dehistoricizing them. Much discussion of augmented reality or pervasive games has taken as axiomatic the notion that they newly blur or dissolve boundaries: between game and reality, play and work, private and public, et cetera. Certainly, as we learned in the last chapter, part of the problem has to do with the false binaries themselves. Yet the binaries persist, for they serve important ideological functions. This chapter explores what some of those functions are by reframing *Pokémon GO*’s marketing and mechanics as the evolution and automation of a much older logic of “location-based” ethnocentrism and a much longer history of “augmenting reality” through the cartographic naturalization of such worldviews. These mapping and marketing efforts collectively create new ways of seeing—or not seeing—Japaneseness and its wartime history, particularly in relation to the conservative nationalist agendas of the present.

Augmenting “Cultural Odor”

In part I of this book, we saw how Asianness in the American context has historically been understood as the biological or cultural feature responsible for the unparalleled efficiency (and cheapness) of Asian American labor. With the rise of Japan as a technology-exporting nation

beginning in the 1980s, we see a curious inversion of that narrative. Early game scholars (many of whom, of course, were also consumers) have somewhat optimistically tended to regard Japanese video games like *Super Mario Bros.* and *Donkey Kong* much as business analysts did Sony Walkmans and Toyota sedans: that is, as “culturally neutral commodities whose country of origin has nothing to do with the way that they work and the satisfaction that a consumer obtains from usage.”¹⁸ Scholarly appraisals of Nintendo’s successful video games have thus often characterized Link, Pac-Man, and Ash Ketchum alike simply as user interfaces, “little more than a cursor that mediates the player’s relationship to the story world,” as Henry Jenkins puts it.¹⁹

The complete, cursor-like reliance of such game characters on user input is certainly a central feature of many Japanese video games, distilled to its essence in the 1990s with the Tamagotchi, a helpless digital “pet” requiring constant care and maintenance. Yet claims of video games’ Japaneseness as functionally—and thus politically—meaningless ironically attest to the remarkable success of the marketing strategies developed by their creators. These approaches were explicitly intended to “augment reality” by rendering their products *mukokuseki*, which literally means something or someone lacking any nationality, but which is also used to refer to the erasure of racial or religious characteristics and contexts from a cultural product.²⁰ This erasure can be found throughout Japanese mass culture and especially in cartoons, comics, and video games, where the “look” of Japaneseness is evacuated both by removing the visual markers of human racial difference (hence the huge, jewel-colored eyes and expressive hair of many Japanese animated characters), and by replacing it with the altogether different aesthetic category of cuteness or *kawaii*: that is, not by making the characters “Caucasian,” but “cute.”

Closely associated with the visual style of internationally popular manga and anime (comics and animated cartoons), *kawaii* is often described in terms of a particular set of physical attributes: namely, large heads and eyes, coupled with small, rounded bodies. The cuteness of creatures like Hello Kitty, Totoro, and, of course, the Pokémon has arguably been central to the erasure of “cultural odor” regarded as essential for their global success in international markets. Indeed, the Pokémon franchise’s ambitious and successful expansion from Gameboy games to trading cards and television shows was facilitated by the original’s

already minimal cultural “odor,” with the TV show producers observing that “it appeared easy to produce international versions [because] the setting of the adventure explored looks *mukoku* and religion free.”²¹

What Iwabuchi described as the creation of “culturally odorless” products, and Christine Yano as “performing commodity white face,” was a complex process that went far beyond mere visual erasure, however. It was part of a broader marketing strategy known as “global localization” in which Japanese companies like Sony and Nomura led the way during the 1980s. “Glocalization,” which soon became a part of American business jargon and one of the major marketing buzzwords of the early 1990s, was based on the notion that to succeed simultaneously in a variety of local markets, global companies had to conduct an intricate balancing act: to both “transcend vestigial national differences and to create standardized global markets, whilst remaining sensitive to the peculiarities of local markets and differentiated consumer segments.”²²

In part because the Pokémon universe was composed mostly of nonhuman characters, the Pokémon Company’s American marketing sector focused much of their efforts on linguistic rather than aesthetic glocalization. Just as glocalization as a whole, as Tilden emphasized, did not involve “hiding” Pokémon’s Japanese origins but rather making the characters “familiar” to American audiences, so linguistic glocalization was understood as something distinct from the sort of translation or dubbing found in traditional textual or filmic Asian imports to the States, where maintaining the semantic meaning of the original is paramount. What linguistic glocalization involved instead, as *Pokémon* TV producer Masakazu Kubo put it, was “erasing Japanese language signs as much as possible”—which, interestingly, meant not wholly translating the characters’ names into their semantic English equivalents but rather simply erasing their “Japaneseness” (i.e., their “foreignness”).²³ At the same time, it required maintaining the complicated nomenclature and classification system of the Japanese original, which, as Joseph Tobin explains, focused on devising “names that make it easy for children not only to memorize the Pokémon but to understand the relationship of Pokémon both to their evolved higher forms and to their family groups (e.g., water, air, fire).”²⁴

The remarkable range of tactics through which this complex process was achieved can be illustrated with just a few examples. In the

English-language version of the Pokémon games and television show, creatures like Fushigibana became Venusaur, Nyarth became Meowth, and the main human character, the Pokémon trainer Satoshi, named after the game's creator, became Ash. The logic behind these "cleverly descriptive" names is, however, different for all three. Fushigibana, in Japanese, roughly translates to "strange flower"; Venusaur, a portmanteau of "Venus" and "dinosaur," effectively captures the connotation of "strangeness," but abandons the sound and denotative meaning of the original.²⁵ Nyarth is apparently derived from *nya* (ニャー), the Japanese onomatopoeia for the sound a cat makes; hence the English translation to Meowth.²⁶ Satoshi, a common Japanese name for boys, roughly translates to "intelligent" or "quick-witted"; Ash has no semantic connection, but is rather a combination of three of the letters extracted from the original name (*Satoshi*).

Interestingly, the instances where the original Japanese name was retained—such as Pikachu—were those which the marketing team apparently thought didn't "telegraph" their Japaneseness in quite the same way—meaning, to an American ear, that they not only didn't sound Japanese, but that they didn't sound like words at all. Quite common, in fact, was the assumption of meaninglessness expressed by an English-speaking journalist at *Time* magazine in a 1999 interview with Satoshi Tajiri:

Time: Do the names mean anything or are they just gibberish?

TAJIRI: They all have meaning. Like Nyarth. It's from a Japanese proverb about a cat with money on his head that doesn't know it's there. It's about understanding the value of money. I don't think they have that concept in the U.S., so the name is different.

And Pikachu. "Pika" is the sound Japanese say an electric spark makes. And "chu" is the sound a mouse makes. So Pikachu is like an electric mouse.²⁷

Although, as Tajiri points out, the original nuances, puns, and culturally specific Japanese references are largely lost in their linguistic glocalization, the very question of what is "lost in translation" in the Pokémon world as a whole is rarely considered in the first place because we tend not to register that what we are encountering is, in fact, a translation.

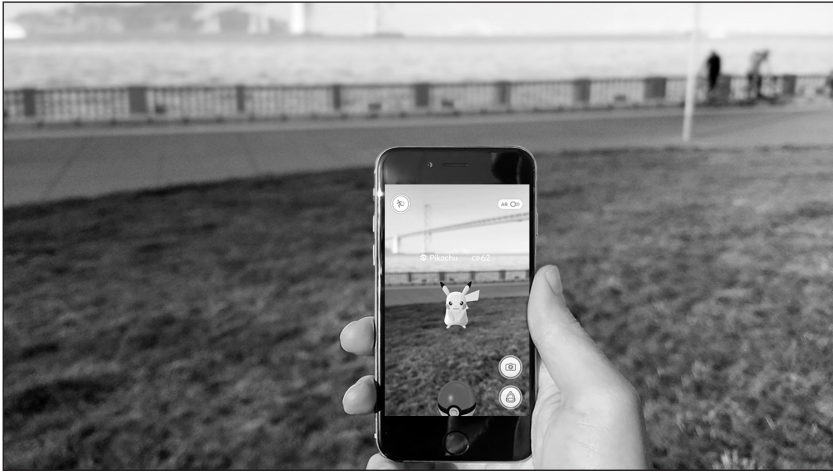


Figure 5.1. Augmented reality technology in the mobile game *Pokémon GO*. Gameplay screenshot courtesy of *Digital Trends*, www.digitaltrends.com.

We might say, in light of this observation, that glocalization constituted the analog version of augmented reality, fostering the illusion of Pokémon being “local” and “familiar” despite being from Japan. It was in this sense a direct precursor to the digital version of the augmented reality technology found in the later *Pokémon GO* game, which used the smartphone camera to create the illusion of Pokémon existing in the material world (fig. 5.1). While linguistic glocalization was the result of intense imaginative labor on the part of the Pokémon Company, by 2016 that labor had been outsourced—or, rather, mechanized. Now, it was the player’s smartphone battery that was taxed in the effort. The constant depletion of power: such is an apt description of the price one paid to play.

Imaginative Geography: A New Techno-Orientalism

Although John Hanke and his San Francisco-based company Niantic have received the lion’s share of the credit (and, in later days, the blame) for *Pokémon GO*, the idea for the game as well as the April Fools’ Day Pokémon Challenge came from overseas. It was Satoru Iwata and Tsunekazu Ishihara, the CEOs of Nintendo and the Pokémon Company,

respectively, who initially pitched the concept to Google; Hanke, at that time a Google employee, was simply the one who “took it seriously”²⁸ enough to extend it beyond April 1. Iwata, credited with revitalizing the stagnating company upon taking the reins in 2002, had long been interested in mobile and motion control gaming: his visionary leadership resulted in the Nintendo DS, Wii, and Switch. Ishihara, however, was the one who helped broker the eventual collaboration with Niantic, a choice based in part on his appreciation for the company’s 2012 mobile title *Ingress*, a sci-fi themed “capture the flag” game with very similar location-based mechanics to *Pokémon GO*.²⁹

Ingress, too, had fundamentally relied on the appeal of laminating a second world on top of the first and encouraging the discovery of landmarks that, despite being right in their backyards, Americans may never have noticed. Yet while it attracted significant attention within a particular subset of gamers (including Ishihara), *Ingress* never got close to the mainstream appeal *Pokémon GO* enjoyed. The explanation seems to rest in part on the latter’s ability to leverage an established franchise and consumer base: what game writer Ollie Barder has delightfully described as “two decades of Pokémon mindshare.”³⁰ Although the majority of American players of *GO* had never played a single Pokémon game before—the diversity of the demographics was in fact a significant part of what made the game so noteworthy—they were quick to be enraptured by the charming combination of “culturally odorless” and adorably vulnerable creatures that had made the original franchise so successful.

Furthermore, while *Pokémon GO*’s method of changing the way people viewed the world around them also relied, like *Ingress*, on changing their relationships to familiar spaces, its “glocalized” use of augmented reality technology seemed to harmonize far better with the location-based conceit. Whereas *Ingress* used Google Maps to create a futuristic-looking game display, amplifying the difference between “augmented” and everyday reality, *Pokémon GO* was in many ways indistinguishable from the Google Maps interface that had already become an integral part of most smartphone users’ daily lives (fig. 5.2). Indeed, if the similarity between *Ingress*’s objective of conquering portals and *Pokémon GO*’s of capturing Pokémon and battling them at local “gyms” made the Nintendo-Niantic collaboration, in Hanke’s words, “a perfect match,”³¹ so, too, did Pokémon’s extraordinarily successful track record of globalization make it an

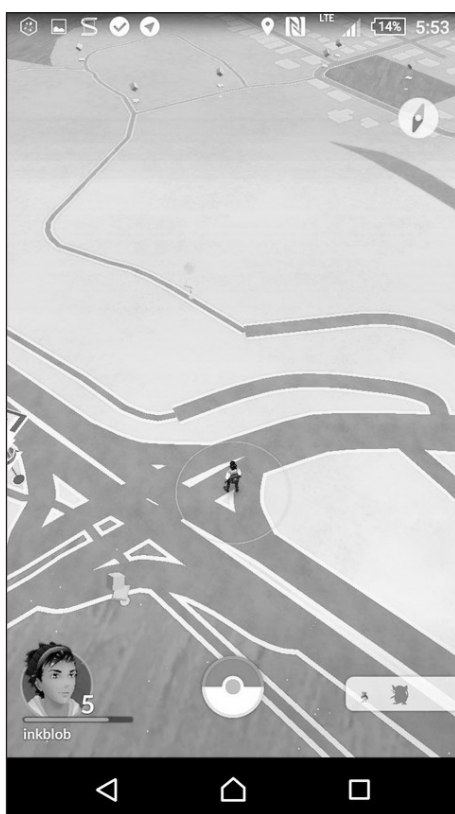
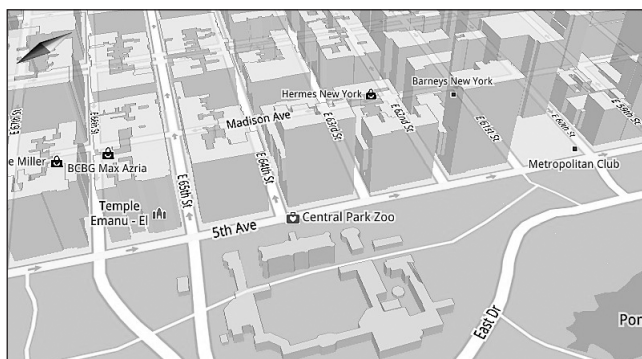


Figure 5.2. Screenshots of real-life locations as seen in Google Maps, the augmented reality mobile game *Ingress*, and *Pokémon GO*. Gameplay screenshots courtesy of Reddit user Inkblob. http://www.reddit.com/r/Ingress/comments/4saih1/two_worlds/.

equally natural fit for a game whose pleasure derived in large part from the mapping of foreign worlds onto familiar ones.³²

For *Pokémon GO*'s augmented reality technology extended beyond its use of the camera lens: indeed, the battery drain led many veteran users to disable the AR function altogether. That the game could be equally enjoyable even without the AR suggests the extent to which the fiction was maintained by the GPS technology. The latter was, counterintuitively, an even more powerful means of "augmenting reality" because it had become so familiar as to seem self-evident. That is, *Pokémon GO* changed the way users saw the world in much the same way that Google Maps and other navigational apps had done for years: not by adding fanciful landmarks or competitive objectives, but simply by reorienting the user's perspective. This feature had been integrated into the interface of Google Maps almost from the beginning, in the form of a button aptly called "My Location," which, when pushed, literally makes the user—in the form of their phone—the center of the world around which the map now orients itself (fig. 5.3).

The AR and GPS technologies, then, functioned in the game as mutually reinforcing modes of representing the world: as at once exotic and unfamiliar (because filled with magical creatures) and yet completely safe and familiar (because entirely centered around oneself). It underscored new media scholar Laura Kurgan's observation that "maps . . . show us where we are and how to get somewhere else, and in doing so, they can contribute to a sense of security and self-possession. The solidity and certainty of the phrase 'You are here' would be the motto of that identity-reinforcing—and maybe even identity-constitutive—function of maps."³³

In emphasizing how maps function as a means of representing the world as well as oneself in relation to it, Kurgan builds on the observations of scholars across diverse disciplines—geography, philosophy, new media, and postcolonial studies, in particular—who have compellingly unmasked maps as value-laden, interest-serving fictions whose seemingly neutral choices of content, scale, and perspective disguise the fact that they are "embedded in a history they help construct."³⁴ *Pokémon GO* is a useful site from which to consider how mapping technology more broadly, and mobile GPS in particular, continues to serve the self-legitimizing function of Orientalism that we examined in the previous chapter—what Edward Said dubbed "imaginative geography"—while

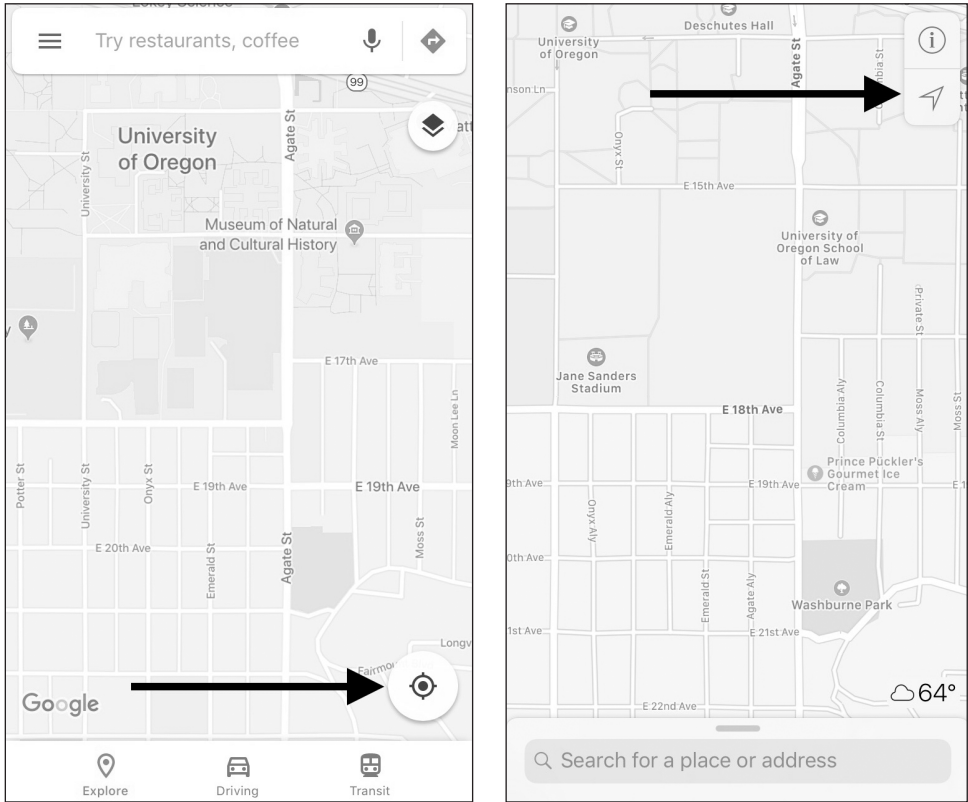


Figure 5.3. “My Location” feature in Google Maps and Apple Maps.

also participating in the late capitalist cultural form that Frederic Jameson, a decade or so after Said, would describe as an “aesthetic of cognitive mapping.”³⁵ Together, they provide a scaffold on which to fashion a historicist account of *Pokémon GO* as it remaps the relation between Japan’s imperial past and its nationalist present.

Imaginative geography, Said suggests, “help[s] the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away.”³⁶ What Said identifies as the dramatic intensity of imaginative geography captures the logic whereby maps—and Orientalist discourse—achieve their implicit authority. As our discussion of Pokémon’s glocalization revealed the continuity between marketing tactics and augmented reality technology, so our understanding

of the game's location-based, self-orienting technology is incomplete without an account of its Orientalist—or, more precisely, techno-Orientalist—predecessors. Indeed, as critics like John Cheng remind us, Orientalism was always technological, in the sense that “geography, the adoption of international scientific standards for its measure, and their cartographic application were transformative technologies for Western hegemonic modernity, facilitating production of knowledge about ‘the Orient’ that inverted and assuaged European imperial interests in Asia.”³⁷ Although it has largely receded in our current usage of the term, the cartographic is crucial to understanding the nature of the relationship between the two terms that make up the whole concept of “techno-Orientalism.”

David Morley and Kevin Robins coined the term “techno-Orientalism” in 1995 as part of a broader effort to understand how and why, “within the political and cultural unconscious of the West, Japan has come to exist as the figure of empty and dehumanised technological power.”³⁸ They observed that techno-Orientalist imagery and narrative frequently conveyed a sense of Asian threat, yet one that extended beyond Western anxieties about technological advancement that were being projected onto Japan as the creator, and the profiteer, of these technologies. The threat rather coincided with that technology's eastward *migration*, upsetting not simply the technological supremacy historically associated with the West, but the geocentric identity associated with that supremacy: that of being, as the earth itself was long presumed to be, the center of the universe, the world around which all others revolved. In other words, as Asia became, and continues to become, the new center of technological progress, the West is losing its identity as the unmarked, universal point of reference against which the Orient—a term which, as we noted in the last chapter, corresponds not to a specific place but rather a spatial relation—has been constructed as and reduced to a particular, an Other to the West's self. Underlying techno-Orientalism, then, is the broader threat Asia poses to what French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas referred to as “ontological imperialism,” in which “human history is seen from the viewpoint of Europe and the West—providing narcissistic forms of self-centered knowledge—philosophy as ‘egology,’ as Levinas puts it.”³⁹

Current scholarship on techno-Orientalism tends to understand it in terms of overt and intentional representations (particularly visual

and literary) of Asian bodies, landscapes, languages, and other cultural tropes. Yet the “odorless,” subtended Asianness of Pokémon is, as we have seen, the result of a painstaking and deliberate *removal* effort: it is, in other words, no more natural or neutral than the seemingly unmarked, objective map of the world it seemingly reproduces. We must, in other words, expand our consideration of techno-Orientalism to include, as Paul Martin does in his inventive reconsideration of the video game *Resident Evil 5*, not solely the game’s “ostensible theme”—which is to say, the zombie-killing, world-saving exploits of a white male protagonist and his black female partner in neocolonial Africa—but to the underlying “social imaginary that shapes that theme.”⁴⁰ Reading *Resident Evil* as a “Japanese game”—not only in the sense of the national and racial identity of its creators, but the extent to which it “obliquely memorializ[es]” the country’s colonial history—Martin persuasively argues that the game “transforms a partially suppressed Japanese colonial memory into the performance of a normal [i.e., militarily sovereign] Japanese (inter)national subjectivity” on the global stage.⁴¹ Analogously, it is by recognizing the way the mapping technology of augmented reality games like *Pokémon GO* “obliquely” constructs an Orientalist perspective—which is to say, a means of defining human difference in terms of geographic distance—that we begin to detect in such games the cultural odors which glocalizing efforts so effectively eliminate at the surface level.

In her compelling discussion of “high tech Orientalism” in early cyberspace, Wendy Chun defines that term as a tactic of “navigating by difference,” a strategy that “seeks to orient the reader to a technology-overloaded present/future (which is portrayed as belonging to the Japanese or other Far Eastern countries) through the promise of readable difference, and through a conflation of information networks with urban landscape.”⁴² Written fourteen years before *Pokémon GO*’s release, Chun’s emphasis on Asian difference as the product of the lamination of real and virtual spaces provocatively anticipates how the game’s “reorienting” appeal relies not simply on making the Pokémon visible but readable; not simply mappable, but collectible (hence the game’s slogan, “Gotta Catch ’Em All!”).

This “high tech Orientalism” also reworks, for the internet age, the spatial model of political culture that Frederic Jameson discussed in terms of “cognitive mapping.” Robert Tally Jr. and others have suggested that Jameson’s aesthetic understanding of cognitive mapping was problematically

“prefigured” by that of the national allegory as articulated in his deeply controversial essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.” There, Jameson posited that “third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.*”⁴³ Aijaz Ahmad, in an early response to Jameson, argued that “there is no such thing as a ‘Third World Literature’ which can be constructed as an internally coherent object of theoretical knowledge.”⁴⁴ In short, as Tally notes, Jameson’s deployment of the national allegory (and later, of cognitive mapping) functioned as a “renewed or revived Orientalism, notwithstanding the otherwise good intentions of the critic.”⁴⁵ Orientalism might then be perceived as a kind of return of the repressed in Jameson’s later work on cognitive mapping in his book *Postmodernism*, wherein, as Patrick Jagoda pithily describes it, the term is used to posit a “theoretical way of *knowing* the world without accurately *representing* it.”⁴⁶ Drawing on Kevin Lynch’s *The Image of the City*, Jameson introduced cognitive mapping as an imaginative response to the alienating conditions of (post)modern city life and the vicissitudes of multinational capitalism (and before that, market and monopoly capitalism).⁴⁷ In the absence of “traditional” navigational referents such as “monuments, nodes, natural boundaries, built perspectives,” the individual struggles to mentally map either themselves or the “urban totality” surrounding them.⁴⁸ Jameson is less interested in what cognitive maps might look like, in the neurological sense, than in the ideological function they serve, in the Althusserian sense: as a “representation of the subject’s Imaginary relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence,”⁴⁹ which, in Chun’s account, becomes an explicitly Orientalized representation of the relationship between information networks and urban landscapes.

But who needs cognitive maps when one has Google Maps? Or, to frame it in Chun’s terms, what is *Pokémon GO* if not “high tech Orientalism” in app form? For what better representation of the cognitive map’s function—what Jameson called “the practical reconquest of a sense of place”⁵⁰—than the *Pokémon GO* interface depicted in figure 5.4, in which the world is nothing *but* a space of conquest—of natives to be captured, “gyms” to be conquered, and “PokéStops” to be raided? And alongside

that simulated imperialism, we can speak of the game as a reconquest of a sense of time: a nostalgic return to childhood games of territorial expansion in days when the world was new, each step a frontier.

As we saw in chapters 1 and 3, nostalgia for the closed frontier has guided American cultural production and national imagination since the late 1800s; thus Asian Americans' association with that frontier was crucial in painting them as "pioneering Americans" in the model minority era. The emergence of cyberspace in the mid-1990s gave rise to a reemergence of the frontier trope, with creators and users of the new internet rhetorically framing it as an electronic frontier. As Chun reminds us, "Like all explorations, charting cyberspace entailed uncovering what was always already there and declaring it 'new.' It entailed obscuring already existing geographies and structures so that space becomes vacuous yet chartable, unknown yet populated and populatable. Like the New World and the frontier, settlers claimed this 'new' space and declared themselves its citizens."⁵¹ *Pokémon GO's* marketing, from the earliest days of the April Fools' video, played explicitly on this idea of a "New World" in which players served as the digital pioneers of twenty-first-century manifest destiny: courageous settlers traveling to the edges of the mappable world (or at least the edges of the cell phone service map), wandering into inhospitable deserts and ascending sheer rock walls to domesticate "monstrous" inhabitants and plant their team flags.

While the newer game's augmented reality and GPS technology helped enhance the visual immersiveness of this fantasy, this simulated imperialism—the goal of collecting all the Pokémon and completing the "Pokédex"—had always been the franchise's core dynamic. Such a convention is arguably not unique to Pokémon, but a central feature of many of Nintendo's most successful games. Speaking of Nintendo games as a form of "New World travel writing," Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins observe that such games "allow . . . people to enact through play an older narrative that can no longer be enacted in reality—a constant struggle for possession of desirable spaces, the ever shifting and unstable frontier between controlled and uncontrolled space."⁵² "When I watch my son playing Nintendo," Jenkins muses, "I watch him play the part of an explorer and a colonist, taking a harsh new world and bringing it under his symbolic control, and that story is strangely familiar."⁵³ The very terms in which Jenkins describes the American resonances of these

Japanese-created games—as “strangely familiar”—pithily attests to the remarkable success of Nintendo’s glocalization efforts, successfully negotiating the seeming contradiction between “global” and “local” through experiences which, to reinvoke the words of Pokémon’s brand manager Gail Tilden, feel “familiar to children all over the world.”⁵⁴

Yet, as we saw with the data mining controversy, it is only from a particular perspective that the player appears to be the colonizer; from a broader view, it is the player who is being colonized.⁵⁵ Indeed, the conclusions of Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter would suggest that Japanese video games ultimately confirm even as they seemingly resolve American anxieties about Asian invasion: “The microworld colonizer—the player who enjoys exploring the virtual territory of the game—is also the real-world colonized whose imagination is increasingly occupied and shaped into a source of profits for Nintendo. Through identification with Mario the conqueror/explorer/colonist, the player is annexed/invaded/occupied by Nintendo, the company for whom Mario has become conquistador.”⁵⁶ Kline and colleagues’ description of games as “microworlds” adds a further dimension to a historicist approach to game studies. So far, we have focused on historical context mainly in terms of chronology and cartography. To this we can now add the element of *scope*: of micro- and macro-worlds, or, in Googlespeak, of “Street View” and “Bird’s Eye View.” The point here is that a game’s ideology functions at the “macro” level as well as the “micro”; however, this is a view that we rarely consider because we instead tend to analyze the game world as the gamer sees it (i.e., at whatever representational scales the game allows: first person, map view, over the shoulder, etc.). But when we zoom out and consider the *Pokémon GO* map from a perspective we would never see within the game because our scale is too limited (for example, the “macro” image depicted in figure 5.4, a user-created map of all the Pokémon gyms in New York City), a different picture emerges of the game itself, not us, colonizing the world.

Beyond the various PokéStops scattered throughout the map—waypoints where players can collect and deploy items to assist them in capturing Pokémon—the game features a series of “Pokémon gyms,” at which players can, once they have traveled near enough to the site, train and strengthen their Pokémon by pitting them in combat against



Figure 5.4. Map of *Pokémon GO* gyms in New York City. Image courtesy of the *Observer*. <http://observer.com>.

a lineup of creatures at the gym. If successful in defeating the reigning champions, control of the gym then falls to whichever of the three teams the player had elected to join during the setup phase of the game. The team controlling the arena is indicated by a prominently colored “flag” on the map; the player whose Pokémon currently reign at the gym receives rewards for each day they manage to maintain control. Above is a “macro” level, user-created map of the gyms in New York City, one which the player themselves would never see in-game because of the physical distance separating gyms (they would likely be able to see at most two or three at a single time from within the game’s map view).

Compare the above map with the following one, which appeared in a Japanese propaganda booklet—*A 1942 Declaration for Greater East Asian Co-operation*—used in Japan’s Asian and Pacific colonies and occupied



Figure 5.5. A cartoon-like illustration of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere titled "Japan Stood Up" from a wartime propaganda booklet. James Orr, Yayoi Koi-zumi, and Zeljko Cipris (trans.), "A 1942 Declaration for Greater East Asian Co-operation," *Asia-Pacific Journal* 6, no. 3 (March 2008): <http://apjif.org>.



territories. This map is essentially a visual representation of the foreign policy plan that came to be known in English as the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” (hereafter GEA): Japan’s vision of a pan-Asian military and economic bloc freed of Western imperialist powers and based on a policy, as outlined in a series of official declarations and radio addresses beginning in 1940, of “mutual respect” for each Asian country’s “sovereignty and independence.”⁵⁷

The visual narrative of racial and spatial unity constructed by this map offers a reflection of how imperial Japan saw the world and its relation to that world: what we might call its cognitive map, if nations can be said to have such things.⁵⁸ The map’s scale extends not to the entire globe but only to a circumscribed Asian region—with a particular focus on China, Southeast Asia, and the Philippines—within which Japan itself is represented as a literally marginal figure. Such artistic choices, in visually eliminating the “egological ethnocentrism” of Western imperialist cartography—in which one’s own nation is depicted at the center of the map—deliberately underscore the image of Japan not as a colonizer but as a regional “friend” and liberator. Although the appearance of Japanese flags makes clear that such “liberation” simultaneously involves a transfer of ownership, the minute size of these flags in comparison to the more prominent ones representing each Asian country constructs an ideal vision of sovereign unity rather than forcible annexation. (Compare this to the depiction of Taiwan and Korea, which are simply filled in with red to communicate their status as geographic extensions of the Japanese landmass.) What we see in this strikingly “cute” cartographic representation is thus the naturalization of the GEA’s distorted logic of colonization as liberation: the substitution of individual sovereignty for collective autonomy from the West. The images of the liberated captives are disturbingly reminiscent of the relationship between Pokémon trainer Ash Ketchum and his loyal captive Pikachu—the latter of whom, per Kline and colleagues, might also be understood as a representation of us, the captivated players.

The GEA was framed as an opportunity for broader “co-prosperity” that allowed each individual nation to, as Minister for Foreign Affairs Hachirō Arita put it in 1941, “display their strong points.”⁵⁹ The plan for unifying so many “peoples of different races,” Premier Hideki Tojo argued in 1942, thus involved not forcing them all under a single,

“Japanified” standard, but rather enabling each “to have its proper place and demonstrate its real character.”⁶⁰ “Developing the creative faculties of each race,” the GEA declaration suggested, would collectively “enhance the culture and civilization of Greater East Asia” as a whole.⁶¹ Such, of course, is also the task of the Pokémon trainer and the function of the Pokémon gyms, which involve the strategic construction of a bloc of Pokémon composed of a diverse range of skills to address as many combat contingencies as possible.⁶² In other words, the game rhetorically rehabilitates Japan’s role from conqueror (or eugenicist) to friendly but demanding personal trainer, developing rigorous, personalized plans for the core strengthening of each individual race.⁶³

The point of drawing out these parallels is to recognize how the game’s dynamics—its rules and objectives, or what Bogost calls “procedural rhetoric”—make *Pokémon GO* into a “persuasive game,” wherein the messy martial realities resulting from the abstract wartime ideals of “racial development” and “social evolution” could be rendered not so much “odorless” as automated and, from the average citizen’s perspective, unreal.⁶⁴ The wartime policy can in fact be seen more broadly as a source for the game’s logic of glocalization. The GEA was ostensibly about maintaining the sovereignty of individual nations and respecting “local cultural differences” through puppet governments—that is, creating a two-part system of Japanese administration on the one hand and “indigenous” national culture on the other. In *Pokémon GO*, we see a conceit that similarly involves the lamination of real and virtual worlds. Yet the GEA illustrates the danger of such conceits: while the doubling of the world can be seen, on the one hand, as an expansion into an exciting frontier of discovery, it can also be seen as the imposition of a newly oppressive set of standards for representing and navigating the world.⁶⁵

Rebranding the Past

Attending to Pokémon GO in terms of the specificity of Japanese imperialism does not diminish earlier insights into its Orientalist functions in the U.S. context—wherein, as we noted, it has been assimilated into a U.S.-specific version of New World manifest destiny. Rather, the multiple national contexts in which the game has successfully functioned attests to the bidirectional and complex possibilities of such reorienting

discourses. Indeed, reappropriating Orientalist perceptions into empowering nationalistic rhetoric has arguably been a hallmark of Japanese marketing both at home and abroad. As historian Daniel Sneider notes, despite “the gradual disappearance of the generation that actually experienced the war . . . the younger generation in Northeast Asia seems even more imbued with the ideology of nationalism than those who went through [the war].”⁶⁶ Such proxy nationalism has been coincident with Japan’s aggressive postwar efforts to rebrand itself in the eyes of the world.

Since the early 2000s, Japan has launched a series of “pop culture diplomacy” campaigns in response to a 2003 Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs directive, which proclaimed that “in the twenty-first century, ‘soft power,’ which is the capacity to attract foreign nations by the appeal of lifestyle and culture of the nation, is more important than military power. Japan as the nation rich in attractive cultures is expected to make an international contribution through international cultural exchange and actively display the 21st century model of soft power.”⁶⁷ “International cultural exchange” was, however, no more a genuine objective than “co-prosperity” was in the GEA. As Koichi Iwabuchi notes, campaigns like “*Kūru* Japan” (Cool Japan), which pressed characters like Hello Kitty and Doraemon into service as official tourism ambassador and Olympics ambassador respectively, were always conceived of as a one-way street. The intention was never exchange but influence: to, as Iwabuchi puts it, make “other countries more receptive to Japan’s positions through the dissemination of the country’s cultures and values.”⁶⁸ “Cool Japan” has been widely discussed in American media and scholarship as an effort to alter Euro-American audiences’ techno-Orientalist perceptions of Japan of a late twentieth-century vintage, especially the image of the round-the-clock 1970s Japanese businessman associated with Japan’s postwar “economic miracle.”⁶⁹ Yet, the strategic transformation of the country’s national image “from a land that is strange and workaholic to someplace that is humane and cool” was also—as the term “humane” suggests—propelled by a need to soften anti-Japanese sentiment among those East and Southeast Asian countries who had been brutalized by its expansionist ambitions through atrocities that Japan has at times downplayed or even denied.⁷⁰

Video games have played a prominent role in authorizing these acts of national rebranding and historical revisionism. During the closing ceremony of the 2016 Summer Olympics held in Rio de Janeiro, a clever commercial segment featured Japan's prime minister, Shinzō Abe, "morphing" into Super Mario and drilling his way into the Maracanã stadium, emerging from a cartoonish drain pipe clutching a huge red soccer ball reminiscent of those used to capture Pokémon (fig. 5.6). While the majority of American media accounts of the event described it as a "cute" publicity stunt to announce the formal officiation of Tokyo as the 2020 Olympics host, Japanese responses consistently framed Abe's performance as a continuation of the "Cool Japan" campaign, and hence a comment on Japan's past rather than its future. In a much-shared tweet posted after the closing ceremony, a Japanese user edited an image of the classic "warp zone" screen from the Nintendo *Mario Bros.* game, through which players could travel instantaneously to other levels (and, Abe, in the Olympics advertisement, from Shibuya to Rio). The tweeted image was framed as a sort of visual backstory to the Olympics ad, renaming the three drainpipe "portals" as "Prime Minister's Office," "Yasukuni (Shrine)," and "Rio" (fig. 5.6). "Prime Minister, you managed not to make a mistake," the accompanying caption read: a reference to the long-standing controversy over Yasukuni, a Shinto shrine commemorating, among the nation's war dead from the imperial period (1867–1951), over one thousand convicted war criminals. Although Abe has not matched the frequency of personal visits to Yasukuni for which his predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi, received global disapprobation, his bi-annual *masakaki* (sacred tree) offerings to the shrine have continued to stir up enmity, particularly in South Korea and China.

The tweet, in drawing for its critique of Abe on the same ludic conceit used by the advertising campaign itself to promote him, further draws our attention to the powerful yet often overlooked political intimacies between Japanese video games and Japanese World War II-era history. That is, if the tweet used the Mario game to emphasize parallels between Abe Mario's Rio performance and Prime Minister Abe's conservative attitude toward Japan's wartime past, the Rio performance itself can be understood, in contrast, as an attempt to use the Nintendo franchise to *erase* that wartime connection. Viewed in that light, the spectacular



Figure 5.6. “Abe Mario” August 21, 2016, tweet by @sazanami_kyodai: “Prime Minister, you managed not to make a mistake.” Image and translation courtesy of Mokoto Rich, “A Morning Surprise for Japan: Shinzo Abe as Super Mario,” *New York Times*, August 22, 2016.

transformation of Abe into Mario functions as a counterpart, rather than a departure from or antidote to, the controversial editing of Japanese history textbooks to revise the narrative of the nation’s role in World War II, particularly regarding its treatment of enslaved “comfort women” (efforts with which Abe’s conservative party has been closely associated). Like the Pokémon Jigglypuff, whose enchanting voice lulls opponents to sleep, Abe’s Rio performance offered an enchanting, sanitized version of himself and of Japan that reassured even his critics: “I hate to admit it,” another Japanese Twitter user confessed following the Rio

commercial, “but I feel soothed by Abe Mario.” Anne Allison notes that “in consuming cuteness, one expresses the yearning to be comforted and soothed.”⁷¹ As an embodiment of what Christine Yano calls “Japanese Cute-Cool,” Abe Mario thus exemplified the underlying logic not simply of “Cool Japan” but also of the *kawaii* aesthetics so closely associated with the nation and its products.⁷²

The absence of Pikachu in the all-star lineup of the Olympics closing ceremony—comprising Pac-Man, Captain Tsubasa, Hello Kitty, Dorae-mon, and of course Mario—was one which the promo creators later rued. The planning committee had been formed in early 2016, several months before *Pokémon GO* became a global sensation and hence over a decade since the franchise had enjoyed significant overseas success.⁷³ Otherwise, the adorable Pokémon would have been an obvious choice. Indeed, the franchise’s seamless bridging of national and consumer marketing had, during the first wave of “Pokémonia” in the late 1990s, already provided the satirical grist for one of the most well-known episodes of the American animated television series *South Park*. In the November 1999 installment, which was later nominated for an Emmy, the fourth-grade protagonists’ obsession with the “strange-looking” but adorable “Chinpokomon” is initially dismissed by their parents as a harmless fad . . . until it’s revealed that the creatures are part of a nefarious plot by the Japanese government to “once again become a dominant world power” by subliminally converting American children into loyal subjects ready to bomb Pearl Harbor.

The episode is a brilliant example of the show’s well-deserved reputation for both pointed and prescient critique. Deliberately written to “skewer the irrational paranoia of American parents” over their children’s preoccupation with all things Pokémon, the episode’s creators ramped up the perceived malevolence of the franchise by imaginatively inventing sophisticated technology that would not be possible for over a decade—but, essentially, the very technology which would be used in *Pokémon GO*. Thus, in the episode, Pokémon toys serve as vehicles for Japanese nationalist rhetoric—quite literally becoming the plush hosts for tiny speakers and spy cameras embedded within, broadcasting from and streaming back to Tokyo. The satellite technology functions as an analogue to the creatures’ disarming cuteness; together, they form a simultaneously political and economic strategy that transforms American



Figure 5.7. “Emperor Hirohito” from *South Park* “Chinpokomon” episode and Shinzō Abe dressed as Mario at 2016 Summer Olympics closing ceremony in Rio de Janeiro. “Chinpokomon,” *South Park*, directed by Trey Parker and Eric Stough, written by Trey Parker, broadcast on Comedy Central, November 3, 1999; photo of Abe by Stoyan Nenov.

children into brainwashed robots. The “Chinpokomon training camp” they clamor to attend turns out to be, in fact, a kamikaze flight school. As the children’s droning consumerist chant—“I must buy Chinpokomon, I must buy Chinpokomon”—transitions seamlessly to “I must destroy the USA, I must destroy the USA,” the episode captures both the absurdity and the sobering reality of the mutually reinforcing mechanisms of nationalist propaganda and entertainment product marketing.

The image of a battle-garbed “Emperor Hirohito,” flanked by life-size images of Chinpokomon (fig. 5.7), revealing before an arena of enchanted Colorado schoolchildren his nefarious plans to take revenge on the United States for the “shame” it inflicted on Japan during World War II, acquires an entirely new and disturbing resonance when seen in light of Abe Mario. In the middle of Hirohito’s speech, Eric Cartman turns to his friends with a rare look of uncertainty and asks, “Is this cool or not? I can’t tell.”

The diptych in figure 5.7 above encapsulates what Anne Allison has eloquently described as the mutually constitutive relation between “the products Japan is selling—and using to sell itself.”⁷⁴ The product we have been examining—*Pokémon GO*—is not simply a product being sold but a story being told, a game being played with national spaces and histories. Satisfying both nostalgia and narcissism, the novel augmented reality and mapping strategies of *Pokémon GO* at once expand and obscure our ability to “place” the origins of, and orient ourselves in relation to, the value-laden representations such technologies implicitly authorize.

Laura Kurgan has suggested that maps “let us see too much, and hence blind us to what we cannot see, imposing a quiet tyranny of orientation.”⁷⁵ Although Kurgan here echoes postcolonial scholars like Said, Charles Mills, and V. Y. Mudimbe in understanding cartography as a seemingly neutral technology that constructs and legitimizes hegemonic projects of “epistemological ethnocentrism,” she also hints at the “localizing” tactics through which maps achieve their aims.⁷⁶ Maps both “omit, according to their conventions, those invisible lines of people, places, and networks that create the most common spaces we live in today”—that is, they erase, by failing to represent, the social fault lines or clusters created by nodes of race, class, religion, et cetera—and “blind us to what we cannot see”: they erase the very fact of their erasure.⁷⁷ Mapping, in this sense, reproduces the logic of glocalized rebranding,

wherein the active production of non-Japaneseness as odorlessness has become a telltale sign of Japanese products themselves. *Pokémon GO* becomes a ludic vehicle through which Japan constructs its own magic circle, imaginatively authoring alternative representations of itself whose correspondence to historical reality becomes secondary to their cuteness.

We began this chapter with the kinship between playing and mapping; we end by emphasizing how marketing completes the family portrait. Maps are marketing tools, in the sense that they license (i.e., “sell”) a particular version of reality; marketing is also a form of mapping, reorienting one’s perspective on the global and the local, the foreign and the familiar, the medium and the message. These processes occur within but also through play: they can give play its pleasure and its form, and vice versa. *Pokémon GO* shatters the illusion of playing, mapping, and selling as discrete, or at least categorically dissimilar, endeavors—and alongside these, the binaries of nations and corporations, world and game, ideology and technology. But what it most effectively demonstrates, in the end, is how the ludic can transform what might appear to be precarious fictions into powerfully enduring worldviews that fundamentally shape the way we perceive—and what we perceive as—reality.