The main theme of Tobin’s book is practices of Nintendo DS play in everyday life settings. DS Play is viewed as a ‘compromise’ (42) between ‘places and times, players and games,’ a ‘secondary-ness’ (12) that ‘thrives in contingency,’ and a ‘moderation’ (112) that ‘flies in the face of conceptions of play as emancipatory and excessive.’ Tobin’s ‘utilitarian ludus’ (103) evidently joins the recent rise of criticisms of Huizinga’s holistic ‘magic circle’ approach that sees play as an isolated situation (Consalvo 2009; Pargman & Jakobsson 2008) and embraces a narrative of ‘everyday life’: how play is intertwined with or delimited by facets of everyday life. This argument alone is no longer novel as the academic passions for lived experiences have well penetrated games studies (Apperley & Jayemane 2012); that said, the nuanced and calculative distinctions of different everyday spaces, scenarios, affordances, materiality and corresponding analysis makes this book an absorbing read. The book begins with a chapter on the history of the DS as a platform, followed by a digital ethnography of forum reviews and recommendations of DS games. The following three chapters are discussions on the correlations between the interface of the DS, time, space and contingencies of portable play at home as well as in transit.

I finished reading Tobin’s book after two long train rides in China, when I was travelling between Hong Kong and a mainland Chinese city. It was something of a coincidence that I packed this particular book for the trip: I needed some reading material to ‘kill time’ during the five hours of onerous stagnation and I remembered I had this book review to finish. The book seemed short and could be finished in 10 hours. Not until I was half way through the book did I realise the appropriateness of reading this book while commuting: this is a book that primarily associates the necessities of the DS with the social contexts of train rides. The texts were immediately tested against the sociality I was immersed in.

There is an certain sense of embarrassment ‘experienced on crowded trains,’ which is ‘produced by the lack of the kind of verbal communication and eye contact which would be expected in other contexts when people are in proximity to others’ (86). Fixating your own attention on a (not necessarily digital) device mitigates the underlying pressures to talk to strangers. On my return trip to Hong Kong, an old man sitting opposite me was unfortunately not well prepared and was deprived of such ‘obligatory’ (101) devices in the train. The ‘tension of this silence and mutual non-acknowledgement’ was apparently gripping him as he was intermittently glancing and squinting at the Candy...
Crush gameplay on the phone of the women next to him. The woman was eventually irritated by him and turned sideways to avoid his gaze. ‘We need look […] not only at presence, but also at lack […] it is the removal that needs to be studied’ (7). Without a portable distraction countering ‘the commuter’s ennui’ (82), the old man was afflicted with the restless embarrassment and the horror of ‘monotony and boredom of travel by rail’ (83) – soon he fell asleep, which was the only distraction possible for him.

Tobin talks of an ‘invisible engagement with their device which makes one socially invisible to a kind of embodied engagement which threatens to make one a public spectacle’ (87). This ‘invisibility’ is socially constituted: mobile phones are the most commonplace devices therefore remain largely ignored and unobtrusive. A ‘cocooning’ (88) is a bodily deployment that temporarily shuts down sensory connection to the physical proximity and ‘produces an alteration in attention’ (88). I was attempting to cocoon myself by reading Tobin’s book, which ‘necessitates the addition of another item’ (87), namely a marker. Unfortunately, reading an English book with a marker attracted unwanted attentions in a Chinese train and, in my case at least, people did not hide their curiosity. It did not escalate into a public spectacle because everyone had his or her own immediate distraction: their own cocoons or camouflages of ‘media usage, modes and postures, one that blurs and redraws boundaries between user and environment, while protecting the user’ (92).

In fact, I had also brought my 3DS with me, but I did not take it out once from my bag, because cocooning with a 3DS makes me highly vulnerable to children roaming back and forth in the train compartment. Similar to my train riding experience, playing a DS in public – in particular, in transit – is less about navigating in ‘gamespace’ (the virtual space of the videogame) and more about dealing with the interruptions and distractions in the ‘playspace’ – a kind of tactic, in reference to de Certeau (91). In enclosed environments like a train compartment, techniques of distancing and withdrawing to your individual ‘micro-space’ become elaborate learnt urban survival skills.

The discussion on boredom in the final chapter is particularly captivating but insufficiently elaborated. ‘Much of DS play is a response to boredom that itself is a kind of boredom’ (111). Free time can be onerous and therefore needs to be killed. Gaming vernaculars such as ‘time sink’ (38) are useful metaphors for understanding the mundanity of spending time with games today. Games are only instruments to pass the time. They do not necessarily entail frantic enthusiasm, but rather regularity and passage of time. This feeds back to how Tobin establishes the boundaries of his ethnographic inquiry: ‘average DS players’ – not fans but just players of the device – and ‘good enough’ games, which matches the moment, ‘a specific possibility of time and space’ (45).