

# How 'Pokemon Go' went from prank to phenomenon

July 22 2016, by Michael Liedtke

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In this Tuesday, June 26, 2007, file photo, Elliot Schrage, left, Google vice president for global communications & public affairs, listens, as Google Earth & Maps Director John Hanke smiles while listening to remarks from Dr. Jane Goodall during a video teleconference with Goodall from London at Google Earth's offices in New York. Hanke now runs Niantic Labs and is the man behind "Pokemon Go." (AP Photo/Kathy Willens, File)

The origin of "Pokemon Go" is as peculiar as any of the Voltorbs or Snorlaxes that players track and capture in the surprise hit game.

Its hybrid DNA flows from a digital mapping pioneer's fascination with the world around him, Google's affinity for offbeat ideas, Nintendo's comeback quest and a 20-year-old menagerie of animated monsters so popular that it spawned a company just to be its talent agency.

Then all it took was a prank to hatch a mobile video game that has turned into a cultural phenomenon.

## APRIL FOOL, POKEMON

Google unwittingly planted the seed for "Pokemon Go" two years ago in one of the many April Fools' Day jokes the internet company is famous for. In a mischievous 2014 post, Google announced a new training tool, created in conjunction with Pokemon and Nintendo, for hunting Pokemon using Google Maps. Its goal, the company said, was to hire the world's best Pokemon Master—because it valued technically savvy risk takers who can "navigate through tall grass to capture wild creatures."

The enthusiastic reaction to Google's fake "Pokemon Challenge" video resonated within Niantic Labs, a little-known startup that had been incubating within the company—particularly with its founder John Hanke.

## MAPS AS A LURE

Hanke was at Google because he'd sold it a digital mapping startup called Keyhole in 2004, providing the 3-D satellite imagery used in Google Earth. He'd overseen a number of maps-related projects until 2010, when he hit upon the idea of using maps to lure people outdoors to explore neighborhoods, see notable places and discover new places to

eat, drink or just hang out.

With the goal of building mobile apps and games that encouraged "adventures on foot with others," Hanke named Niantic after a grounded whaling vessel grounded during the San Francisco Gold Rush of 1849 and converted to a storage building. The remains of the original ship were later found buried near a current San Francisco landmark, the Transamerica Pyramid.

The Niantic name is a reminder that "there is lot of cool stuff beneath the surface of things," Hanke told The Associated Press in a 2013 interview. A Niantic spokesman said Hanke was too busy working on "Pokemon Go" to comment for this story.



In this Thursday, July 14, 2016, file photo, youngsters play during a "Pokemon Go" event at Memorial Stadium in Lincoln, Neb. Pokemon Go's origins are as

peculiar as any of the creatures inhabiting the game. (AP Photo/Nati Harnik, File)

Hanke was ready to found his own independent startup until Google co-founder Larry Page persuaded him he could keep Niantic within the internet's most powerful company.

## GETTING AUGMENTED

In 2014, Niantic set out to turn Google's Pokemon joke into a breakthrough for augmented reality—a still-nascent field that involves layering digital images onto homes, offices, streets, parks and other real-life settings.

In the case of "Pokemon Go," this involves smartphone cameras and GPS technology that can project cute and creepy "pocket monsters," or Pokemon, into the real world, at least as viewed through a phone's screen.

It helped that Niantic had already built a technological foundation for "Pokemon Go" via an earlier mobile game called "Ingress." The science-fiction game requires players to visit real-world landmarks and other locations to acquire weapons and gear necessary to gain points, acquire territory and battle an opposing faction.

"Ingress" has been downloaded more than 12 million times. It has such a devoted following that Hanke spent a week in Japan earlier this month to attend a live "Ingress" event in Tokyo—just as the rest of his team was struggling to keep up with the intense demand for "Pokemon Go."

## INGRESS TO POKEMON

Niantic's negotiations for the rights to use the Pokemon characters got a boost from the fact that Pokemon Co. CEO Tsunekazu Ishihara was himself a fan of "Ingress." Ishihara's company, originally named Pokemon Center, manages a sprawling franchise that included games, TV shows and movies—essentially the entire cultural sensation created by childhood insect collector Satoshi Tajiri in conjunction with Nintendo.

Nintendo, meanwhile, had fallen on hard times. Just one month after Google's Pokemon video, the Japanese video-game maker reported its third yearly operating loss in a row as its lackluster Wii U console cratered.

Not only had it failed to recreate the success of its groundbreaking Wii game system, Nintendo had missed almost every opportunity to jump on new gaming trends. It was particularly resistant to the idea of developing or licensing video games for smartphones.



In this Friday, July 8, 2016, file photo, "Pokemon Go" is displayed on a cell phone in Los Angeles. Pokemon Go's origins are as peculiar as any of the creatures inhabiting the game. (AP Photo/Richard Vogel, File)

"Pokemon Go" offered a potential way out of its hole. Nintendo still owns the trademark to all the characters and retains a 32 percent stake in Pokemon Co. Similar-sized stakes are held by Game Freak, a company created by Pokemon creator Tajiri, and Creatures Inc., launched by Ishihara.

## GOOGLE LETS GO

The final piece in the "Pokemon Go" puzzle fell into place last August, when Google reorganized itself as a holding company called Alphabet that would in turn own a collection of independent subsidiaries—from large ones like Google itself to tiny ones like Niantic.

But Niantic quickly broke free of Google in order to explore opportunities with companies that might be reluctant to partner directly with the search giant, said long-time technology analyst Rob Enderle. "There are a lot of companies out there that are afraid of Google," he said.

In addition, Google hasn't demonstrated much prowess in video games, according to Forrester Research analyst Julie Ask. That makes it even more unlikely Nintendo would entrust one of its most valuable properties to a U.S. company solely owned by Google or its parent.

Niantic laid out its plans for "Pokemon Go" last September, and the following month Google, Nintendo and Pokemon agreed to invest \$20 million , with a promise to put up another \$10 million if an undisclosed set of goals were met.

Pokemon Co. says the additional investment hasn't been made yet, even though it looks Niantic is hitting all its targets with the precision of a Pokemon Master.

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