

'Pokemon Go' fervor has cooled, but the game isn't dead yet

September 26 2016, by Mae Anderson



In the Wednesday, July 20, 2016, file photo, "Pokemon Go" players begin a group walk along the Embarcadero in San Francisco. "Pokemon Go" was an instant hit when it debuted in July, as millions of people discovered augmented reality and joined stampedes from Central Park to Sydney capturing Pokemon via their phones. But as the hype subsides, what's next for the game? (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

Does "Pokemon Go" have a second act?

The mobile phone app was an instant hit when it debuted in July. Crowds stampeded after a Vaporeon in Central Park and people fell off cliffs playing it in California.

At an Apple event on Sept. 7, Niantic CEO John Hanke said 500 million people had downloaded the [game](#) in just two months. It was the first mobile game to go mainstream in a big way since "Candy Crush" in 2014 or "Angry Birds" in 2012. It was also the first to incorporate augmented reality, a blending of the real and virtual worlds.

But the buzz has decidedly cooled. Last Tuesday, the game ended its reign as the top-grossing U.S. iPhone app after 74 days on top, replaced by "Clash Royale," a popular battling game, according to research firm Sensor Tower. Twitter mentions of the game peaked at 1.7 million on July 11, five days after its launch, according to Adobe Digital Insights. That number had fallen by 98 percent, to 131,000, by Sept. 7, when Apple featured it.

Was it all a summer fever dream? While experts say the game is likely to remain popular for a while, it needs to evolve to have real staying power—just like its namesake digital creatures.

"Almost anything of this sort is a fad," says Steve Jones, a communications professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "I think we've seen the tapering off."

DOWN BUT NOT OUT

Of course, an enormous number of people still play the game. Research firm App Annie estimates 1 in 10 smartphone owners in the U.S. are playing; in Japan, that number is 1 in 4. Those U.S. figures are half what App Annie saw the week after the game launched—but to put them in perspective, they still reflect roughly the same user interest as Twitter or

Pinterest.

"Pokemon Go" has also been good at keeping people playing after signing up. Its 30-day retention rate is the second best on the Google Play store—behind "Words with Friends," but ahead of other popular games such as "Clash of Clans" and "Clash Royale."

"For a gaming app to be as big as a social network is unprecedented," said Fabien-Pierre Nicolas, a spokesman at App Annie. "Right now, yes, they're losing a million players every week. But they get a million new players every week."

The longer users interact with the game, the more time a company has to figure out how to get money from them, Nicolas said. It took a year for some successful games like "Clash of Clans," "Puzzle" and "Dragon" to earn revenue of \$1 billion, but "Pokemon Go" has already made more than \$500 million in revenue in two months alone, according to App Annie. The game is free, but lets users purchase items in the game.

"POKEMON GO" EVOLUTION

But with social chatter dying down and a new smartphone game based on a beloved 1990s character—"Super Mario Run"—hitting app stores in December, Pokemon will have to reinvent itself.

Kari Amarosso, a public relations manager at Arizona State University, started playing "Pokemon Go" with her 19-year-old son as a fun mother-son summer activity sparked by 1990s Pokemon-card nostalgia. They'd go to the mall or to meetups like one in Tempe, Arizona, where thousands of people walked around Tempe Town Lake capturing digital monsters.

But the allure wore off after about six weeks, she said. "I lost interest or

just plain forgot to play," she says—and her son has stopped as well. "His route doesn't change much from work, to home, and he lost interest," she says.

Niantic has been trying to freshen things up. In September it introduced a "buddy" system, allowing users to pair up with a Pokemon to scoop up game currency called "candy." It has also debuted an Apple Watch app and introduced a \$35 wearable device, Pokemon Go Plus, which lights up and vibrates when you're near a Pokestop or a newly appeared Pokemon.

Niantic did not respond to a request for comment.

HASN'T CAUGHT THEM ALL

Jones suggests the company needs to do more to keep people interested—for example, by adding some kind of social element so that players can interact with each other. His two teenage sons, he notes, have grown slightly less enchanted with the game.

"Young people are used to doing social media and there isn't really messaging as part of the game," Jones said. There have been persistent rumors that Niantic plans to let players trade captured Pokemon with one another, although the company hasn't commented on that.

The big challenge for "Pokemon Go" is to avoid the fate of "Candy Crush," says Pace University marketing professor Larry Chiagouris. Created by King Digital, "Candy Crush" became a smash hit; Activision Blizzard subsequently bought King for \$5.9 billion. But while people still play the game, the fervor around it has died down.

When the game was at its peak, "you were getting invited to play Candy Crush every day" on Facebook, he said. "You don't get too many

invitations to play Candy Crush anymore."

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