

## The Pokémon GO Craze

### Case

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## Abstract

When Niantic Inc. released Pokémon GO, it became the most downloaded app in the iOS store. By June 2017, Pokémon GO had 752 million downloads and earned approximately USD 1.2 billion in revenue, partially due to Niantic's partnerships with companies such as Starbucks, T-Mobile, and Apple. However, the game's success was short lived and began declining in popularity soon after its launch. A game that was ahead of its time and received record breaking downloads and attention, now seemed a thing of the past. This case examines contributing factors to the meteoric rise and decline of Pokémon GO, in particular issues with safety and stability, and the strategic marketing that brought on, but could not sustain, the game's popularity.

## Case

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### Learning Outcomes

Students should have an improved understanding of the following:

- The standard product life cycle (PLC) curve and marketing strategies appropriate for each stage while comparing how the PLC of Pokémon GO deviates from the standard.
- Effective promotional strategies, especially in relation to creating hype and word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing.
- How partnerships with Starbucks, McDonald's, Apple, and T-Mobile were beneficial.
- The concept of "marketing tactics by starvation" and related marketing ethical issues.

### Introduction

It took only nine days after Pokémon GO's launch on July 6, 2016, for the game to hit 30 million downloads worldwide in iOS and Android (Nelson, 2016). The game's brief, but successful, introduction was a result of many factors, including the easy-to-use gaming platform, various modes of user engagement, and reward systems in the game that encouraged players to stay engaged (Chin, 2016). Consumers who grew up playing the original Pokémon games were also eager to see Pokémon's comeback, especially with new, exciting technology included in Pokémon GO's gameplay, and they created hype around Pokémon GO's launch through word-of-mouth (WOM).

### Background

In 1996, The Pokémon Company, a consortium including the three businesses holding the copyright on Pokémon: Game Freak Inc. (Game Freak), Creatures Inc. (Creatures), and Nintendo (Theirault, 2015; Weinberger, 2016), debuted the electronic game series Pokémon in Japan. It became popular in the United States after its introduction in 1998. The goal of the game was to become a powerful Pokémon trainer, catching and training creatures called Pokémon to fight beside you in battles. Pokémon later inspired movies, books, a toy line, cartoons, and a trading-card game ("Pokémon Case Study," 1999). From out of this franchise came the location-based augmented reality game for smartphones: Pokémon GO. It was a one-of-a-kind, technology-driven Pokémon game. Instead of catching Pokémon in a virtual world, users of Pokémon GO were tasked with exploring the real world as their avatar moved with them, coming across catchable Pokémon as they traveled (Van Schneider, 2016).

One of the most important people in the creation and success story of Pokémon GO is John Hanke, the current CEO of Niantic. Hanke began his career with a startup that would eventually be bought by Google Inc. (Google). With Google, Hanke had a hand in the creation of both Google Earth and Google Maps. In 2010, Hanke created Niantic, a subsidiary within Google, and began work on two projects: Field Trip and Ingress. The technology used in both these apps, along with Google Earth and Google Maps, would later be used to develop Pokémon GO. In 2015, Niantic spun out from Google, not long before Pokémon GO was released in July of 2016 (Bogle, 2016; Weinberger, 2016).

## Pokémon GO's Gameplay

Pokémon GO kept some of the same concepts from the traditional Pokémon games but included features and a gameplay experience never seen before. Pokémon GO's vast change in gameplay compared to traditional Pokémon games is mostly due to the fact that the game is an app for a smartphone, not for a console. The game made use of several smartphone technologies, including GPS tracking, app notifications, the touch screen, and the phone camera.

To begin the game, the user creates an avatar and is placed in a detailed map of their surroundings, including buildings and streets. As they move around in the real world, their avatar moves with them. Even with the app closed, their location is still tracked. Throughout the day, Pokémon GO will send notifications whenever catchable Pokémon are nearby (Van Schneider, 2016; Weldon, 2016).

Catching Pokémon, a key concept in the Pokémon games, requires the user to lift their phone as if taking a picture of the Pokémon in real life. To catch the Pokémon, the user swipes the screen up with a finger, throwing a Pokéball at the Pokémon. As more Pokémon are caught, duplicate Pokémon can be combined to make a stronger version. Pokéball and potions are examples of some features used in the game and found at Pokéstops (Van Schneider, 2016; Weldon, 2016). These Pokéstops are located at landmarks or other points of interest, using data retrieved from Niantic's previous work. Players can also visit Pokémon Gyms, where they have the chance to battle another player's Pokémon left by their owner. If the challenger player wins, then they can replace the existing Pokémon at that Gym with one of their own. These points of interest determine different Pokémon's habitats. For example, water type Pokémon are more likely to be found near bodies of water and rivers (Bogle, 2016; Weldon, 2016).

## Target Market and Appeal

Traditional Pokémon games appealed to young boys between the ages of 6–14, with parents being targeted indirectly. However, because Pokémon GO was an app instead of a game on a console and was released 20 years after the first Pokémon games, it appealed to a much wider, older audience.

At the end of July 2016, users were broken down into the following age groups:

- 22% of total users were between the ages of 13–17.
- 46% of total users were between the ages of 18–29.
- 25% of total users were between the ages of 30–50.
- 6% of total users were 50 or older (Dogtiev, 2016; Statista, 2016).

Most users were in the 18–29 bracket. These young adults, also known as Millennials, were born between the years of 1982 and 2004 and grew up with traditional Pokémon games as they were released (Bump, 2015).

Regarding gender, Pokémon GO still seemed to appeal more to men than women. Upon its release date, the percentage of total users that were female was only about 20%. This increased throughout July, and by the

end of the month, there was a 40/60 split between female and male players, respectively. This is close to the average gender split for other mobile games, which is 50/50 (Dogtiev, 2016; Minotti, 2017).

## Global Hype

Although Niantic eventually launched Pokémon GO globally, they began by launching it in select countries. The game was first available in Australia, the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, and Portugal (Glum, 2016; Lindh, 2016).

Japan was excluded from the initial launch and had to wait two weeks, until July 22, 2016 (Niantic Inc., 2016). Niantic's CEO, Hanke, explained that server capacity in Japan was not powerful enough and that the company was working with their partners in Japan to enable the "servers to keep up with demand once the game goes online" (Lyon, 2016). Japanese players were so angry that Niantic Asia's representative marketing manager sent out an apology on Twitter. This tweet was met with "a chain of angry responses accusing him of using 'marketing tactics by starvation' and expressing devastation over Pokémon being released in other parts of the world before Japan" (Glum, 2016). In launching Pokémon GO this way, Niantic created a sense of fear of missing out (FOMO), defined as a feeling of missing out on desirable experiences that one knows about but does not participate in (Anik, Gürhan-Canlı & Hayran, 2016). While this marketing strategy may have made Japanese users more excited about Pokémon GO's upcoming launch, it also made them angrier.

## Partnerships and Sponsored Locations

With the help of business partnerships and sales promotions, the game's hype grew. Sales promotions referred to the "displays, trade shows, coupons, contest, samples, premiums, product demonstrations, and various one-time selling efforts" (Wieland & Meng-Hsien, 2016). Since Pokémon GO users exchanged their physical foot-traffic for virtual goods, companies could pay Niantic to have their store locations be turned into Pokémon GO-sponsored locations to increase their real-world foot-traffic. These sponsorships led to the development of partnerships between Niantic and companies with global presence such as McDonald's and Apple, which benefited Niantic with increased user activity and its partners with increased physical foot-traffic and customer interactions (Frank, 2016).

Pokémon GO's sponsored locations took the form of Pokéstops and Gyms and meant paying Niantic anywhere from USD 0.15 to USD 0.50 for every customer that walked in because of the game. The Pokémon GO mobile game offered incentives to players who visited sponsored locations; users claimed their Pokémon or battled once they arrived at a sponsor's business. For businesses, this can be an investment to help their business in the long-term or, in the case of McDonald's, to help with their brand image (Constine, 2017). Bars, restaurants, and other businesses could also attract users by setting up a lure module, which would attract large numbers of Pokémon and Pokémon GO players for a limited time.

## McDonald's

In 2015, McDonald's in Japan was going through their first year of operating loss since 2001 due to a food safety scandal (Wilson, 2015). To distract from the public relations issue, CEO Sarah Casanova signed on for a partnership with Niantic in which all Japanese McDonald's locations were turned into sponsored Pokéstops or Gyms (Frank, 2016), a total of about 3,000 McDonald's restaurants. At Pokémon GO's peak, the fast-food giant would have paid about USD 900,000 per day to Niantic for the sponsorship at USD 0.15 per visitor, or USD 3 million per day at USD 0.50 per visitor (Constine, 2017).

## T-Mobile

T-Mobile is a “national provider of wireless voice, messaging, and data services capable of reaching over 308 million Americans” (T-Mobile USA, Inc., 2018). The company has something called “T-Mobile Tuesdays,” which means that each Tuesday it gives free stuff to its customers. On Tuesday, July 14, 2016, T-Mobile’s Tuesday was about thanking its customers with free, unlimited data to play Pokémon GO. The package included:

- “Free, unlimited data on Pokémon GO, so it won’t touch your high-speed data—for a full year.
- Free Lyft rides up to USD 15 to get to a new Pokéstop or Gym.
- Free Wendy’s Frosty to fuel up for your hunting trip.
- 50% off select accessories—including portable power packs and chargers at T-Mobile stores—so you can keep on playing for hours” (T-Mobile USA, Inc., 2016).

T-Mobile claimed that they decided to make July 14 about free Pokémon GO data giveaways to help their customers not “burn up the family’s data bucket and then be facing overages.” In addition, T-Mobile claimed that “T-Mobile Tuesday is all about unleashing you to catch ‘em all,” while adding that Pokémon GO has hit a record-breaking number of downloads, which qualifies Pokémon GO as a certifiable “global phenomenon” (T-Mobile USA, Inc., 2016).

T-Mobile used different social media methods to increase awareness of its promotion and of Pokémon GO, including photo sharing, microblogging, and mobile marketing. Specifically, T-Mobile used Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. To promote the unlimited data deal for Pokémon GO, it mainly used Facebook and Instagram. T-Mobile shared a photo on Instagram to promote their T-Mobile Tuesday promotion and received 802 likes and over 500K views on Facebook posts.

## Starbucks

Starbucks, one of the largest retailers in whole bean, ground coffee, tea, and spices with more than 24,000 stores in 70 countries, partnered up with Pokémon GO on December 8, 2016. Starbucks turned their locations into Pokéstops and Gyms. Niantic also gave the exclusivity of releasing special battles, called EX Raids, at Starbucks locations. In order to enter an EX Raid, players needed to receive an invite, and the only way to get one was to have recently beaten another Raid at a Starbucks Gym (Hoffer, 2017). Starbucks not only had Pokéstops and Gyms but also made a drink called the “Pokémon GO Frappuccino,” which was a blended beverage made of raspberry syrup and freeze-dried whole blackberries, topped with whipped cream. Starbucks claimed that “it’s the perfect treat for any Pokémon Trainer on the go,” while adding the drink was available at participating Starbucks for a limited time (Starbucks Corporation, 2016).

Commenting on Pokémon GO’s partnership with Starbucks, Niantic’s CEO, Hanke, explained that “the collaboration is important to us as we look for ways to use technology to encourage exploration, exercise and real-world social interaction, and Starbucks’ footprint throughout the U.S. provides an awesome platform” (Makuch, 2017).

## Apple

On September 7, 2016, during Apple’s event at the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium, Hanke announced that Pokémon GO would be made available on the Apple Watch, with features including a tracker showing the distance between a player and a nearby location to hatch an egg, a tracker showing the player the points

needed to reach the next level, and notifications when a Pokéstop is nearby (Plante, 2016).

Pokémon GO claimed this partnership was meant for players to “exercise and play with Apple Watch” (Niantic Inc., 2018). Pokémon GO, on the Apple Watch, allows users to start a session, visit a Pokéstop, find Pokémon, pause or end a session, set up Pokémon GO notifications, and add Pokémon GO to the Apple Watch screen. While both companies claimed the user did not need to open their iPhone, users were required to open it before starting a session and then let it run while playing the game. Pokémon GO on the Apple Watch was not meant to be a replacement for the app, but rather more like a companion to accompany the user in the game and in their exercise or fitness (Plante, 2016).

## The Spread Through Social Media

Pokémon GO utilized social news sites, which are sites that “let users submit links to news stories or other web pages to be ranked and displayed” (Wieland & Meng-Hsien, 2016). As a result, throughout July 2016, there were approximately 20,000 posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram promoting the game. Most of the posts were made by retailers on their social media accounts to engage or promote their products. Socialbakers analyzed the posts during the previous month and found that Twitter was the social media platform that had most of the posts and peaked around July 14 of the same year (Ross, 2016). Pokémon GO players also created podcasts that discussed various aspects of the app, such as how to catch difficult monsters, sentiments about the app, and news (Apple Inc., 2017).

Niantic also hosted events to increase the hype associated with Pokémon GO. On the game’s official website, they created the Global Catch Challenge event, from November 20 to 26, 2017. Depending on how many Pokémon the users caught, everyone earned something, from double XP to having rare Pokémon appear for 48 hours in different parts of the globe (Thier, 2017). Other events, such as Pokémon hunts, were created by users with the purpose of teaming up with others to catch as many Pokémon as they could. These events were held on Facebook and Twitter.

## Pokémon GO’s Decline

The hype and WOM associated with Pokémon GO were unheard of, and with an unprecedented number of downloads and worldwide participation, it was believed that Pokémon GO’s popularity would not fade any time soon.

## No Decline in Sight?

With the successful launch of Pokémon GO, and the number of downloads and initial active users, analysts predicted that the game would stay a hit. Users also saw the potential for the game to improve and they were excited to see what updates would come. Van Schneider, a user of the app, believed it “has way more potential than what it is right now. I’d assume its growth will stagnate pretty soon, but a fairly big group of core players will stick” (2016). Another user, Orland, explained that “back in those heady days of early July, it was easy to believe that Pokémon GO’s stratospheric growth would last forever” (2016). After all, the game started out with an unprecedented 100 million downloads and 45 million active users in its first month (Orland, 2016), about 28 million of whom were in the United States alone (Siegal, 2017).

One potentially useful tool for analyzing Pokémon GO’s rise and fall in popularity, despite criticisms and lim-

itations of the tool, is the product life cycle (PLC). The standard PLC has a distinct “hump” shape with four stages: introduction, growth, maturity, and decline. However, this is not the order that all products follow. It is important to note that there are variations of the PLC, depending on the product. Different factors affect the shape of a product’s PLC, which can make it difficult to use it as a tool to predict a product’s success, including the type of product, marketing strategies used, number of competitors, and shifting global markets (“Criticisms of the PLC: Part 1,” 2019; Levitt, 1965). Pokémon GO, with its level of hype and short, steep growth stage, did not follow the standard PLC shape. What may be more helpful is to compare Pokémon GO’s PLC with those of other viral mobile games. This way, the shape of Pokémon GO’s PLC is compared with those of similar products.

Other viral mobile games had typically started out slow and gained popularity over time. Candy Crush Saga, for example, only saw 10 million downloads in December of 2012, shortly after its launch. Angry Birds, another popular mobile game, took nine months to reach 20 million downloads (Orland, 2016). The PLCs for both of these popular games more closely followed the standard PLC curve, with a long growth stage as the game gains popularity, a peak in popularity, and a solid maturity stage with retained users. Since Pokémon GO’s launch started off the tracks of the standard PLC to begin with, predictions for the future of the game could not be made by comparing it to past games like Candy Crush Saga and Angry Birds. Indeed, it became clear within a month of Pokémon GO’s launch that the game could possibly be a fad.

## Quick Decline

Decline in popularity began as early as mid-to-late-July of 2016, less than a month after the app’s launch on July 6. After the app’s peak in daily active users at 45 million people in mid-July, the number of daily active users began declining at a steady rate. By the start of August 2016, the number of daily active users had dropped to 30 million (Orland, 2016).

Specifically, in the United States, active users peaked on July 13 at 28.5 million. It declined to 20 million by the end of July and then further dropped to 10 million by the end of September. Daily active users in the United States then tapered off slightly and dropped to about 5 million users by December of 2016 (Siegal, 2017).

## Causes of Decline

It is difficult to pinpoint the most significant cause of Pokémon GO’s decline; however, there were several contributing factors that led to the app’s decrease in popularity.

The first issue was that playing Pokémon GO could be dangerous. Reportedly, people were not looking where they were going; they harmed themselves or trespassed in an attempt to catch Pokémon. However, despite pleas for safety from Niantic and The Pokémon Company, “the addictive mobile AR experience is still prone to lead players straight into danger” (Connolly, n.d.). Pokémon GO was making headlines, and not always good ones. There were reports that people were being robbed while playing the game in large cities such as San Francisco, and in Encinitas, California, two distracted men fell off an ocean cliff while playing (Rocha, 2016). Hudetz, a reporter in New Mexico, reported “people wandering into yards, driveways, cemeteries and even an off-limits police parking lot in search of cartoon monsters” (Hudetz, Cushman, & Shotzbarger, 2016). People walking around in remote locations even found dead bodies.

People were also caught playing while driving, resulting in incredible damage. In the first 148 days after the game was released, the county of Tippecanoe, Indiana, experienced 286 car crashes more than expected, the damage equaling between USD 5.2 million and USD 25.5 million (Chen, 2017). Countries all over the



world dealt with deaths of people killed by distracted players. Japan's first death associated with the game was in August of 2016, when a truck driver ran over two women who were crossing the street. When the man was arrested, he admitted that the accident was because he was playing Pokémon GO (Barbash, 2016).

To make matters worse, with so many players on the app at the same time, servers were overloaded and crashed. Niantic appeared to be fairly responsive to the app's functionality issues. The first update was released less than a week after the game's launch with fixes for stability and ease-of-use (Dornbush, 2018). However, it hardly helped. After a week of the game's launch, "crashes and other glitches [were] still a big part of the Pokémon GO experience" (Thier, 2016). Players were also frustrated that although the app had functionality issues, Niantic was still going through with expansion. Thier, a Forbes contributor and a Pokémon GO player, expressed his concern and explained that "we still find ourselves with a bunch of technical problems, which is troubling given the fact that Niantic seems to be moving forward with the European launch" (Thier, 2016). This is after Niantic recognized that the app's issues were due to too many users on it at once and had apologized to players for the frustration it caused (Lui, 2016).

Additionally, people looking forward to updates became impatient and bored. The app lacked two key features that the traditional Pokémon games possessed, such as player-to-player trading and battling, along with improved Gym battles. Tsunekazu Ishihara, president and CEO of The Pokémon Company, responded to player concerns in an interview with *Bloomberg*: "We've only accomplished 10% of what Pokémon and Niantic are trying to do, so going forward we will have to include fundamental Pokémon experiences such as Pokémon trading and peer-to-peer battles, and other possibilities" (Beck, 2017; Nakamura, 2017). When these features are added, will it be enough to grab back player's interest?

Finally, the game drained phone batteries quickly, making it a challenge to play for long periods without a charger. To help alleviate battery drainage, Niantic included a Battery Saver Mode feature for the game. However, players reported that the Battery Saver Mode was hardly effective (Jaworski, 2016).

## Conclusion

Pokémon GO had a very brief, but successful, introduction. This was thanks to consumers' fond memories of Pokémon when they were younger and the hype they created around the game's launch through WOM. Hype continued to grow after its launch, as swarms of Pokémon GO players took to the streets on the hunt for Pokémon. Niantic successfully grew Pokémon GO's public presence even further through sponsorships and partnerships with large companies such as McDonald's, Starbucks, T-Mobile, and Apple.

The negative publicity associated with Pokémon GO, coupled with the game's selective launch and functionality issues, demanded strong damage control on Niantic's end. Other than in-game notifications, warnings, and minor updates, Niantic did little in response to people's complaints and safety concerns.

Pokémon GO users and non-users alike found Niantic's responses to be unsatisfactory, and many demanded that changes be made to the game for the sake of everyone's safety. Specifically, Niantic recently agreed to settle a lawsuit with people who had Pokéstops placed near their homes and had dealt with users trespassing, littering, damaging their property, and even blocking them in their driveway with cars. This settlement will require Niantic to resolve complaints related to the game within 15 days, maintain a database to ensure that no additional Pokéstop are placed nearby once one is removed, and additional notifications in the app reminding people to "be courteous to others and respectful of their real-world surroundings." It may also include up to USD 1,000 in financial damages to each person named in the lawsuit. This lawsuit cannot undo the damage done by Pokémon GO and its users and it doesn't establish a legal precedent for regulating digital space, but it at least distinguishes practices that similar games should follow so that they don't bother non-

users (Robertson, 2019).

Due to the nature of the game and the incredible number of initial players, the developers likely could not have prevented damage done by distracted players, negative publicity, and functionality issues. After all, the game requires you to travel outside to play it, inevitably encouraging users to trespass, drive while playing, or break other laws in an attempt to catch Pokémon. Pokémon GO's use of augmented-reality technology is also the main reason why people revered the game as unique and ground-breaking. The question remains whether Niantic could have foreseen the ramifications of using this technology at a global scale and set precautions in place.

## Discussion Questions

1. Depict and label the four stages in the standard PLC. Draw another PLC for Pokémon GO based on the information in the case. Compare both graphs. How is Pokémon GO's PLC different from a standard PLC? Based on these differences, explain whether the PLC is a reliable tool for predicting product success.
2. What are some of the promotional tactics Pokémon GO used during its introduction stage? Comment on the effectiveness of these tactics.
3. What were the biggest factors that contributed to the decline of Pokémon GO's popularity? Is there anything Niantic could have done to extend the game's success by prolonging the maturity stage or delaying its decline?
4. What was Niantic's reason behind Pokémon GO's initial launch in select countries? How effective was the use of FOMO for Niantic and was it worth it?
5. The case study described the publicity Pokémon GO received due to the game's inherent tendency to put players at risk. Research how Niantic handled the negative publicity and the public's reaction. Did the company act appropriately? What could they have done differently? What are some other marketing ethical values that Niantic breached?

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