

Whatever happened to Harry Potter: Wizards Unite?



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By [Jon Jordan](#), Contributing Editor

It was billed by some as being bigger and better - the next great location-based mobile game. But whatever's happened to Harry Potter: Wizards Unite?

Since its June 2019 launch, the initial marketing buzz drove millions of downloads and it's been estimated to have made [\\$3 million sales in its first week](#).

But since then, things have been pretty quiet.

Of course, perhaps the biggest issue with such analysis is the comparison to Niantic's breakout hit Pokemon Go, which - three years after launch - is on track to [generate \\$3 billion](#).

A good opportunity then to get our expert group, the Monetizer Mavens, on the case. We asked them:

- **What went wrong for Harry Potter: Wizards Unite?**
- **Are there specific issues in terms of retention and monetization, or is it just that nothing has the same cut-through as Pokemon?**



Mikkel Celinder

Owner, AppCrimes.com

Looking at the first five minutes of gameplay, it quickly becomes clear why this game isn't doing well.

The storyline isn't something the player can relate to knowing the franchise. The game takes place after the movies end and the Wizarding World is in trouble, but the characters from the books are thrown in there for some reason.

The story isn't compelling because the player is learning a tonne of new lore, rather than playing. Far from, "here's a ball, throw it!", it's instant disengagement. I would bet a tonne of players churn before level two for the disappointment in story alone.

The game also has a midcore-esque feel to it, which I think scares a lot of the more casual players away.

In terms of input mechanics each spell has a different pattern which isn't a meaningful choice for the player. And when failing a spell, it takes about 10 seconds to let the player know they failed, when they knew the second they perform it. It took about half a second to 'recharge' in Pokemon Go after an awkward throw.

Other than the gameplay, I think there are some important factors to consider about the IP itself and the timing. The Harry Potter IP, though the Fantastic Beasts spinoff is still rolling, isn't at a high point and the timing feels rather forced. Pottermore is also a rather closed ecosystem and it's tightly controlled, which limits reach and knowledge of the brand.

Pokemon, on the other hand, was - at the launch of Go - on most platforms with other interactive media and decades of Nintendo games and trading

card games had chiselled the path for the mobile launch, making the onboarding extremely easy for Pokemon Go.

All-in-all I think Harry Potter: Wizards Unite didn't fail on a single specific thing but ended up failing on most parameters.



Dylan Tredrea

Head of Publishing ZeptoLab

The game itself certainly has some issues - no clear motivation for why you should be collecting, clunky UX and it doesn't do a good job of quickly getting the player into the loop, in my opinion.

All that said, I think there is good reason to be very sceptical about location-based games and big IP. Pokemon was just too perfect. Even people who only vaguely know the IP (like myself) know it is all about going out and collecting.

So even if you could 'wave a magic wand' and fix all the product issues in Harry Potter: Wizards Unite, I don't think it would have an outsized business impact.

Getting people to regularly, well, go outside is simply a very high bar. It's usually a pretty good 'IP Play' to take a successful game, make a few tweaks/improvements and release it with a different IP, but I don't think this approach is easy or even possible with a location-based game.

I certainly do think it's possible that we'll see another gameplay experience that uses location in a completely different way and hits it out of the park, but I think this will be something quite innovative and surprising.

Simply rehashing the Pokemon Go experience isn't going to work. Unfortunately though, I think this will only happen after dozens of smaller studios try high risk, highly innovative approaches.

As a player I'm quite excited to see what happens in the space, but as an IP holder I have to say I'm quite sceptical about the near-term potential for IP to utilise location-based gameplay unless we see more variety in proven gameplay experiences.



Ben Cousins

CEO ISBIT Games

I definitely agree that Pokemon Go was a perfect combination of gameplay and IP, and I'm not that surprised that the other attempts at the gameplay with other, less appropriate IPs haven't worked (Jurassic Park, Walking Dead, Wizarding World).

It takes a LOT to get people playing location games. The UX for getting out of the house is the problem!

There were no successes before Pokemon Go and I wonder if there will be any afterwards. Watching Minecraft with bated breath.



Mark Sorrell

Consultant

Ben and Dylan make a good point. I feel it's backed up by the lack of success other Pokemon games have had on mobile and the reasonable success other Harry Potter games have had.

Pokemon Go was not just the Pokemon IP, it was the intrinsic match of IP and gameplay.

It's also worth considering that Pokemon Go was extremely novel. It wasn't the first location-based game, but it was the first mainstream one, and given the high bar to entry - as Dylan notes - repeating that is far harder than repeating the success of conventional mobile success templates, almost all of which revel in being extremely easy to play (with the exception of the Game of War lineage).

Combine that with the specific clunk Mikkel describes and the lack of success seems reasonable.

One swallow does not a summer make. Pokemon Go was - depending on your outlook - perfect, or lucky, or both. But it seems clear that it does not provide a template for success.



Kenneth Wong

Director of Research and Monetization Hothead Games

I agree full-heartedly with the above comments.

Before the game's launch, there were some signs that led me to believe Harry Potter: Wizards Unite couldn't replicate Pokemon Go's success.

1) Walking Dead and Jurassic World were more relevant IPs at the time their location-based games launched. Both games got good reviews and yet neither became the big hits some predicted.

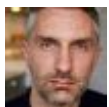
2) IP-based sequels/spinoffs rarely do well in the mobile app space (Final Fantasy is the only one I recall that did well). Examples include Transformers from Kabam (Marvel Contest of Champions), all the post-Kim Kardashian celebrity games, etcetera. The biggest issue is that not all IP fits the gameplay and meta of the original success. Most developers also try too hard to "top" the predecessor, so they add unnecessary features that take away the simplicity of the original product.

3) In regards to the Potter IP itself, even though it is a global phenomenon, the target audience who were hooked on the novels and movies are in their mid-20s. The motivation to walk around to catch the mythical beasts they liked 10 to 15 years ago is minimal at best. There's also no mainstream relevancy on the IP as the last Potter movie came out eight years ago and Fantastic Beasts does not count. The Pokemon audience targeted younger and this allowed the game to become a family event. Parents will gladly take their kids for a stroll to catch some pokemon as family bonding time. As mentioned above, Pokemon remains relevant with its popular TCGs, movies, cartoons, etcetera.

As for the game itself, the retention data is somewhat surprising (68 per cent D1, 30 per cent D7 in Brazil - source: AppAnnie).

I agree the tutorial is very clunky and it's very hard to pick up. In an age where less means more, it requires the user to learn way too much too quickly. It doesn't have the simple charm of just throwing a colourful ball at a cute monster.

I have not played a second session since the first 20 minutes and I still log into Pokemon Go a few days a week (please don't judge!).



Ben Cousins

CEO ISBIT Games

I would just like to chime in and say I don't think it's correct to say the Fantastic Beasts movies don't count and the franchise, in general, is too old.

The two latest movies grossed at 65 to 85 per cent of the average movie from the original series, which is very respectable considering the much narrower demographic appeal due to the more adult stories.

I was at a nighttime premiere of the last film and I've not experienced fandom in a movie that intense since the Star Wars special editions in 1997.

All the kids I know in my daughter's age group (eight to nine) consider reading the books and seeing the movies a rite of passage.

The franchise is still very strong with millennials and younger, and there is a game opportunity there, just not sure it's a location one.



Jordan Blackman

CEO Bright Black Associates

Great input so far.

Question: how badly is Wizards Unite doing? Is it a total crash and burn?



Alex Gray

Vice President, Solutions Consulting Swrve

Breaking down most mobile games, we can look at a few categories: FTUE, core gameplay/loops and marketing (including brand/IP context).

Unfortunately, Harry Potter: Wizards Unite doesn't stack up well on most of these especially when compared to Pokemon Go, and even moreso when we consider the broader context Pokemon Go was released in.

(This turned into a mini-review of the game, for better or worse.)

Game optimization: This isn't a category I listed above, but it has such a big impact that it deserves its own section. I still use a Galaxy S8 as my daily phone, and this game runs slowly. It's not quite unplayable, but it is bad enough to keep me from playing the game much more.

The S8 is currently the second most popular Android device and many Android devices offer lower performance - reports of poor performance are common in reviews. Retention will be a challenge for those whose phones are not newer flagships.

Contrast to Pokemon Go which, while an enormous battery hog, didn't suffer nearly as much from performance complaints.

FTUE: Some basics are done well here, but there are big areas for improvement. Prior to getting into the actual game, you are blocked by (1) an age gate (2) a request for your full name and (3) a request for a code name.

Why they felt the need to ask for a full name at all, let alone doing so as the very first action, I have not yet discovered in gameplay. It seems like

unnecessary friction that provides little value both to the player and the studio.

Code names must be unique, which adds more friction to the process - the delay between entering a code name and finding out it was taken was about 15 seconds. It's not clear to me why code names must be unique, from a player's perspective.

Compare all of this to Go's streamlined, intuitive FTUE that gets you into the game ASAP and it's clear which title will struggle more with D1 (and beyond) retention. Once we get into the gameplay, the tutorial is straightforward and gets us into the game.

Core gameplay: It's another Niantic game based on the Ingress tech. Go will have introduced many (if not most) players to this either through them playing the game or simply hearing about it in media, word of mouth, etcetera.

Beyond the location mechanics, this game looks and feels like a midcore or hardcore game. There's a wide variety of items, currencies and progression indicators. There's a volume of mechanics to understand and get into that might feel overwhelming to a casual player.

Compare this to Pokemon Go at launch, which provided a small number of item types - some reviewers criticized it for a lack of depth, however they were able to make the game extraordinarily accessible. Interacting with monsters is unsatisfying - there's no element of choosing which spell is the right one, simply trace-the-pattern.

Again, compare to Go: simple throwing of balls. Sure, I could use a berry, change the type of ball, or put some spin on the throw - but none of this is required. There are a mishmash of core loops the game is clearly encouraging - nothing unusual here, but nothing new either.

Marketing and IP: The differences between Harry Potter and Pokemon here are vast. Go was the very first mobile phone game for Pokemon, a series that has been releasing handheld games since 1996.

It is the second Harry Potter mobile game and it never had the legions of fans aching for a mobile phone release like Pokemon had. Huge download numbers were nearly guaranteed for the very first Pokemon app.

Wizards Unite has benefited hugely from the marketing push and the brand recognition of Harry Potter, but it's hard to think of a brand that could surpass Pokemon in this context.

TL;DR: Harry Potter was never positioned to capture mobile game audiences in the same way that Pokemon Go was and even if it had been it's not 2016. The gameplay is fine (though some improvements could be made), but doesn't bring anything revolutionary for the average player.

I don't agree that it has crashed and burned or even that anything went "wrong" - I think the expectations for it were far too high to begin with.



Kenneth Wong

Director of Research and Monetization Hothead Games

Jordan Blackman, it all depends on who you ask. I would say anyone with an expectation that this game will make as much money as Pokemon Go will be disappointed. However, I would be ecstatic if we had a game that made \$4 million in the US in its first four weeks. To put in perspective, Pokemon Go made over \$110 million in the US in its first four weeks.

Ben Cousins, I don't disagree Harry Potter is a big IP. Jam City's Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery was one of 2018's top grossing new games. Perhaps my point didn't come across that well.

What I'm pointing out is that it's an unfair expectation to believe Harry Potter can have the same amount of success as Pokemon Go. There are [articles that say Harry Potter will be the top grossing new game of 2019](#). Harry Potter

is a huge IP, but Pokemon is the number one franchise in the world (Yes, [worth more than Star Wars](#)).

In my honest opinion, Pokemon Go is a lightning-in-a-bottle phenomenon and cannot be replicated. I can't say if the game will be profitable for Niantic, but I doubt too many people predicted that the game will make less than five per cent of Pokemon in its first four weeks.



Mark Robinson

CEO DeltaDNA

Harry Potter: Wizards Unite suffered because its IP and lore aren't necessarily well-suited to this type of AR gameplay.

Pokemon Go works so well because the entire Pokemon IP is essentially based on the themes of exploration and collection. The strapline is even "Gotta catch 'em all".

If you've watched the cartoons or played any of the games, Pokemon Go does a very good job of allowing you to emulate your favourite characters and live out your fantasy. In contrast, Harry Potter: Wizards Unite relies on a 'sticker book' mechanic, which is not particularly relevant to most people's idea of being a wizard and therefore isn't that compelling.

The story is also quite heavy. In trying to surface the Harry Potter lore and make it relevant, Harry Potter: Wizards Unite uses a lot of streaming text dialogue that can seem overwhelming and boring to casual players.

It's always good to have areas of a game that lets more hardcore players get really immersed into the concept but deep involvement in this kind of thing should always be optional. By pushing all this stuff on every player, the

accessibility of the game is compromised and onboarding becomes unnecessarily complex.

Also, Harry Potter: Wizards Unite has no real social mechanic to speak of. Being part of a team provides players with a great reason to return day after day where they might otherwise simply stop playing through boredom or frustration one day and simply never bother to return.

Other successful games in this genre (Jurassic World Alive and The Walking Dead: Our World) have borrowed popular mechanics from other genres such as cooperative tasks and shared rewards that go a long way towards building in-game communities and creating social stickiness.