# Niantic's first AR game Ingress is getting a massive overhaul in 2018

Niantic may be best-known for the massive hit *Pokémon Go*, but for its next major release the studio is going back to the beginning. Today the developer revealed that it's working on a significant update to its debut augmented reality game, *Ingress*. Called *Ingress Prime*, the overhauled version of the game will be launching next year, and will change virtually every aspect of the experience — from the art, design, and narrative, to the underlying technology that powers it. "This game was the place where we figured out all of the things that we later applied to *Pokémon Go*, and will be drawing from for other projects that we do in the future," says Niantic CEO John Hanke. "We really look at it as our spiritual core."

*Ingress* first launched in 2012, when Niantic was still a subsidiary of Google, and its futuristic world puts players on one of two factions at a time when humanity has discovered a new technology could point to the existence of alien life. It includes augmented reality and location-based elements, much like *Pokémon Go*, and Niantic says the game has since been downloaded more than 20 million times across both Android and iOS. In some ways, the game was really ahead of its time; five years ago when it launched, far fewer people understood the concept of an AR game in the way that they do now. With the explosive popularity of *Pokémon Go*, which has been downloaded more than 750 million times, the idea is much more mainstream.

*"We really look at it as our spiritual core."*
For Niantic, that made it a great time to re-introduce *Ingress* to a potentially more receptive audience, while also rewarding those dedicated players who have stuck with the game over the years. "We took people and some of our attention off of

*Ingress* after the *Pokémon Go* launch, just because that game was going so strong that we had to beef up all aspects of it," says Hanke. "We haven't been able to give the [*Ingress*] community much in terms of new features for the past year. Luckily the community has stayed with us and remained strong, but we're excited now to have a fully-staffed team on *Ingress*."

*A brief teaser of the upcoming Ingress Prime anime.*

*Ingress Prime* will be available as an update to the existing game at some point next year, and Hanke says that the new version is a "completely re-written new client." *Prime* will introduce a revamped storyline, which Hanke likens to a superhero origin story that tells largely the same narrative as the original, but in a different way. "Things aren't exactly the same, but the general arc is familiar," he explains.

*"A modern, beautiful version of the game."*
As part of that expanded narrative, Niantic will also be debuting an anime series that further fleshes out the world, though there's no word yet on when it will debut. This kind of transmedia storytelling is something the studio has explored since the game first launched, with a YouTube series and several ebooks, but with *Prime* they want to go a step further. "I'm a big believer in building up the world across many different media," says Hanke. "Short of doing a $200 million motion picture, anime is a great way to introduce a world like *Ingress*, because you can really pull people into a world that goes beyond the everyday."

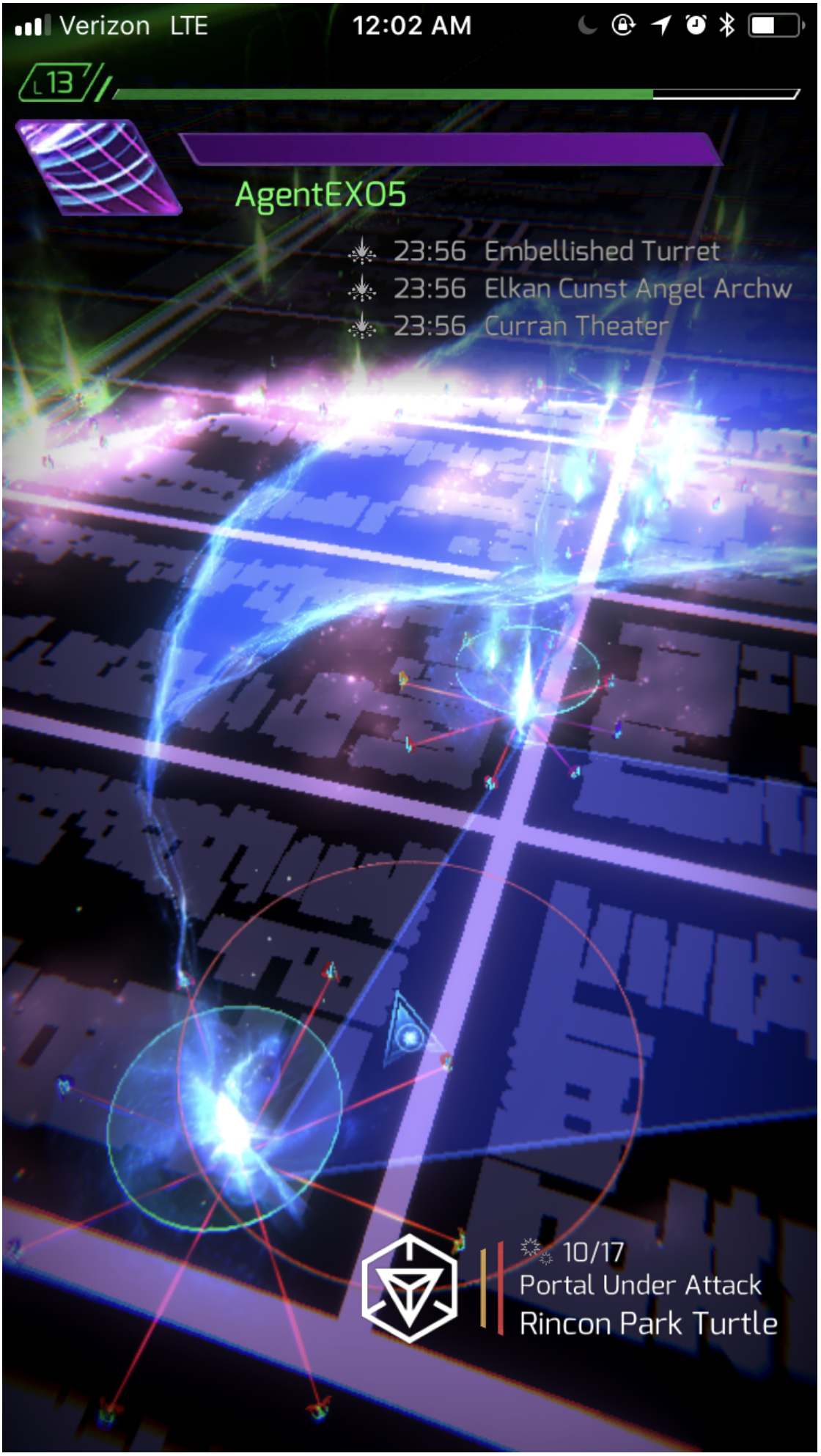
*Prime* will also feature a completely new look, with revamped visuals and a more streamlined interface, marking a big change from the original release. "It was a very spartan crew that did the first version of *Ingress*," he says. "I guess it's part of the charm of that game, that it's a very spartan UI and players have grown to love that. But we're really happy to be

able to bring in some really talented artists and designers into the project, and really just give people a modern, beautiful version of the game.”




*Ingress (left) compared to Ingress Prime (right).*




Verizon LTE
12:02 AM
L13
AgentEXO5
23:56 Embellished Turret
23:56 Elkan Cunst Angel Archw
23:56 Curran Theater
10/17
Portal Under Attack
Rincon Park Turtle

One of the biggest changes, though, will be on the technical side. The new *Ingress* client will see the game moved to the same technology platform as *Pokémon Go*, meaning that Niantic will be able to share improvements and fixes between the two games. It also means that *Ingress Prime* can take advantage of nascent mobile technologies like Apple's ARKit and Google's ARCore, and make use of improved tools for detecting cheaters, a problem that has especially plagued *Pokémon Go*.

From a game design perspective, Niantic sees *Prime* as an opportunity to make a version of *Ingress* that's more approachable to new players. That's something *Pokémon Go* excelled at, and the company is hoping to use what they learned on that game to improve the new-player experience for *Ingress Prime*. "*Ingress* is very hard to grasp initially, and doesn't come into its own until you've connected with another group of players," Hanke acknowledges.

2018 is shaping up to be a busy year for Niantic. In addition to the massive overhaul of *Ingress* and ongoing support for *Pokémon Go*, the studio is also launching a new branded AR title with *Harry Potter: Wizards Unite*. Given the server problems that plagued *Pokémon Go* during its peak popularity last summer, it's easy to be skeptical of the studio's ability to support three games simultaneously. But Hanke seems confident that the studio's investments and growth – the team has gone from 35 people at the launch of *Ingress* to a headcount of around 150 today – will be enough to keep all three games on track.

"We've been diligently building our capacity within the company over the past year," he says. The company made a lot of money with *Pokémon Go*, and much of that has been reinvested in additional staff and improved technologies. Hanke believes this puts the studio in a much better place to deal with the challenges that will come from a hectic 2018. "There are a lot more resources at our disposal now than at the time that we launched *Pokémon Go*."

*Ingress* is a game that helped pioneer the concept of AR and location-based games, and its success gave Niantic the opportunity to work on two of the biggest pop culture brands on the planet. And while *Ingress* may never reach the same stature as *Harry Potter*, Hanke believes that it has the potential to be something much bigger than what it currently is. “I feel like the world of *Ingress* is at its beginning stages,” he says.