

Palworld is a hit, and it's easy to see why

It seems like everyone on Earth is either talking about or playing *Palworld*. Indeed, in the three days since its early access launch on Steam on January 19th (and simultaneous release on Game Pass), the game has sold over 5 million copies. While that's not quite *Tears of the Kingdom* numbers, to have a game from a relatively unknown developer do that kind of work in that short of time? Okay, *Palworld*, you have our attention. Let's see exactly what it is you have to say.

Palworld's announcement trailer released in 2021. It started generally enough, with a bright, colorful world populated with cute monsters that bear an almost uncomfortable resemblance to another game featuring cute, catchable creatures. But then come the AK-47s. Midway through the game's trailer, the tone shifts from "catch these cute monsters that will help you build your home" to "shoot these cute monsters and use them as slave labor." One of the most memorable moments from that first trailer was the image of a bunch of pals (the monsters are called pals) that look startlingly like Sprigatito, mournfully manufacturing assault rifles on an assembly line.

Fast forward two years, and while I haven't quite gotten my gun factory up and running yet, I do feel a jolt of excitement when my Lamball helps me make a new tool or weapon. Crafting / survival games are not my jam; I bounce off them like Pikachu bouncing off a Snorlax belly. Yet for all my relative disinterest in what *Palworld's* trying to sell me, I'm kinda buying it anyway. I definitely see the vision, and I completely understand how if I was someone who *did* enjoy the *Pokémon* or *Minecraft* games of the world, *Palworld* would have

lit my brain on fire like a Charizard at butcher shop.

When you first load into *Palworld*, you create your character and then your world. I do appreciate that the tutorial is very good about explaining what it is you need to get started. There's a robust survival guide that not only explains how the basic controls work but also offers tips on what to do first. And like any survival game, the first thing I wound up doing was punching trees and rocks.

Catching pals is a simple affair frontloaded with a bunch of busy work before you can even think about building your team. You've gotta craft the game's version of pokéballs, but before you can make them you need a special kind of stone that you can either pick up off the ground or mine from rock deposits. Then you've gotta craft the workbench to craft the pokéball. After that, catching a pal works like it would in any other game: weaken it (with weapons, your fists, or another pal you've got on your team) then throw the ball to catch it. The game will tell you, based on how much you've weakened the pal, your likelihood of successfully catching it, which is a nice touch. But make sure you aim that ball *precisely* because if you're off by one pixel, you'll miss and lose your ball. This is especially frustrating in the early game because of all the work it takes to make the suckers in the first place.

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gray-bd dark: [>a]: shadow-underline-gray">Image: PocketPair
The game's survival features are all what one would expect. There's a hunger bar for your character, your pals have a hunger bar, and there's even a hot / cold weather feature a la *Tears of the Kingdom*, so keep a torch handy or stay near campfires at night.

Setting up your base is similarly simple. Building a special structure will establish a base, and assigning any pals you've

caught to that base will put them to work. If there are any resources within the base's perimeter, your assigned pals will start harvesting them. Also, if you're crafting within the base, whether it be tools or structures, your pals will bust out little hammers and help. You have to manage your pals carefully, providing them with shelter, food, and something to do.

And... that's it. I have two hours in the game across PC and Game Pass. (The Xbox version is vastly inferior to PC – lots of frame rate drops, texture pop-ins, and visual glitches. Also, the Xbox version doesn't have dedicated servers, which means multiplayer games are limited to up to four players, not 32 like on Steam. According to a report from *IGN*, *Palworld* developer PocketPair is working on it.) It feels like I've got a decent understanding of most of what the game's offering: catch pals, build stuff. The game's novelty combined with its dissonant and edgy tone might be enough to hold players' attention for the first 20 hours (or more, if you're playing with friends), but I'm curious what the next 20 hours look like. The game's still in early access and according to its Steam page, it'll be at least a year before the full release.

Then there's all the controversy. Multiple outlets and people on social media have pointed out the similarities between *Palworld*'s pals and pokémon.

On X, user byofrog created a video showing models of pals superimposed over pokémon with the models lining up perfectly.

In a report from *VGC*, several game developers spoke anonymously about how improbable it would be for the models to match like that.

"You cannot, in any way, accidentally get the same proportions on multiple models from another game without ripping the models. Or at the very least, tracing them meticulously first," said one game developer to *VGC*. PocketPair's CEO

Takuro Mizobe refuted the accusations to Japanese gaming news website *Automation*, saying, “We make our games very seriously, and we have absolutely no intention of infringing upon the intellectual property of other companies.” He also spoke out against the harassment and death threats he said PocketPair’s employees were facing: “Currently, we are receiving slanderous comments against our artists, and we are seeing tweets that appear to be death threats,” read his post on X translated from Japanese. “I would appreciate it if you would refrain from slandering the artists involved in *Palworld*.”

There are also accusations that *Palworld* was made with AI. Mizobe has made posts on X discussing AI and the potential for its use in game development. His company also has another game in early access called , where you must use the game’s “AI” art generation feature to create works of art that will fool other artists. But taken together, these instances don’t prove that *Palworld* was made with AI and so far, there’s no evidence that it has been.

As of this writing, *Palworld* has sold over 5 million copies, and it is currently the most played game on Steam with over 870,000 players – it’s 300,000 players shy of beating *Counter-Strike*’s record for the most players on Steam ever. I can see why. First, it’s dry January. Outside of *Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown* – which you should absolutely be playing! – and *Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth*, there’s not much going on such that a game like *Palworld* with its “Pokémon with guns” premise has the breathing room to make a big splash.

Secondly, *Palworld* is different. I don’t mean that it’s special in its difference; it’s not doing anything particularly inspired with its survival, crafting, or monster-catching elements. But the fact that *Palworld* mashed all those highly popular game mechanics together makes it enough to catch the attention of starved *Pokémon* fans who haven’t had a decent meal since *Sword / Shield*.

<https://www.theverge.com/2024/1/22/24047087/palworld-early-access-steam-xbox-gamepass>