Pokémon Masters on mobile turns collecting pokémon into a microtransaction

Since Nintendo properties started expanding to mobile devices four years ago, we've seen a number of uncharacteristic experiments, including games branded with popular flagship characters that are nonetheless filled to the brim with microtransactions. And *Pokémon Masters*, the latest mobile title in the monster-capturing franchise announced last month, is no exception.

The game is developed by Japanese mobile powerhouse DeNA, the same company that helped Nintendo develop mobile versions for popular franchises like *Super Mario*, *Animal Crossing*, and *Mario Kart*. And for the first time, this is a Nintendo-affiliated title that's being published by DeNA, and not by Nintendo itself. (The company's representative was quick to point out that Nintendo owns 10 percent of DeNA, as well as one-third of The Pokémon Company, giving it indirect influence over some *Pokémon* properties even when none of its employees are working on the title.)

'Pokémon Masters' is published by DeNA and not officially affiliated with Nintendo

That said, the one title *Pokémon Masters* most resembles is *Fire Emblem Heroes*, the iOS and Android game DeNA co-developed with Intelligent Systems and released in 2017. That may come as a bit of a surprise to longtime *Pokémon* fans who were expecting something more traditional, and it's not necessarily a bad thing. I got my hands on *Pokémon Masters* for a short demo earlier this month, and I got to see firsthand exactly how DeNA has designed this free-to-play game's monetization and collection systems. It's relatively fair, so long as you're willing to accept that microtransactions are core to

the experience.

First and foremost, if you find yourself pushed away by traditional Japanese “gacha” elements, you’re not going to like *Pokémon Masters*. Gacha is a loot box-style mechanic named after randomized toy vending machines in Japan, and it’s a common monetization practice in the Asian mobile market. So like *Fire Emblem Heroes*, which was designed around core gacha elements, this particular *Pokémon* mobile game revolves around collecting characters at various levels of rarity, sometimes paying for the ability to unlock them more frequently. But unlike traditional *Pokémon* games, those characters you’re collecting are trainers, not just the titular creatures.

In *Pokémon Masters,* every pokémon is paired with a distinct trainer taken from one of the core games in the franchise, in what the game refers to as a sync pair. So if you want a particular creature to battle with, you’ll have to unlock the trainer associated with them. Think Brock and his rock partner Onix, Misty and the water pokémon Starmie, and iconic Red (the main character of the first pair of *Pokémon* games) and his fire-breathing friend Charizard. All are unlockable and playable characters in the game.

Unlocking can be done a number of ways. You can buy in-game currency and just spend your way to a more expansive collection of trainers. You can also spend a reduced amount of a different currency you can earn in-game once per day to unlock a character of your choice. And then lastly, playing the story mode will let you battle and then recruit trainers and their associated pokémon into your roster.

You can pay money to unlock more trainer-pokémon sync pairs
The story mode itself is designed much like *Fire Emblem Heroes*, where you progress through chapters with small,

dialogue-heavy cutscenes that typically end in battles. DeNA crafted a custom narrative for the game featuring a few original characters on a new island called Pasio, and you play as a unique male or female character that starts out paired with Pikachu. The normal trappings of a *Pokémon* game are all here: a professor that guides you in your quest, a rival to compete against routinely throughout the story, and a top-tier "masters league" to strive to compete in.

Battling is the one standout element, with a turn-based style reminiscent of the core *Pokémon* games and neat custom animations, but with simplified move sets that make it more like *Pokémon Let's Go* in practice. You typically play as a trio of trainers, each with one unique pokémon that can be swapped between, and each pokémon has a special move that you can use once you've charged up a meter over the course of battle. You can also combine abilities when playing in co-op mode against other human players or AI opponents.

Image: DeNA

There are a few other intricacies worth mentioning. Leveling up requires using currency that is distinct from the currency you can buy for unlocking characters. The same is true of evolution, which will let you transform your pokémon at a certain level after you've completed an extra hard chapter and use the requisite mix of items. (There appears to be about a dozen different types of collectible currencies and resources that can be spent on a number of in-game items, new pokémon moves, and other unlockables.)

Notably, DeNA says there will be no stamina meter, so you can play the game as much as you want per day without having to spend any currency or wait out a timer. DeNA tells me there will be a total of 65 sync pairs to collect at launch, with more to be added later, that cover up to the upcoming *Sword* and *Shield* titles coming out in November. Collecting every

single character shouldn’t be anywhere near as intensive as it is in *Fire Emblem Heroes*, at least as best as I could tell in my short time with the title.

So this may not be the long sought-after *Pokémon* mobile game people have been asking for since the dawn of the smartphone era. But it is a unique enough approach to differentiate it from its mobile counterpart *Pokémon Go*, with enough of the core series elements and story threads to make it a much improved experience over the limited puzzle and board game options that existed before Nintendo first paired with DeNA more than four years ago.

DeNA won’t say when *Pokémon Masters* is coming out on iOS and Android, but the company is maintaining a summer 2019 window for release. That means it’s likely going to hit the mobile storefronts some time in the next month or so.

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