Game Overview: "Pokemon Sun and Moon" hit shelves

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The newest games in GameFreak's acclaimed Pokémon game series, titled "Pokémon Sun" and "Pokémon Moon," finally hit shelves on Friday, November 18 for the Nintendo 3DS. This game, like many other popular game series, received a midnight release, which I decided to attend as my first midnight release (there's a first time for everything). If "Pokémon GO" was your first Pokémon "game" and you still enjoy it, continue to do so, but you may find it pales in comparison to the full-fledged experience if you decide to give it a go. That said, at the time of writing I have only been able to put a few hours into the game, but I'm going to provide a few initial insights I've had.

Story

Pokémon games have always been known for having rather simple stories, which typically entail playing as a new trainer who has yet to receive their first Pokémon and is the "new kid in town." However, before we even get to that point this time, there's a cool cinematic chase scene that the player is shown, involving a mysterious girl on the run from what is presumed to be some evil organization. This kind of intro is new for the series, which historically has not had many "cinematic" moments, as it were. Before you officially begin the game, you are given the choice of being male or female, along with a few choices of skin tone, which is far more options than we have previously seen. You can change things like hairstyle, color, and more later on in the game. After that you'll begin the game being woken up by your character's mother, aptly named "Mom," who informs you of a visitor. This visitor ends up being Professor Kukui, a very casual guy who seemingly always requires a fanfare of guitar riffs and upbeat percussion along with his presence. After some dialogue and such, you finally get the chance to choose your starter Pokémon. There are three options as per usual, featuring a grass, fire, and water type starter. Respectively, these are Rowlet, the owl Pokémon; Litten, the cat Pokémon; and Popplio, the seal Pokémon. Seeing as I'm a somewhat shallow person, I picked the one I thought was cutest, which was Rowlet. Keep in mind that, as usual, these Pokémon will not stay so cute forever. After choosing your starter, you get to see a short scene where you as the trainer gain their trust then proceed to hug them (I squealed a bit, I won't lie). Beating "Sun" and "Moon" is a notably different undertaking when compared to previous games in the series, as this time your goal is not to visit eight towns and defeat Gym Leaders. Rather, your goal is to travel to all four islands of the Alola region and complete various trials, with the final trial of each location being defeating its "Kahuna." As of right now, it is unclear what happens after you complete all four final trials. As expected from Pokémon games, along your journey you will be a bit sidetracked by an evil organization, this time referred to as Team Skull, whose main job is to get in your way and serve as the obligatory evil group who goes around terrorizing people and Pokémon under the orders of a leader with a very skewed view of creating a perfect world.

Gameplay and Features

Pokémon has retained a very defined gameplay formula over the years, "Sun" and "Moon" being no exceptions. In terms of game mechanics, everything is the more or less same, except for the introduction of Z moves. These are powerful attacks that a Pokémon can use for causing some major damage to the opponent Pokémon, which is activated by using the Z-Ring feature. Most of the notable changes are present in the organization of in-game functions, notably the pause menu, which features a paginated system for options, like viewing your Pokémon party, looking at the Pokédex, and other new features such as the built-in QR scanner. With that in mind, I'll address a few new features.

The QR scanner allows you to scan QR codes that are associated with a certain Pokémon. You get one new scan every 2 hours, and you can scan up to 10 codes in a single sitting. Each code you scan awards you 10 points towards the "island scanner" and registers the scanned Pokémon in your Pokédex. Once you receive 100 points, you can activate the island scanner, which will make a Pokémon that would otherwise not appear in "Sun" and "Moon" show up in a place defined by the scanner. I was able to easily get to 100 points by visiting Pokémon GO Hub, who has

Photo courtesy of Nintendo

80 or so QR codes available which cover most Pokémon native to the Alola region. Speaking of, there are new, "Alolan" variants of Pokémon from the first generation of Pokémon games (Red and Blue), which are essentially variants that adapted to the more tropical climate of the Alola region. For instance, a Rattata, normally a purple rat, is gray and has moustache-like whiskers. Long before the release of "Sun" and "Moon," the internet got a chance to see various Alolan Pokémon, out of which Alolan Exeggutor became popular enough to become a meme. I highly implore you to Google that one if you'd like a good laugh.

Up next is the new Festival Plaza, which acts as a virtual hub for interacting with other players in your local area or over wireless, be it through chatting, battling, or trading Pokémon. Interacting with other trainers is interesting, as you have the option of paging another player (yes, paging them), which allows you to interact with a

downloaded version of their character, viewing information from win-to-loss ratios to how many eggs they have hatched in the game. You also have the option of adding up to 50 other players to your VIP list, which means that they will consistently show up in your particular Festival Plaza. In addition, everything in the Festival Plaza that doesn't involve interacting with strangers uses Festival Coins (FC), a currency utilized only within the Plaza. FC is gained by interacting with other players, to then be used at various facilities, such as a shop that sells items which increase your Pokémon's affection towards you, a lottery, and a haunted house, which I have read involves sending in one of your Pokémon then receiving a random item when they come back. Chances are that I may not use this feature too often, but I like seeing GameFreak making more efforts to increase interaction between players.

The last notable feature I got to try out was Pokémon Refresh, which allows you to interact with your Pokémon. You can pet them with the 3DS stylus and feed them "Poké Beans" which increase their affection towards you, among other features I have yet to explore. After battles you sometimes have the option of using the feature to clean up your Pokémon, be it by blow drying or brushing, which also increases their affection. This is similar to the "Pokémon Amie" feature introduced in X and Y, which was very similar minus the additional grooming options present here.

Visual

There is only so much I can say about my excitement without using profanity, so let me just say that this game looks amazing for a handheld Pokémon game. In fact, I can say without a doubt that it is the most visually appealing handheld Pokémon game to date. Those who played the recent "Animal Crossing: New Leaf" may find the game's visuals somewhat reminiscent thereof, featuring lush 3D landscapes and nice touches such as actual moving water and rather detailed walkways (including tile and hardwood floors). You'll also find characters with mostly human proportions (no giant heads on small bodies here, folks). This allows for notably better representation of physical motion, among other things. The most amazing thing to me upon starting the game, however, was the star-filled night sky, which

admittedly had me staring for a good couple of minutes, and provided a wonderful sense of immersion. In terms of battles, each Pokémon present on the field isn't given its own little "area" anymore, instead occupying a part of the field. For comparison, in previous Pokémon games, during a battle, every Pokémon was surrounded by a small circular area, but in some ways that always made a minor dent in my immersion, so I'm glad that GameFreak made the change. I could go on for a long time on all of the little visual nuances present in "Sun" and "Moon," but this should give a bit of an idea. Keep in mind that this game was made with the New 3DS in mind, so while it does look great, if you're an original 3DS player like me, then you may notice a bit of lag here and there, especially when more than two Pokémon are on the field at once.

Look up screenshots, demo the game: I don't care what you do to gather a visual, just prepare to be impressed. No, it doesn't look like a PlayStation 4 game, but were you expecting it to? Without further ado, onto the gameplay.

Sound

As usual for Pokémon, the background music is solid. This time there's a more tropical vibe, because the game takes place in the more tropical Alola region, which, as noted, is meant to be modeled somewhat after Hawaii. Because of this the game has a more leisurely feel, making the experience both relaxing and engaging. A few sound effects have been changed, such as the "item received" sound, affecting a more tropical vibe as well. Other than that there isn't too much to say about the sound; things can only get better.

Final Thoughts

I'm very much looking forward to getting deeper into this new Pokémon entry and am very glad it was my first midnight game release. Also, as this is more of an overview including my initial thoughts, I'm not going to assign a score to this game. However, it looks very promising and I'm excited to try out all the features that I either briefly touched on here or have yet to learn about at all. The only thing I would advise to anyone looking to buy the game: you may want to consider getting a New 3DS if you own the original handheld like I do, because like more recent games such as "Super Smash Bros. 3DS," you may see slightly more lag and every time you quit the game, the whole device will require a reboot, presumably due to having to run in a higher power mode. There is some good news, though, if you were looking into eventually getting the New 3DS, as Nintendo is releasing a $100 version for Black Friday, which will be sold at retail stores like GameStop. If you're willing to risk potentially being uncomfortably close to other customers, this is as good a time as any. Now, excuse me while I go back to staring at my 3DS screen and pressing buttons with my thumbs.

Note: Currently, you can receive a Munchlax over the game's Mystery Gift which has special attacks and comes with Snorlium Z (an item that allows a Snorlax, evolved from Munchlax, to use a Z move), and if you played the demo of the game, you can transfer the Greninja you acquire in it to the main game.

Frost in their Mortar: A short story

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The site was originally composed of a series of untouched pre-mountainous hills, land as fertile as it was formidable. Measuring 79 kilometers along each side, the square plan for the massive complex called for leveling those rolling banks of soil, creating a flat plinth to underpin the largest single development in human history. Leftover earth from the levelling process was used to create an imperceptible gradient leading from the site's easternmost edge, lying in grasslands, up to where the now-demolished hills turned rocky at the base of the great mountain range to the west. For a decade now, construction crews had worked nonstop to transform the landscape's natural chaos into an orderly and uniform mass, carrying out a vision devised in offices whose occupants would likely never find themselves in the foothills of northeastern Wyoming.

Rising from the carefully constructed ground was a new kind of city. Really, though, it wasn't a city at all; Henning would have to find a few alternate words to use in the final version of his report. In some ways, it was a utopian community: the engineers he had spoken with told him that the plan dictated that the land be divided into 1,444 square subsets, each two kilometers in length, which were further divided into grids of 40 by 40 private home plots, each populated with a squat California bungalow at its center. In the middle of each multi-home grid was a masculine concrete tower (based on a scaled-up version of a little-known Brutalist design for a religious museum in northern Michigan, he was informed) containing public services and amenities for each community. The word "utopian," however, implied some form of luxury, and since luxury was defined on a relative scale, it was hard to form a frame of reference within the all-encompassing boundaries of the grid, where every community took on the same shape. After accounting for the space needed for roads and for the towers at the center of each of the grid's subsets, the number of homes in each community totaled 1,596. Overall, taking into consideration reserved space for two massive three-kilometer-wide strips of unused land which divided the whole site into quadrants, the development would contain 2,304,624 households upon completion.

The press had already exhaustively documented the crews that for years worked to carve out the giant square which carried the compound. In fact, a team from Henning's own publication had made repeated trips from Seattle to document every step in the process, returning each time with increasingly outlandish stories about the sheer scale of the project. Henning himself was only sent here because of the unique nature of the report his editors now wanted written: an in-depth look at the technology which enabled the construction and maintenance of so many dwellings with minimal human support.