

Mobile Games

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INTRODUCTION

The mobile interface is now a multi-variant medium that incorporates a number of platforms—predominantly smartphones and tablets or pads supported by iOS and Android operating systems, but also inclusive of Nintendo and Sony portable game consoles and supported software. Such devices occupy an expanding range of use-contexts, and are fast emerging as significant spaces for gaming and playful social activities more broadly. Web-capable smartphones are rapidly becoming ubiquitous, and together with app-based media ecologies and the uptake of gamification strategies by businesses and developers, mobile games are now increasingly infused into our mundane day-to-day media and communication practices. Seventy five percent of all mobile phone downloads are games, and the mobile gaming industry is now valued at \$50 billion (Moses, 2013; PWC, 2012), with some predicting that the mobile device will become the ‘primary screen’ for games by 2016 (Peterson, 2013). The popular game *Angry Birds* achieved one billion downloads as of mid 2012 and has continued to expand into toy, movie and merchandise franchises. While not all mobile games have enjoyed such success, the rapidly developing industry has provided many designers and programmers—and consequently, players—with more flexibility and innovation around game genres, gameplay, and the aesthetics and affordances of game environments. In tandem with these developments, researchers of

media and culture have turned their attention to an analysis of the mobile as an interface for play. Pioneering scholars include Larissa Hjorth and Dean Chan (2009) and Adrianna de Souza e Silva (2009). More recently, current leading experts include Mia Consalvo (2012), Jason Farman (2012), Jordan Frith (2013) and Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson (2014).

This article provides a critical overview of the various modalities of mobile gaming – from discrete offline casual games to location-based and cross-platform games, and more recently, the array of downloadable playful and social applications for the touchscreen smartphone and handheld tablet or pad. On the one hand, casual or ‘occasional’ mobile games – played for minutes at a time and at irregular intervals – can be seen as a form of portable home entertainment that cocoons the player in public places, facilitating a radical mobilization of personal space and privacy. On the other, location-based mobile games generate hybrid experiences of place and presence, requiring the player to integrate their own situated and embodied perception of the world with dynamic GPS-enabled information, embedded within an augmented and networked game reality. Today, the proliferation of location-aware mobile apps has effectively worked to interweave the previously disparate domains of online social networking and mobile gaming, turning many of our interpersonal, social and communicative practices into ‘playful’ activities.

MORE THAN CASUAL: THE RISE OF APP-BASED MOBILE MEDIA GAMES

Until recently, mobile phone gaming has been largely dismissed as ‘casual’ – typically defined in terms of non-immersive shallow gameplay that is brief, interruptible and non-narrative. Yet just as the constitution of mobile gaming has evolved, expanded, and deepened, so too has the notion of casual play. Most notably, the proliferation of app-based ecologies across devices has extended the dimension of play, to include playful and creative activities, games across multiple genres, contexts and levels of haptic and temporal investment.

Mobile gaming has a complex and uneven history, and is steeped in an even longer tradition of portable media, travel-sized board games and card games (Tobin, 2012). Early mobile gaming, often called portable or handheld gaming, was played on dedicated devices of Japanese origin, including Nintendo’s Game & Watch, GameBoy series, and DualScreen series with a recently released 3D-enhanced model (3DS), and Sony’s PSP series. Although there were some attempts to design mobile phone handsets with gaming platforms (e.g. the Nokia NGage in 2003) it wasn’t until the release of the first generation iPhone and launch of the App Store soon after that a smartphone became a game platform in its own right. Prior to 2002 early mobile phone gaming was initially limited to pre-loaded offline games such as *Tetris*, and subsequently, as mobile developers and providers experimented with distribution models, to a narrow spectrum of games made available through provider portals. Since 2008 and the launch of the App Store, mobile applications have extended the dimensions of play, to include programs and services that are not simply defined by the term ‘casual’ or even by the term ‘game’.

Indeed, the iPhone and App Store have in many ways set the standard as the mobile exemplar of the lusory turn in contemporary culture. Upon the initial release of the iPhone in 2007, Joel Mace and Michael West (2008) identified three major differ-

ences that distinguished it from competing mobile phone products: the large capacitive touchscreen and keyboard, integration into the already existing iTunes store (as a high-end model of the iPod with phone capability) and the inclusion within the device of Apple’s web browser, Safari. In 2008, Apple also released the software development kit (SDK), soon to be followed by the opening of an online App Store one day before the iPhone 3G became available (Mace & West, 2010). As West and Mace document: ‘In the first six months, the store attracted more than 15,000 applications and 500 million downloads, and three months later (April 2009) those figures had doubled to 30,000 and 1 billion, respectively’ (Mace & West, 2010). By early 2011 this number increased to 10 billion, and in mid-2013 Apple counted down to the 50-billionth download; according to App Store figures, 16 out of the 25 top all-time paid apps are games, the others comprising ‘playful’ apps for music, photo and video editing, and ‘productivity’ apps. At the same time, Google Play has listed similar figures of 48 billion app downloads onto Android devices.

As Consalvo notes, the iPhone and subsequent smartphone touchscreens have put mobile gaming platforms ‘in the hands of millions of people’ who would never consider themselves gamers’ (2012, 184). Like being ‘online’, playing games has become normalised, embedded in numerous other navigational, informational, productivity and social media app-based activities within our mobile mediascape. For Consalvo, the pervasive incorporation of play activities into our everyday lives means that mobile phone gamers ‘defy categorization’ (2012, 193), suggesting that we need to move beyond the conventional dichotomy of casual (mobile) and hardcore gaming.

Within much game literature, casual games are typically described in terms of their properties; that is, they are designed for casual use, are easy to learn (such as simple puzzle, card, and word games), offer quick rewards and consist of levels of short duration. Thus, casual gaming is often

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