Always On the Move

A HISTORY OF MOBILE GAMING

This e-book explores the history of mobile gaming and explains how it’s evolved from one small game to a global, multi billion dollar industry.
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Kyu Lee is the President of Gamevil, one of mobile gaming’s longest running companies. Founded in 2000 right at the start of the industry, the company has evolved in the ever changing landscape to become one of Korea’s premier gaming companies; a position recently cemented with their acquisition of rivals Com2Us in October 2013. Kyu has therefore seen many of the major changes in the industry happen at first hand and his perspective has proven interesting as a result of that.

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Christopher Kassulke is the founder of HandyGames, which formed in 2000 during the early stages of the mobile industry. Starting out as a small company working on freely released independent projects, Christopher has helped to transform the company into a fifty strong organisation that specialises in free to play titles.

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James Kaye is a founder and director of mobile marketing and PR agency Dimoso. James has worked within the gaming industry since 1994 and has been working in mobile since it emerged as a new genre of gameplay. Reflecting on his time at Orange Mobile and Hands on Mobile from 2002–2008, James spoke at length about the problems that faced game developers in the pre-iPhone era.

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Mobile gaming is one of the world’s youngest creative industries. If the start of mobile gaming is dated to the integration of Snake on the Nokia 6110 in 1997, then that means we’re in the company of a sixteen year old who wouldn’t be able to drive to the MGF in January – let alone have a drink at one of the famed end of day parties.

Yet despite its youth, Mobile Gaming is arguably the most pervasive form of gaming across the world today, permeating more corners than any PC, console or handheld has ever reached before. A survey from Popcap games in 2012 suggested that 44% of people played a mobile game and that smartphones were the device which most people played games on, with 33% of people playing on them in comparison to 18% using dedicated consoles.

And that is leading to some spectacular numbers that demonstrate the ever increasing power of mobile gaming as a business. This year alone we have heard news of Supercell receiving $1.5 billion in investment, Puzzles and Dragons making $3.8m a day in April 2013 and Candy Crush Saga reaching half a billion installs on Facebook and mobile. Our expectations are so high now that Rovio’s announcement of nearly $200 million in revenue is met with something of a shrug as if their success since 2010 has somehow become blasé in the face of enormous profitability elsewhere.

How then did we get here in such a short space of time? What did it take for us to get from making simple monochrome games to fully-fledged “games as services”? And what were the major successes or setbacks along the way? This paper intends to explore the history of mobile gaming and explain how it evolved from one small game to a global, multi billion dollar industry.
1997–2000
THE BIRTH OF MOBILE GAMING

As already mentioned, we must trace the beginning of the mobile gaming industry to the development of one game in 1997 by a Finnish developer working for Nokia called Taneli Armanto: Snake.

The game was a simple port of an arcade game originally developed in 1982 by David Bresnan for the BBC Micro. Featuring monochrome graphics, played on a small screen and utilising four way controls on a numeric keypad, Snake was certainly not the state of the art experience gamers expect today.

It was, however, a lot of fun and Nokia recognized that by making the decision to embed the follow up to the game, Snake II, on all of their monochrome mobile handsets. Simplistic it may have been but Snake became the first game to become a pervasive hit on mobile, reaching up to 350 million gamers on Nokia handsets according to the Entertainment Software Association.

The success of Snake was, in many ways, a useful analogy for a lot of what characterized the early mobile games. Held back by significant limitations in hardware, broader infrastructure and penetration levels amongst consumers, the early mobile pioneers nevertheless managed to achieve things that would prove crucial to the long term future of the industry.

In particular, the creation of the Wireless Application Protocol (WAP for short) was of pivotal importance to the early days of the mobile gaming industry. Created by the WAP Forum, a group which was also founded in 1997 and later became a part of the Open Handset Forum responsible for Android, WAP was the basis for the first era of mobile connectivity, leading to the arrival of a number of features within games that would help shape the future of the genre.

First, it allowed players to be able to download new games straight to their devices – a key step in allowing players to actively pick and choose which titles to play. Second, it allowed for the creation of the first multiplayer titles on mobile by allowing players to crudely connect their devices to each others. And third, it allowed games to use the mobile internet to store and adapt their content, such as Steve Jackson’s Sorcery which used WAP to download alternative player choices in the game.
Ultimately though, mobile gaming in the early years remained primitive and offered only limited experiences to those playing on their handsets. But the early years did demonstrate that there was both a market for players and the means to reach them – an important first step in making the business case for mobile as a potential gaming platform and something which Gameloft, JAMDAT and Gamevil took the decision to form their businesses around at the turn of the millennium.

2001–2006
GROWING PAINS

In Summer 2001, mobile gaming took an important step forward with the arrival of J2ME at the Java One Conference. It allowed for some improvement in the quality of mobile titles, with developers able to create fast moving sprites thus allowing them to broaden their sights when it came to making mobile games.

J2ME’s emergence alongside other languages such as BREW and the Nokia 40 series and Nokia 60 series software, helped to slowly increase the quality of games during the period. With support for colour displays increasingly prevalent and chip technology gradually improving, developers were able to start crafting mobile games with more depth and character than had been seen in the early days of the industry.

And, for the most part, the people best placed to benefit from this progress were brands and big name companies eager to tap into the mobile potential who had the resources to squeeze the most out of limited capabilities.

In 2001, The Lord of The Rings was released for WAP phones by Riot-E and that official licence was one of the first of a wave of big name titles to arrive on mobile. Between 2001 and 2007, industry giants such as Sonic the Hedgehog, Tiger Woods Golf, Madden NFL, The Prince of Persia: Sands of Time and Splinter Cell found their way onto mobile devices for the first time, albeit in less detailed and less interactive forms than their console siblings.
So to meet the demand of these Triple A brands and to manage their transition to a new platform, a number of mobile first companies made their first steps in the industry that has seen them survive to the present day. Digital Chocolate was founded in 2003 by Trip Hawkins in San Francisco and proceeded to earn millions in investment; Sorrent Mobile evolved into Glu Mobile in 2006 following an acquisition of a London based company and JAMDAT, makers of one of the first casual mobile hits, JAMDAT bowling, became mobile’s first enormous acquisition following a $580m payout from EA in 2005.

But despite there being positives in the industry, mobile struggled to make any kind of meaningful impact as a gaming platform of note during the 2001–2006 period because the technology and infrastructure simply didn’t exist to make a real success from.

On the one hand, a lot of the problems for mobile gaming came from the handsets themselves. Without touchscreen interfaces to call on or a clear gold standard that consumers gravitated towards developers had to design games which worked with multiple keypads types, varying screen sizes and hundreds of differently designed handsets sporting BREW, J2ME or the Nokia series software depending on where in the world they were. It was a big challenge and one that few developers were capable of meeting at the time.

Crucially, mobile had a serious commercial headache due to distribution problems driven as a result of the operator model. Control over the mobile ecosystem fell to the mobile operators such as T-Mobile and Vodafone and they held no quarter for developers. They took large revenue cuts in return for low quality distribution. Cutting back room deals for life giving feature spots was the norm and their reporting on results was slow and opaque. That meant developers already struggling with the limited capability of mobile devices were offered little help from the organisations capable of promoting them; a bad situation to be in.

Perhaps mobile gaming in the period of 2001–2006 can ultimately be summed up by the fortunes of one handset in particular. The Nokia N-Gage was released in October 2003 to much fanfare, promising mobile gamers great gaming on the go. And, while it bravely pioneered Bluetooth multiplayer and digital distribution, it was simply too ambitious for it’s time. Derided for “taco holding” phone calls and for forcing players to take the phone apart to change physical games, the N-Gage, like mobile gaming, was looking to the future but was held back by technology and the infrastructure available to make it work.
That was all to change within the next three years as the technology and infrastructure rapidly fell in place to transform mobile gaming from an interesting nascent idea into an industry. And the driver of this revolution wasn’t Motorola, Nokia or any other traditional handset maker operating in the first decade of the industry: it was Apple.

From 2007–2008, Steve Jobs and the rest of the team at Apple helped drive mobile gaming to the next level by offering developers the tools and commercial structures that it had desperately needed to make better, more profitable games. On the handset front, the iPhone, announced in January 2007, offered a uniquely enticing platform for mobile games developers. With the help of a large screen to call upon, a touch interface that offered more diverse control options than a numeric keypad and in built hardware such as the accelerometer, the iPhone was a futuristic canvas that had clear advantages over the incumbent handsets that developers wanted to be on.

And, although Apple initially barred third party applications from the device, the announcement in March 2008 of an SDK for third party app development and the App Store on the back of enormous developer demand turned the iPhone into an incredibly desirable platform to develop for. In return for a $99 annual developer account and a 30% cut of the profits, Apple allowed developers to list their apps for download on the store by handling promotion, distribution and billing.

As a result of that infrastructure, The App Store quickly became the best place for mobile developers to release their games. With the mobile operators cut out of the loop and development proving accessible to the majority, mobile gaming became the place where smaller developers could genuinely make a name for themselves leading to something of a gold rush on the platform.

It was in fact those smaller developers who built many of the iconic games on the platform. Tap, Tap Revenge in 2008, Doodle Jump in 2009, Angry Birds in 2010 and Temple Run in 2011 all proved to be mega hits as well as great examples of how small teams with entertaining games could make multi-million dollar hits.
It was those successes that helped turn growing optimism around the App Store into a grassroots movement that led to a period of rapid and continued growth in mobile; a success that saw the App Store moving from 500 apps in June 2008 to 200,000 by May 2010 to demand the needs of nearly 50 million iPhone owners in April 2010.

This extraordinary popularity forced others to enter the mobile development game in an attempt to ride on Apple’s coat tails. Google launched their own app store, the Android Market, in late 2008 while Microsoft eventually created a Windows Phone store for their OS in 2010 after partnering up with Nokia.

But the years when mobile grew up really coincided with the push that Apple gave it. By following up the iPhone with the iPad in April 2010 and iPad 2 in May 2011 as well as introducing features such as Game Center in 2010, Apple created the devices, the environment and the structures necessary for game developers to create mobile gaming experiences that blew the early efforts out of the water, such as Infinity Blade and NOVA. If 2001–2006 was a period of frustrated promise, 2007–2010 was the period when an explosive and beneficiary revolution ripped through the industry.

And in the period 2011–2013, growth and continued business success for mobile game developers has been the order of the day. In particular, the emergence of one business model has acted as the river for the transformation of mobile gaming into a genuine money spinner: the arrival of freemium gaming.

Initially, freemium was simply a reaction to the problem of falling prices on the store. Consumers, who initially had to stump up $9.99 to download Super Monkey Ball on the App Store, began to drift away from the idea of paying up front for a product, as services across the wider web such as Spotify and Netflix began dampening the demand

“We provided all our games free to our consumers and monetized over ads, making us ready for freemium.”

CHRISTOPHER KASSULKE // HANDYGAMES
for up front payments and stores such as Google Play struggled with consumer trust over privacy issues. Developers who were on the receiving end of this shift were forced to take action, the simplest method being the decision to utilize In App Purchases, which were enabled by Apple in 2009, alongside advertising to drive revenues instead.

The shift also tied in handily with the continued broadening of the mobile gaming audience that reached far beyond the hardcore gamer. As smartphone and tablet proliferation as Samsung, Apple, HTC and Nokia developed ever better devices for the mass market, a wider audience of casual and mid-core gamers began to search for games to fit their needs. Games that they could play for free and try proved increasingly popular amongst the casual audience, with paid games struggling to pitch themselves as value for money within the highly competitive app store environments that casual gamers browsed.

The result was a boom in the number of players downloading freemium games and a resulting explosion in the free download charts, with a report by Distimo in June 2013 claiming that a Top 50 chart spot for a free app in the U.S. needed 25,000 downloads in comparison to a little over a thousand paid apps.

And those developers who spent time and money investing in freemium first began to see the fruits of their labours. With the help of intelligently developed feedback loops, detailed analytics to provide information on how players behaved and complex monetization strategies, top free to play games began to see revenues increase enormously. Games released in 2012 such as CSR Racing, Clash of Clans, Hay Day, Puzzles and Dragons and Candy Crush Saga each ascended the monetisation mountain, with Supercell announcing in early 2013 that their games were making an astonishing $2.4 million a day.

In the wake of this success, the big name companies have increased their efforts on mobile significantly to try to get in on the action. In terms of those working within the gaming sector already, EA’s mobile division has released Plants vs Zombies 2, Real Racing 3 and Fifa 2014 as freemium games following their success with The Simpsons: Tapped Out!

At the same time, brands and big name movie tie-ins have increasingly started to feel the power of mobile. Gameloft’s Despicable Me 2: Minion Rush became their first real free to play hit, while NimbleBit scored a big coup with their port of Tiny Death Star. At the same time, the game Dumb Ways to Die, a mini game collection based on a humorous rail safety advert that won numerous advertising awards, also saw free to
play success earlier this year, with a chart topping stint that showed how mobile games can help businesses to engage with consumers.

All things considered then, the mobile landscape lying ahead of us in 2014 looks to be a broadly positive one. Technology has improved to the point where players who were dazzled by the simple keypad clicking gameplay of Snake in the 1990s can now immerse themselves in immersive experiences like The Room and Device 6. The commercial infrastructure has grown to the point where apps can make millions of dollars in the right circumstances. And the emergence of a much broader audience of gamers than has ever been seen on any platform means that mobile is uniquely placed to grow ever bigger as a medium.

But, despite all this good news, there are concerns facing the industry. First, the fate of the indie developer hangs in the balance in the face of successful free to play titles. With the mobile marketing eco-system favouring free releases and consumers less willing to pay up front for products, there is a genuine concern that the types of indies behind great “product” games such as The Room, Ridiculous Fishing and Badland may be forced out the market by free to play “services”; an undertaking that is relatively difficult for indies.

Second, the growth of Android as a genuine competitor to iOS and the wider fragmentation of App Stores across the world are increasing the problems of developing and distributing apps to a wider market. With the number of apps reaching over a million on Android and iOS and over 100,000 on Windows Phone and Amazon, the problem of discoverability that plagued the industry during the reign of carriers is returning with something of a vengeance to the app stores as battle is drawn over positioning within the major distribution centers.

Finally, the cost of user acquisition is becoming a serious problem for developers to negotiate. As the charts remain the most important route for discovery and a number of companies are dominating the attention and spend of users, the news that CPI has risen to $1.63 in October 2013 according to Fiksu when ARPU’s are often lower suggests that there is potential for developers to be squeezed from the market.

But these issues, while important, shouldn’t sidetrack us from the central point of the past seventeen years which is the astonishing growth of mobile gaming as an industry. Despite its youth and humble origins on a Nokia 6110, mobile gaming has grown in stature and quality at a rate that no other creative industry has arguably ever grown. Mobile gaming is here to stay; the question now is how will it develop in the coming years?•
THE INSIDE TRACK
Expert insight and reflection on the history of mobile gaming

Alex Bubb has been the Head of Global Partner Management and Marketing at Nokia, Games Vertical since October 2006. Having worked previously at Sony, T-Mobile and JAMDAT, Alex watched Nokia’s rise to prominence in the early stages of mobile gaming and has taken an active part in their transformation to Microsoft’s partner of choice for their Windows Phone OS.

WHAT WAS YOUR PERSPECTIVE ON NOKIA IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE INDUSTRY?
I joined Nokia in 2006 and, at that time, it wasn’t an industry dominated by handsets but by operators. What Nokia did well early in the industry was show a great use case with Snake that was preloaded with devices. It lead the way in terms of mobile gaming – it showed what was possible and that you could create interesting experiences.

CAN YOU TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE N-GAGE WHEN IT WAS RELEASED?
The problem at that time in the industry was that people were trying to understand how exactly people play mobile games and what they were expecting from that. I saw it from the console world and at that time people wanted to position mobile as if it was part of that world. The N-Gage tried it and it turned out that wasn’t really where mobile was. Many years later, the likes of Candy Crush Saga and other games have shown the value of the mainstream and mobile is much more of a fit with that demographic. Step one in the future of mobile was about discovering where it was going and step two about where is it distributed – once you realised that it was outside of the core audience the N-Gage went for then you can develop for it.

WHAT LESSONS FROM THE SUCCESS OF THE IPHONE DID NOKIA LEARN?
The iPhone wasn’t just successful because it was a great device – it was a success because it offered an end to end User Experience that was seamless. The App Store came off the back of the infrastructure and distribution helped by iTunes meaning that developers could easily develop their games and sell them while users can discover them. It helped shape our thinking at Nokia as well. In 2008–2009 we had a complete mindset shift. It’s well documented that, at the time, Nokia was at a cross roads. We had the choice to go Symbian, try out a Linux based OS or build something completely fresh. But if we were to do that, we would have to make a serious investment which could take a number of years to turn around – something that we did with Windows Phone. We had thought about going with Android but Samsung had begun dominating the field there. So to differentiate we had to be bold and bring forward as fresh and interesting a proposition, something we thought we could achieve with Windows Phone and Microsoft and the help of their end to end infrastructure. The challenge we’ve had now has been to make it successful and I think if you look at our recent results in the U.S., a market Nokia typically hasn’t seen much of a success in, I think you’re starting to see the results of that thinking.

“...The iPhone wasn’t just successful because it was a great device – it was a success because it offered an end to end User Experience that was seamless.”

ALEX BUBB // NOKIA
Christopher Kassulke is the founder of HandyGames, which formed in 2000 during the early stages of the mobile industry. Starting out as a small company working on freely released independent projects, Christopher has helped to transform the company into a fifty strong organisation that specialises in free to play titles. His take on the development of mobile gaming is therefore infused with an understanding of the challenges facing smaller developers in the industry, from the early operator dominated.

Only a handful of gatekeepers really played the games and checked the quality. So we got around it by developing games our big competitors didn’t offer.”

WHAT WAS THE INDUSTRY LIKE WHEN YOU STARTED OUT?
HandyGames started developing long time before JavaME or WAP was available. We first developed games on emulators in ’99 for monochrome devices. We showed some OEMs how cool gaming can be on their devices. So you can say we were around before the industry was even established.

THERE WAS A LOT OF ISSUES SURROUNDING DEVICE AND TECHNOLOGY FRAGMENTATION DURING THE J2ME/BREW/ NOKIA SERIES ERA – WHAT WERE YOUR EXPERIENCES DEVELOPING DURING THAT TIME?
Challenges are here to master. Of course we had handset, language, operator specific fragmentations but we solved them all by own technology. A lot of developers had issues with the fragmentation but for us it was not the big show. It could have been easier for developers those days but then we would have seen more competitors. If you wanted to make revenues those days, you needed to solve the challenges and deliver in time to have any chance of success.

WHAT WERE THE PROBLEMS/ CHALLENGES YOU FACED GETTING YOU GAMES NOTICED – WAS THE MOBILE INDUSTRY “INDIE FRIENDLY”?
I would by lying if I said our partners were indie friendly those days. The operator partners loved big brands and IPs. Only a handful of gatekeepers really played the games and checked the quality. So we got around it by developing games our big competitors didn’t offer and, with our huge track record to help us, it was again easy for us to get our titles distributed around the world.

HOW MUCH OF AN IMPACT DO YOU THINK THE IPHONE MADE ON MOBILE GAMING?
The iphone was a revolution. A lot of fresh blood was coming to the mobile games market. It was just a new playground for developers far away from the hard operator business which was already a closed market. In terms of how it changed the games made money, we weren’t so affected by it’s arrival because HandyGames already started with as we called it “mission free”. We provided all our games free to our consumers and monetized over ads, making us ready for freemium.
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James Kaye is a founder and director of mobile marketing and PR agency Dimoso. James has worked within the gaming industry since 1994 and has been working in mobile since it emerged as a new genre of gameplay. Reflecting on his time at Orange Mobile and Hands on Mobile from 2002–2008, James spoke at length about the problems that faced game developers in the pre-iPhone era.

WHAT WAS YOUR PERSPECTIVE ON MOBILE AT THE TIME – DID YOU THINK IT HAD THE POTENTIAL TO GROW HUGE?
No, not at all. You have to remember that when the industry started out that you were dealing with ZX Spectrum levels of technology. So the growth in mobile to where it is today is analogous to jumping from that to the Xbox 360 age in ten years. If you look at what the games industry went through from where it started in the 1980s to now – that’s an evolution that happened over 30 years versus where we are now with mobile.

WHAT CHALLENGES DID THE HANDSET LIMITATIONS POSE TO DEVELOPERS AT THE TIME?
In terms of the biggest problems for games, number one was fragmentation. Literally you had at some point like 10000+ skews or different possible variants of OS – you didn’t have a uniform experience or gold standard to aim to. The disparity now is nowhere near as large, it’s hard to find an analogy but if you compare Infinity Blade 3 on an air versus an iPad 2 you’ll get a similar experience. But in J2ME, you had a completely different experience at the top end of development. You had the Nokia Series 60 which was the high end experience, and you had the Series 40, which was the low end, meaning you had an incredibly divergent level of experience. That was made worse by technology. Sometimes you had black and white screens, sometimes they had colour and some of them had different input mechanisms was different to the phones: some had a jog dial control stick and most had keys – you had this massively diverse experience of phones that weren’t touch screens, that were small with not much real estate and with colour a luxury at one point. The thing I recall that was the best example of this to the most is the enormous gulf between the mobile versions of the big games and their mobile counterparts. You had Splinter Cell in 3rd person in 3D on the Xbox versus the 2D Side scrolling version on mobile – a big difference in quality compared to what we see now.

AND WHAT ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE OPERATORS IN MOBILE? WHAT PROBLEMS DID THEY PLAY?
What I just talked about was in terms of the technological limitations, there were also commercial limitations facing developers. Culturally mobile was massively different. Back in those days you had a small number of publishers, one of which I was working for which was Hands On Mobile, some of them are still around and literally the operators were the gatekeepers. So the way you did business was to have the sales people in the key territories and they would have key relationships with people at the top tier (T-Mobile, Vodafone) and you would meet with them on a monthly basis and if you were very lucky you’d be game of the week. It was also very very brand centric. Unless you had a well known brand it was very unlikely for you to have a break out hit. It totally murdered the market for indie developers, you had to go through a publisher and if you didn’t have a big name brand it was really difficult. There was Digital Chocolate who waved the flag for great quality unique content but for everyone else it was really hard.

WHAT WOULD YOU DESCRIBE AS THE MOOD AT THE TIME? WAS IT OPTIMISTIC?
No it was horrible, I even got out of it for a while. I’ve been at mobile since the beginning of the games and it was horrible. It was what brands could we get and could we make a good game out of it and pumping out at a premium price. All the market position was wrong: brands dominated, a small number of people acted as king makers or gatekeepers, creativity was stifled and the price point was continually too high for a market that as too high for prepay.
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GAMEVIL KICKED OFF IT’S JAVA GAMING OPERATIONS 2000 FOR THE FIRST TIME – WHAT WAS IT ABOUT THE MARKET AT THE TIME THAT MADE MOBILE LOOK LIKE A WORTHWHILE PROSPECT AND WERE THERE ANY PARTICULAR FACTORS IN THE KOREAN MARKET AT THE TIME THAT HELPED SHAPE YOUR DECISION?

We actually started mobile gaming in 2000. The carriers were servicing WAP based mobile games at the time and we had just started to do Java client based gaming services. Our company was creating Java based PC clients, and thought it would be a great opportunity to start working with the carriers like SK Telecom and LG Telecom. Although the PC gaming sector was already getting dominated by a few publishers, the mobile landscape was wide open, and James Song our CEO thought this would be the future.

I’VE SPOKEN TO A NUMBER OF PEOPLE ABOUT THE PROBLEMS THAT FACED THE MOBILE INDUSTRY IN 2001–2006 PERIOD WITH DISTRIBUTION, HANDSET FRAGMENTATION AND THE CONFLICT BETWEEN JAVA, BREW ETC – DID YOU FACE SIMILAR PROBLEMS AT GAMEVIL AND HOW DID YOU FACE THEM?

Yes we faced the same issues. We had to develop for Java, BREW and WPi-C, and also test it against the thousands of devices out in the market. This was especially painful since platforms were different for each device and also CPU and memory specs were all over the map. We had post-production teams which solely dealt with porting to each of the devices and also huge QA teams which had to test against every single device. On top of that, we had to pay hefty fees to various certification companies to ensure that each game was compatible against their guidelines. The first thing GAMEVIL did back then was it knocked down deals with each of the carriers. I believe we had more than a dozen contracts with carriers out of the US alone.

THE INDUSTRY EVOLVED QUITE SIGNIFICANTLY WITH THE ARRIVAL OF THE IPHONE IN 2007 – WHAT IMPACT DID THAT HAVE ON THE BUSINESS AT GAMEVIL AND THE GAMES IT PRODUCED?

This simplified our business significantly. Before the iPhone, the publishers strength was dependent more on their distribution channel & device coverage, but after the iPhone, the publishers strength became more dependent on the quality of each of the titles. Also, since the deck became more visual with graphical assets, we didn’t really need top brand names as long as the quality of the titles were good. For GAMEVIL, coming from a more international background, this was a great opportunity since all we had to focus on was creating great games rather than having big brands.

HOW HAS THE ARRIVAL OF NEW BUSINESS MODELS, SUCH AS FREEMIUM, AND THE GROWTH OF OS’ LIKE ANDROID AFFECTED GAMEVIL?

Korea was already one of the leaders when it came to freemium so this actually worked to our benefit. We had more home-grown expertise in the freemium space and was already servicing games with virtual currency even before these new business models were introduced to iOS and Android. But of course, GAMEVIL also had to learn which of these mechanics would work in the western world, which was quite a challenge for us too.

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Stuart Dredge runs the mobile apps blog for The Guardian, runs a website about games and apps for children called Apps Playground and has written about mobile for a number of publications including Pocket Gamer and The Sunday Times. His extensive experience writing about mobile has provided him with a unique perspective on the evolution of mobile gaming as both an art and a business.

WHAT WAS YOUR PERCEPTION OF MOBILE GAMES WHEN YOU STARTED OUT WRITING IN THE LATE 1990S/EARLY 00S?
When I started writing about mobile games in the early 00s, they were quite a niche – Java and BREW were just getting going. They were like the ugly sibling of the main games industry, with very little crossover in developers and journalists. That said, there were some really creative, interesting indie studios making stuff. For example, Sumea in Finland, whose founder Ilkka is now the CEO at Supercell. A lot of people doing good stuff in 2013 came through those early Java years.

I’VE SPoken TO A LOT OF DEVELOPERS ABOUT THE CHALLENGES THAT THEY FACED DURING THE J2ME, BREW ERA AND MANY HIGHLIGHTED ISSUES OF BIG BRAND DOMINANCE AND PORTS OF CONSOLE GAMES THAT WEREN’T REALLY UP TO SCRATCH ON MOBILE AT THE TIME – WHAT WAS YOUR ASSESSMENT OF THE QUALITY OF GAMING AT THE TIME?
Game quality was a real problem in the earlier days of mobile gaming. The dominant distribution channel was operator portals, and what the operators wanted was brands. So publishers spent lots of money on brand licences, a lot of money on porting the games to the hundreds of handsets demanded by the operators, and often had little left over for the actual games. There were umpteen really shit movie games, unrecognisable mobile versions of console brands and so on. There WAS some brilliant indie stuff too, but the unbranded games found it tough to get onto the portals and near impossible to get promoted by the operators. A lot of the ideas you saw in the early indie success on iPhone were around in the J2ME days – it’s just that they had much more restricted commercial potential. So there was good and bad stuff in those days, but it was the bad stuff that got promoted and sold. That also meant there was huge churn in mobile gamers – people would buy something from the top of their operator’s portal, find it was rubbish, then not try again until 1–2 years later when they had a new phone. Or they just bought Tetris and played that – it was the number one mobile game by leagues in the pre-iPhone days. Partly because you can’t really mess up Tetris even on a relatively unpowerful feature phone – so it was good – and partly because it’s the kind of game that’s habit-forming, so doesn’t really send you off to buy other ones.

WHEN THE IPHONE ARRIVED, WHAT KIND OF IMPACT DID YOU THINK IT WAS GOING TO HAVE ON THE INDUSTRY AND TO WHAT EXTENT DID YOU THINK IT WAS GOING TO BE TRANSFORMATIVE?
I’d love to say I knew the iPhone would change everything, but... There was a lot of excitement about its potential, and the idea of going direct to consumers (albeit through Apple) rather than having to get operators to carry a game. People were excited about touch and tilt as controls too. So there was a lot of anticipation, but nobody (including me) realised how big it would be, and how quickly. I was working for Pocket Gamer at the time, and I remember the App Store going live a day earlier than expected, and scrambling to see what was on there to write news stories about. And we just rattled out about 25, and that was all the interesting stuff. Super Monkey Ball was the biggest game, I think. So it started relatively quietly.
ABOUT MGF 2014

MGF is the definitive global event for mobile games, social games & virtual goods and social gambling. Taking place on the 22nd and 23rd of January 2014 in London, MGF brings together over 400 of leading figures; including 29 of the top 50 developers in the world, and fresh young talent of the mobile games industry to deliver a genuinely global perspective on the key issues facing the sector today and in the future. Attendees can expect two days packed with keynote talks, interactive debates, lively panel discussions, networking, and a VIP party where the great and good of mobile games can let their hair down.

Comprised of three essential conference tracks – Mobile Games, Social Games & Virtual Goods and Social Gambling – MGF is the definitive forum which seeks to set the strategy for the global mobile entertainment industry. The international & award winning line-up of speakers and influencers already confirmed for MGF includes the likes of: Rovio, EA, King, Wooga, Kakao and Gamevil.

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