Chapter 19

A Short Summary of Mobile Games’ History

Simon Rozner

CONTENTS

19.1 Paving the Way: Original Handheld Games 341
19.2 First Phone Games 342
19.3 The Advent of the iPhone 346
19.4 In-App Purchases 348
Bibliography 356

19.1 PAVING THE WAY: ORIGINAL HANDHELD GAMES

We all love our games, from ages past, we did, and as long as we are around, we will. And the games we liked the most are those we could put into our pockets and carry with us. It is a natural extension that when digital games came about, sooner or later someone would figure out how to make them small enough to carry about. It is rather a small surprise that Mattel would, as so often with toys, beat others to the punch with the release of Auto Race in 1976. All digital, crude by today’s standards for sure, it nevertheless started a rather successful business for Mattel, with their digital games repeatedly selling out.

The competition wasn’t sleeping either though, as more portable games saw the light of day with the Milton Bradley MicroVision in 1979. Famous for great handhelds was the newcomer Nintendo in 1980 with the Game & Watch series. We know the rest of that story with the Game Boy (1989) and then Sega’s Game Gear with a fabulous 32 simultaneous colors displayed on screen in 1990. Yes, business was good, but it was not to last forever.
19.2 FIRST PHONE GAMES

Something else started to happen in the 1990s. Where mobile phones were a luxury for the rich, the eccentric or the government before the last decade of the 20th century, in this last ten years of the millennium, the mobile phone turned into a commodity. Pagers were definitely out and mobile phones were in. And with Nokia & Co. having not just affordable and cool looking phones for calling, SMS and so on, well, the games were part of the fun.

It did not happen overnight however, and the first games were still rather an obscurity by engineers who well, who wouldn’t, code a game into the device. Siemens arguably was the first on their S1 device in 1993 with a Tetris clone called Klotz (German: Block) that was hidden away behind an obscure key combo, apparently because they never got a license to actually publish it. IBM had their own on the IBM Simon, also in 1993, with Scramble. The real kicker though came in 1997 when Nokia released Snake on the Nokia 6110. Subsequently, Nokia released it on all their phones and with the Nokia 3110 in 2000, it was an established fact that Nokia phones had a Snake game. From a business perspective however, phone games hadn’t really been big business.

Although independent developers started making games for phones around the millennium, and games could be downloaded to a device through a service such as NTT DoCoMo’s I-Mode platform in 1999, many games were either preloaded on a device with a publishing contract with a telephone carrier or only available for download with a contract, again with a carrier via WAP—full browser access to the internet was years away. WAP was quite a problem for many developers. And still, no free market whatsoever existed, and if you wanted your game on a phone, well either deal with a carrier or go bust.

Another limitation that wasn’t solved until about 2002 was that the software environment to develop games was basically a mobile house of horrors. J2ME (Java 2 Micro Edition) hailed an end to such barbaric conditions and hardware quality improved at the same time. However, despite J2ME, most devices on the market were still monochrome and games, even with improvements, couldn’t even keep up with what a Game Boy could do 13 years earlier. While J2ME phones could give more “action” due to more powerful computing, their display quality was lagging behind. Thus, devices that were less powerful but had better graphics, providing games via WAP won out for the time being.
However, one must admire the brave companies that despite such an uphill battle, still managed to generate a proper income. The golden goose hadn’t appeared that would allow mobile to compete with PCs and consoles and the ones who profited from games weren’t the developers but the operators.

Mobile games—games for phones—excluding the handhelds business, have accounted for very little of the global yearly revenue generated by games. True enough, if we include handheld games, Nintendo has won that game over the competition. Nintendo, from the end of the 1990s, keeps generating a good income all the way from the Game Boy days to the latest incarnation of the Nintendo DS. However, even that grand master of game creation was sent packing for good during that fateful day when the Apple and Android App Stores introduced in-app purchases (IAPs). It would take Nintendo until Super Mario Run in 2016 to catch up and release its first true mobile title (Nintendo has released other third-party titles before, initially developed for other platforms).

We are getting ahead of the curve though. To understand the business of 2019, we have to head back again to the year, wait for it, 2000. And there were plenty of good games on mobile, even before the Apple revolution, but until 2008, the mobile games industry was mostly dominated by outrageous attempts of innovation and attempts to make it into a business that could compete with its big brothers on PC and console.

By the end of 1999, considerable success had been expected with the boom in mobile phone ownership, but dreams remained dreams for the time being. We all survived the millennium transition—not really a surprise—and hope for the future was abundant. So it came to pass that two companies were established that caused a stir in the years to come. Just at about 23:59 and some seconds before we could hail the year 2000, Michel Guillemot, one of the co-founders of Ubisoft, founded Gameloft in Paris. Here was a guy who knew how to make big games and had plenty of financial support. He had an entire catalog of games licenses from Ubisoft and more to bring to mobile audiences. Thus, it comes as no surprise that most titles in the early years had their PC/Console counterpart produced by Ubisoft. This fact is surely a big reason as to why Gameloft has stayed around long enough to be part of the later rise in mobile games. Experience does count for quite a bit in order to make steady progress and keeping heads above water.

Shortly after the start of Gameloft in Europe, JAMDAT was founded by ex-Activision executives Scott Lahman and Zack Norman in March 2000.
JAMDAT was a developer and publisher of mobile phone games in the US in partnership with the operator Sprint. They released, for example, the *Lord of the Rings* mobile titles, *Bejeweled* and had exclusive rights to *Tetris* on mobile. JAMDAT was later acquired by EA for a staggering US$680 million, catapulting EA Mobile to the number one position in games publishing on mobile. What is notable is that JAMDAT’s business was evaluated as so big when profit margins on mobile were very competitive and development rather expensive. Obviously though it was lucrative enough for the long haul.

Regardless of the start of these two big studios, many smaller outfits made their debuts in these early years: HandyGames (Handy is German slang for Mobile) in Germany, Sorrent (now Glu) in the US, Picofun in Sweden, Rapture Seekers aka. Relude and what would ultimately become Rovio Entertainment and Riot-E in Finland, just to mention a few.

Riot-E deserves a little special mention here as for how much the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow could be, just to end up being a colossal disaster. Riot-E had a lot of investment, the license to create the *Lord of the Rings* mobile games and the license for the Marvel catalog. However, the hype around the company was just talk the talk, not walk the walk, and investors ended up having to write off their investments. It wasn’t all bleak, by the time Riot-E was finally able to turn a profit, all trust in the company was eroded and by 2002 its doors closed. The legacy and learning that remained however would benefit the mobile games business in the years to come, as well as learning how to mature into a multibillion dollar business. (The rise and fall of Riot-E can be watched in the documentary *Riot On!*)

Let’s fast forward and look at the advent of Nokia’s N-Gage. Finally, a phone came along that boasted a mobile phone with a color screen and the power to beat a Game Boy. It was not to be however. The high retail price and clunky design didn’t appeal to anyone but the geeky gamer, and not enough of them could afford it. Even a redesign to make it look more appealing didn’t work, and so, the chance was missed as the competition wasn’t sleeping. Devices started to get ever more powerful, a good thing for the games to come.

Notably, Trip Hawkins invested in mobile games after 3DS went bankrupt and launched Digital Chocolate in 2003. Although it eventually died as well with its Barcelona studio sold to Ubisoft and its Helsinki studio closed in 2013. It did however develop some great original mobile games that sustained its business through that time.
Despite the limitations of hardware, Namco released a fabulous demo of *Ridge Racer 3D* on mobile with impressive 3D quality. Gamevil released a series of stunning games such as *Skipping Stone*, *Super Boom Boom* and *Nom*. The last being especially innovative as it required the user to rotate his phone to leap over the craziest of objects, something not possible on a console or a PC and taking full advantage of a mobile device. To top it off even more, in *Nom 2* you could send a message to outer space by beating the whole game via a Ukraine Space Agency satellite.

JAMDAT also got in on the fun by releasing a multiplayer version of *Bejeweled*. Unfortunately, due to high data costs, multiplayer games, even asynchronous, still didn’t take off on mobile.

In 2004, EA finally entered the mobile market, giving up licensing only for mobile, and instead planned to fully jump into bed with its partner Digital Bridges (later I-Play and acquired by Oberon Media) to build a full mobile studio. This, however, never really transpired into a success for EA, despite releasing games like *The Fast and the Furious* and *Colin McRae Rally 2005*. In the end, EA bought JAMDAT in 2005 and formed EA Mobile. This was a lucky break for EA as just earlier JAMDAT acquired Blue Lava Wireless, and along with it, the *Tetris* license. *The Sims 2*, *Need for Speed*, *Burnout*, *Dakar 2007*, etc. were soon to follow and EA Mobile established itself as a major mobile mover and shaker, albeit with varying success, for example, the sloppy attempt of bringing *Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars* to mobile. EA in particular was heavily pushing big brands on mobile, from *Sims* and *SimCity* to *The Simpsons*, *Harry Potter*, *Wolfenstein*, *Monopoly*, *Tetris* and *Tomb Raider*. However, EA despite being a long-term developer of mobile games, major breakthrough successes were still waiting.

Other developers were not sleeping however, and during the 2004 and 2005 mobile investment craze, Gameloft and Glu established themselves, while others went under. It is notable that racing games, casual puzzle games and card games are as appealing then as they are now.

From 2006 onwards, we see quite a few ups and downs, but there was a steady trend to bring 3D to mobile games. Gizmondo even brought a new device for this reason, just to spectacularly crash and burn, figuratively and literally, when then director Stefan Ericcson crashed his Ferrari, which started a criminal investigation.

Glu in particular followed up through clever contacts and mergers like iFone to publish hit games like *Lemmings*, *DiRT*, *Crash Bandicoot: Mutant Island* and *Project Gotham Racing: Mobile*. 
Clouds started to appear on the horizon quite quickly, with devices springing up like weeds making porting and maintaining games across devices a nightmare. Having moved into games in 3D didn’t help either. This chaos stifled innovation right when it was really taking off with publishers focusing on having titles on as many phones as possible instead of investing in new games. Licensed games were the thing, and it wasn’t about to end. Some curious games did show up though, such as *Paris Hilton’s Diamond Quest* in 2006. Gameloft must have had a licensing bash too, and many went down that path, and if history is anything to not learn from, Rovio Entertainment tried similar shenanigans with a Shakira inspired Match 3 game called *Love Rocks* in 2015, however, it was not successful.

Despite the usual industry mayhem, and mobile did get its fair share of IPOs, bankruptcies and crappy as well as great games, it was to persevere in the good old habit until the fateful day on January 9, 2007. Time was ripe to give the status quo a good kick up the ole butt.

### 19.3 THE ADVENT OF THE IPHONE

All changed overnight when Apple gave the boot to the carrier middleman who decided what goes on a phone and what doesn’t and the big publishers who sucked up to carriers like a bad wart. Why should developers give all that revenue to a carrier and a publisher? The manufacturer of the device doesn’t really benefit from applications made for the phone beyond just selling the device in the first place. Also, why burden developers to make their games work on hundreds of devices, instead of just one?

So the iPhone arrived in 2007, with the AppStore in 2008 as part of the iPhone OS 2.0. For a small fee, anyone could start developing applications for a phone, all the tools to start provided with support and if you made something cool, free promotion on top of it. Give your app for free or charge a little and share your income, 70% for you and 30% with Apple. Boom! If you think that is a bad deal, try selling art at a gallery.

Anyway, suddenly with entertainment devices in millions of peoples’ pockets, anyone could create stuff to sell without having to bother with the carrier dinosaurs. Nokia, Sony and so on got hit by a proverbial truck out of left field and they wouldn’t recover until Googles’ brilliant Android OS was the bitter pill the rest of the industry had to swallow as their own endeavors for a proper phone OS couldn’t keep up. A few of the established device manufacturers did not recover from this blow, in turn giving rise to new behemoths in the smartphone sector like Samsung and Huawei. And make no mistake, this shift in paradigm gives the manufacturer billions in
revenue each year, on top of the billions they make selling the hardware. Not a bad business one would argue.

It wasn’t all a new device stunt. What the Apple iPhone did was revolutionize the mobile business not just in terms of a better store, but with great hardware, an actually usable touch screen, responsive apps, a design that made your head turn and fueled by the great reputation of Apple all contributed to the success.

Suddenly, making games for phones looked like a lucrative business beyond the few players who tried to get crumbs of the ever-growing games entertainment business of which phone companies were the only real big money makers on mobile. Here was a possible motherload coming. Before all that money really started flying like confetti, one crucial invention still needed to happen. The hockey stick moment that really allowed game developers to join the feeding frenzy. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

In July 2008, the AppStore arrived and developers now could get any app they wanted (pending Apples approval) published and download by anyone owning an iPhone. The sheer ease of accessibility and curated apps helped customers find apps in a meaningful way and developers could finally reach their end user with little hassle. This was quite apparent in the top rated games on the iPhone in 2008, where the top ten iPhone games only had three games by major publishers: EA at rank seven with Spore Origins and Gameloft at ranks five and ten with Hero of Sparta and Asphalt 4: Elite Racing respectively, according to PocketGamer. The power of the iPhone brought a plethora of great games for our mobile enjoyment, all in wonderful color and smooth graphics; 2008 and 2009 really was the year for that and all genres were represented. From Tap Tap Dance to Zynga Poker, World of Goo, Need for Speed: Undercover, Zenonia and many more. Edge deserves a special mention as it arguably heralded the modern mobile minimalist puzzle platformer.

2009 also was the beginning of the first of many, although maybe not quite as big, phenomena that without mobile games, and the iPhone in particular, wouldn’t exist today. Unarguably, the biggest hit from 2009 was Angry Birds by mobile developer Rovio Entertainment. And it almost wasn’t going to happen either as Rovio, after years working mostly as a gun for hire to make quality games for mobile, was close to closing shop after 51 game projects. It needed a success and fast. Rovio or as it was called in the “days,” Relude, had been around for YEARS on the mobile scene with a reputation of tech excellence and roots in the foundation of the Finnish demo scene.
Though as luck has it, *Angry Birds* became a smash hit. It was so big in fact, that well, everyone, except maybe folks in Japan, who to this date barely know *Angry Birds*, knew about it. When the iPad launched that same year, Steve Jobs even had it installed and visible on the home screen during the big unveiling. Yeah, that happened. But how is this significant. Well for one, *Angry Birds* was the first massive game on mobile. By now it has way north of 3 billion downloads. Second, it was the last of its kind on mobile. When *Angry Birds* finally cracked open the gaming market on mobile, bringing tens of millions in revenue to the developer, it was also at the same time the end of mobile as we knew it—2009 also marked the end of the premium games market on mobile. The final nail in the coffin was struck and it was a long time coming.

19.4  IN-APP PURCHASES

Oh what a magical wonderful word. IAPs, in-app purchases, the magic bullet, the holy grail, the whatchamacallit of printing money faster than we can spend it and with it the free to play (F2P) business model. Free to play wasn’t a new invention. It was around since the late 1990s, but it was basically tied to your PC with an internet connection. Notable early F2P games were *RuneScape* and *Maplestory*. The premise was quite easy, play for free, pay for premium content.

With games that “anyone” could make and publish on a device millions were carrying in their pockets every day, wherever they went and download for free and pay for all sorts of extras in the game, it was just a matter of time before it would explode. It took about one second. Well almost, but the moment IAPs became available on mobile in 2009, revenue from mobile games skyrocketed. The rest is not quite history. F2P found a lot of popularity in web games in the late 2000s, and with the help of the likes of Facebook and MySpace, it was even easier to get players into the games and use social mechanics to get people to spend.

Today, in 2019, the revenue from mobile games worldwide is about US$68 billion of the US$152 billion of all game revenue. Noteworthy is that the United States and China are almost on par in revenue from all games.

Monetization is a big deal in mobile games and nowhere is this as true as in F2P games on mobile, which account for the majority of income. Clever game design, triggers of the players psychological buttons and application of behavioral economics bring a range of monetization methods to the
table, from the obvious as buying an extra life to the unethical and outright illegal like complete gacha.

Apart from different legal challenges games have faced in the past few decades, one might argue that the current somewhat justifiable witch hunt against loot boxes is the biggest threat to the F2P model and games in general. What most people don’t understand is the entire premise of RPGs, for example, depends on loot tables to begin with, be they packed in a box or a drop from a monster, and making random loot boxes illegal, well, sort of opens Pandora’s Box of litigation well beyond just selling gacha boxes but any random system in a game. However, the ethical aspect of this is a topic for another time.

Nevertheless, nobody can deny that loot boxes have brought significant revenue from F2P games and are a valid and lucrative income stream as well as a fun way to get content for players. Gacha is not the only big money maker for F2P games. Every piece of new content and events can provide regular ways for players to spend and customizations ways for players to express themselves. We digress, the nitty gritty of this topic is big enough to discuss somewhere else.

We mentioned earlier that Angry Birds was first as well as the last really big premium mobile game. As we know now, the AppStore came about and allowed for IAPs, unfortunately for Rovio, the company didn’t really manage to jump on the bandwagon of F2P, despite numerous attempts, until Angry Birds 2 launched in 2015 and even then struggled until around 2016 to really accept the fact that F2P was here to stay. That is not to say that the company didn’t try, but too many people came from a premium mindset, didn’t understand F2P and didn’t know how to make F2P games and all the shebang that accompanies it. It managed to turn the ship around though and it is a thriving company with F2P at its heart.

F2P in any case was here to stay, and it was BIG, so big that by 2011, the top 100 F2P games on the Apple AppStore generated more money than the store’s premium games. By 2018, F2P games were estimated to make around 80% of video game revenue, with almost two-thirds coming from mobile alone.

It wasn’t quite such a huge bonanza by 2010. And we start to see that great games do last. So while the shift to IAPs happened in 2009, the charts in 2010 were still dominated by our friends the premium games. Angry Birds was leading the pack, closely followed by Plants vs. Zombies.
developed by then PopCap, which was acquired by EA in 2011, with about half the revenue that Rovio was pocketing. And the stores were full of innovative games that year, as mobile games had a habit of being, with *Cut the Rope* and *Fruit Ninja* joining the party. *Cut the Rope* and its follow-ups are physics-based puzzle games, and it is noteworthy that the original game came in a free version lite version as well, making it the most downloaded app of 2010 and the fastest selling app according to Chillingo of 2010. Surely having a free “demo” with such massive downloads (about 9.7 million) helped the downloads for the paid app (about 3.5 million)? Interestingly enough, the long-time crowd pleaser *Tetris*, continued to be owned by EA, was still around, and even *Scrabble*, *Need for Speed* and *Battlefield* from EA made appearances. Electronic Arts wasn’t the only old-time mobile company to still be kicking, Glu and Gameloft were along for the ride with plenty of titles in the top 100 grossing chart. Maybe one fun game to mention is *Flick Kick Football* by Australian developer PikPok. It reached rank 20 that year with an estimated US$350,000 in revenue. Not bad for a simple sports game. Interestingly enough, Nordeus, a Finnish developer released *Golden Boot 2019* in, you guessed it, 2019, with exactly the same core mechanics, now as a F2P game and pocketing about US$210,000 in revenue. Not quite as much, but then it is a much more competitive market than it was in 2010. One thing becomes staggeringly clear: “good games last.” And what is really meant by that is “well designed and built game mechanics last.” Plenty of games have great gameplay, sometimes they simply can’t be found. This is the reason why a plethora of similar games with proven cores simply last and keep coming back. *Angry Birds* wasn’t the first physics based, slingshot game, nor the first successful one. Remember games like *Worms* and even *Artillery Simulator*? Although very different in flavor, the basic idea of the core mechanics, throwing something in 2D along a trajectory to make the target go “boom,” is as true and fun today as it was in the 1970s.

In 2011, as mentioned before, the inevitable happened and F2P surpassed premium on mobile. And, yeah, some really unexpected things started to happen. Of course, *Angry Birds* was still topping the grossing charts, but now it jumped on the free download train. And man did that train go. Where in 2010 we were looking at downloads in the under 10 million mark, downloads for the top games were reaching the 30–50 million mark. Don’t forget, games that primarily started as premium games,
even with IAPs, were now available for free. And that didn’t hurt revenues one bit. Mobile games were now hitting the US$20 million mark and of all games to beat *Angry Birds*, it was a game and company nobody heard of (unless you were really into that sort of thing).

PopReach with *Smurfs’ Village*? You have got to be kidding me!? A Smurf game made this much money? Something must be wrong. Data glitch? Lies all around? The commies? The author was as stupefied as you surely are right now dear reader, as until time of research, this was well, hidden lore. Sure, city builders were the thing. Zynga showed it to us with *Farmville* on the web. PopReach doesn’t even have a Wikipedia page! So who is this mysterious player? The company is a little bit of an enigma if you so will, with a barebones website.

Digging a little deeper however reveals that the initial developer was none other than Capcom. One of their divisions, Beeline Interactive made the game, with the IP eventually traveling to PopReach. A silly little research case however, as when looking at historic data charts on AppAnnie, Capcom can’t even be seen, and Beeline is only listed as the publisher in Japan. Well, all comes together, and nothing is a surprise anymore. However, that this game outperformed *Angry Birds* did come as a surprise. *Smurfs’ Village* is a pure F2P game, and its economy didn’t come cheap at US$4.99 being the cheapest IAP.

And here we have another of the dark sides of IAPs. The game was clearly targeted at kids, and it is speculated that children inadvertently were buying more than their parents knew. For one didn’t necessarily have to enter the password again for 15 minutes for a repeat in-app purchase. This targeting to kids and excessive spending by minors would soon, rather than later, become quite a headache for the mobile and F2P games industry.

Over the next few years, things didn’t really change this trend. F2P was here to stay, for better or worse. Some companies were frantically clinging on to the premium model on mobile, and it cost them dearly. Rovio is one example that didn’t manage to embrace F2P fully until *Angry Birds 2* was released and the company was plagued by several layoffs. However, Rovio was a lucky one, building smartly on the success of *Angry Birds* through smart licensing and the eventual *Angry Birds Movie* in 2016. EA, as well as Gameloft, kept chugging along just fine as well, with some ups and downs, but F2P was the bread and butter of their mobile games.
2012 ended up bringing more players to mobile gaming not just on iOS but also on Android, which was now an established fact. Other platforms have mostly perished and are entering a world of obscurity. Not all was so uneventful. A new rise of games came crashing down, that, while not a phenomenon yet, paved the way for games like Pokémon Go—causing landowners a serious headache. The culprit we mean, of course, Ingress from Niantic. Location based games weren’t really anything new, but here we have a game that used the smartphone’s capabilities really well by using the built-in camera for augmented reality and the GPS functionality for location tracking. The longevity of the game is maybe its biggest surprise and proves there is a market for such games, plus it gets people up and moving around.

The other game that made a stir came from Supercell and is Clash of Clans. It took the world by storm, cleverly combining city building with a strategy game where players compete against each other. And Supercell was not resting on its laurels either, ensuring it would stay around.

Increasingly casual and hyper casual games started showing up in 2013 and it ended up being a slightly different year. Of notable mention is Dots. A simple puzzle game that shined through its simplicity. And a breakout title, not financially but as a template for future hyper casual gameplay was Flappy Bird. Games that were released in 2012, such as Candy Crush, Subway Surfers and Hill Climb Racing, were really making a killing in 2013. Business was good and F2P was dominating. But premium was far from dead, and Mojang’s Minecraft Pocket Edition brought in an estimated US$50 million. That, however, is a token gesture compared with Candy Crush and Puzzle & Dragons—each game was reaching close to US$1 billion in revenue. Those are numbers that boggle the mind, and quite frankly if anyone didn’t believe in the power of F2P, you couldn’t deny it now. One special thing did happen in this 2012–2013 period. Asian games are slowly coming to the West on mobile. Until now, we mostly only saw Nintendo and PlayStation have traction in Western markets with games produced in Asia, but with Puzzle & Dragons, this definitely started changing. Japanese games in particular were and still are massive in their local market, but the way those games are made slowly trickles through, especially to Korea and China. Before, games from those countries come to the United States and Europe in a big way, now, one Western game is going “Big in Japan” first. In 2013, Japanese mobile carrier and exclusive reseller of Apple iPhones in Japan, SoftBank, bought a US$1.5 billion share stake in Supercell. Note also that SoftBank owns GungHo Online
A Short Summary of Mobile Games’ History

Entertainment, the makers of Puzzle & Dragons. This catapulted SoftBank to the absolute top by owning two of the three top mobile games on the market. As Clash of Clans became the first game to breach the US$1 billion revenue mark in 2014, it came as no surprise that Clash of Clans became a top 10 game in revenue in Japan among a crowd of all Japanese games. The author allows for a little anecdote: “I have lived on and off in Japan since 2007, and one thing I noticed when in Japan that year after that deal was that I saw Clash of Clans preinstalled on iPhones when shopping for a new iPhone for my relatives.” The Japanese are notoriously immune to Western games, but here we have, well, free marketing for a Western game on the local market. Whether the app was really always preloaded is questionable, but if you walked into any SoftBank store at the time, all demo devices had the game on the front screen, while the phone the author bought had the game preloaded.

Welcome to 2015, the year of strategy and RPGs. While largely the same games from 2014 and before kept their popularity, many newcomers had now entered the market. The top games all earned quite a bit of money. The size of new apps in the app stores had not diminished and growth was huge. Many users have trouble finding apps they love, and Apple has a big advantage over Android by having a well curated store. This reflects in the fact that overall, Apple rakes in more revenue from games and apps despite Android platforms getting a lion’s share of the downloads.

The newcomers such as Game of War, Summoners War, Heroes Clash, Boom Beach and Warcraft: Hearthstone among many others showed a clear trend that RPG oriented games were finally on the rise and devices and data networks were getting powerful enough to run such games. While most games were still asynchronous multiplayers in nature, the real-time games were creeping up on the market. The most popular in the genre in 2015 was World of Tanks: Blitz, which through its relatively slow gameplay and the popularity it enjoyed on PC had an instant following on mobile. The competition was not sleeping and several games were shown in soft and full launch in 2015, with War Robots and Battle Bay taking a lead in action packed real-time team vs. team battles.

By 2016, strategy in the form of 4X was slowly on the rise and more RPGs dominated the revenue market. However, the trends of 2014 and 2015 continued, but a major shift happened in the gaming world and it was most felt on mobile with a major new player joining the fray. It wasn’t a particular company, nor was it really someone new. We speak of China of course. The gaming market in China was steadily growing over the years,
initially mostly trying to bring Western games to the local market, which
through the wonderful ever-scrutinizing eye of government wasn’t ever
easy. It reached epic levels of hassle by this time for Western developers
and publishers, and with Chinese developers and publishers not facing
this trouble, they started rolling out major games to the West. The biggest
players by far were Tencent and NetEase. While the latter wasn’t unknown
before, Tencent came crashing through the door with what is now known
as *Arena of Valor*, the Western version of *Glory of Kings*. And if you haven’t
heard of them before, you would know them now. Chinese games are gen-
erating a big chunk of the global mobile revenue. In 2016, this chunk was
still mostly in China and players outside of China didn’t really know about
those companies, however, this was about change. It was not all about
China that year however. Korean Netmarble launched a highly lucrative
version of *Lineage II Revolution* on mobile and *Monster Strike* dominated
the charts. Supercell finally had a new game with *Clash Royale*, and albeit
after a small start, it gained immense traction by the end of 2016, and gave
the developer the top three games in global games revenue. That year was
also the year Nintendo got some courage and launched its first mobile
game under the Nintendo label with *Super Mario Run*. It showed, not sur-
prisingly, that the company is a decade behind the curve of mobile games
and entirely missed the point of what F2P is all about. Luckily for the
Japanese publisher, people love Mario, and the game was able to turn a
decent buck. It isn’t close to a lucrative business for Nintendo. Those two
years were quite interesting for companies and consumers, with a bigger
variety than ever before on mobile, bringing entertainment to more play-
ners than ever.

The year of 2017 seems almost uneventful in comparison when we look
at the game charts. *Monument Valley 2* followed up its 2014 predecessor
with the expected success and Nintendo published another smash hit with
*Fire Emblem Heroes*. The top charts throughout the year were still domi-
nated by the same games.

So what exciting things did happen in 2017? Well for one, defying all
logic, *Subway Surfers* was the top downloaded game that year, considering
it was five years old, correct live ops certainly helped Danish developer
Kiloo stay relevant with a single game making that approach more rel-
levant than ever for the mobile games industry. Two games were released:
*PUBG Mobile* and *Fortnite*. One might argue that those two games are the
two biggest PC to mobile conversions in history. Where the former took a
slightly new approach compared with its PC counterpart and jumped on the live ops and F2P bandwagon, the latter brought the same experience with cross-platform play and tailored controls to mobile.

By 2018, *Fortnite* dominated the games charts across all platforms, pulling in a whopping estimated US$2.4 billion in revenue in total of which about US$300 million was from mobile. These sheer numbers caused a bit of a craze in the industry with imitators trying to get a piece of the battle royale pie, albeit with limited success on mobile for most titles. *Knives Out*, as an imitator gained immense traction in Japan, and *Garena: Free Fire* found its niche market in Southeast Asia and South America and is making a killing, but that’s about the extent of it.

On the pure mobile side, the picture looks quite a bit different. *Pokémon Go* is still going strong and increased its yearly revenue considerably. *Dragon Ball Z* and *Candy Crush Saga* did likewise. On the side of action games, *Shadowgun Legends* made a splash by having a fabulous competitive shooter experience. One noteworthy game to pick out might be *Meterofall: Journeys*, a rogue-like deck builder.

That brings us to 2019. China is now undeniably a gaming superpower with Tencent and NetEase setting the tone and runner ups Lillith and FunPlus taking their share. Western and Asian games are definitely trying to learn from each other with better and better ways to bring experiences to players and getting players to stay with a game long term. And wouldn’t you know, *PUBG Mobile* launched in China, but alas, China being China, it of course couldn’t just get past the censors just like that but had to undergo “changes” and launched under the surely no “pun intended” name: *Game for Peace*. It still makes a killing.

Other games in 2019 were the long-anticipated *Mario Kart Tour* and *Dr. Mario World*, which just shows again, that Nintendo still doesn’t know how to develop F2P games inhouse. *Call of Duty: Mobile* brings another great franchise to mobile. Thatgamecompany, known for acclaimed games like *Flower* and *Journey*, brought us mobile first *Sky: Children of Light*. And *Archero* and *Auto Chess* redefined what casual action and auto battle games can be. Last but not least, we see AR games getting additions as well with *Minecraft World* and *Angry Birds AR: Isle of Pigs*. The latter was a long time coming, considering *Angry Birds* had been brought into 3D years ago in various forms, even if not in AR. And to top it off, some 2018 latecomers did more than turn a profit, such as *Brawl Stars*. And so, 2019 concluded and we are here, at the beginning of another decade of mobile gaming.
Unfortunately, rising marketing costs and the perpetual flooding of app stores will make it harder and harder for games to be discoverable and profitable. However, the outlook is not all bleak but rather exciting, for technology and creativity on mobile are gaining new heights, augmented and virtual reality are becoming affordable and enjoyable, and accessibility to quality development tools are cheaper than ever. Not all games, learnings, controversies and successes over the years fit in this short chapter and there were and are plenty of fabulous games, some of which are still available on app stores. Many games unfortunately never gained the success they deserved. The reader is encouraged to see Metacritic charts or do a simple “best mobile games of 20xx” search. A little journey down the rabbit hole can reveal exciting things.

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A Short Summary of Mobile Games’ History


