

Business Travel

Cellphone users get hung up on games

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If you spot him in an airport lounge, staring at the screen of his cellphone and punching buttons, you might assume Jeff McCormack is reviewing a business proposal. Or trading stocks. Or reading financial news that could affect a pending contract.

In fact, the Vancouver business traveller is absorbed in a world of fantasy. He's playing AtomicDove, a new wireless game that is all the craze in countries where it is available: Canada, the United States, New Zealand, Ireland, the Netherlands, Singapore and the Philippines.

Developed by a Vancouver company, Air Games Wireless, AtomicDove is one of a new breed of mobile-phone games that are interactive, multiplayer and -- judging by the look on McCormack's face -- both diverting and addictive.

No one in the wireless industry ever predicted that business travellers would be big games players. Back in May, 1999, when Bell Mobility introduced North America's first Internet browser for mobile phones, it expected corporate users to opt for the practical offerings such as news, stocks and air schedules.

The games part of the package, added in September, 2000, was aimed mostly at bored teenagers who hung around malls.

Well surprise, surprise. Bell Mobility says more than half of its wireless browser use is now games-related, compared with 14 per cent just one year ago. And while the other big Canadian players -- Rogers A T & T, Telus Mobility and Fido (Microcell) -- haven't released their own breakdowns, the same pattern is likely true across the board.

Even more interesting -- although the proof is more anecdotal than statistical at this point -- is that a surprising number of those games are being played by adults with high-powered jobs, and that much of their activity occurs while they are away from home on business.

AtomicDove, available in Canada through Telus, has become so popular that the phone company sponsored a tournament late last year, complete with cash prizes, and is planning a second one shortly. Current favourites with other phone companies include Who Wants to Be a Millionaire through Bell Mobility and My Soap Opera through Fido.

If you're not familiar with the latest generation of phone games, you might assume the appeal has something to do with colourful and fast-paced graphics. But you would be wrong. All of that will be coming soon to a wireless phone near you. But at the moment the hot games rely for the most part on old-fashioned text. What makes them special is the interactive quality that allows players to compete against the system, or, even better, against other phone users scattered across the country or around the world.

In AtomicDove, which has similarities to the computer game Sim City, each player builds an empire and assumes responsibility for keeping the residents happy, creating a military-industrial complex and protecting the environment. You can form alliances called clans, negotiate trade deals and even resort to nuclear warfare.

And if you're serious about it, it can become a full-time obsession. While Canadian players take time out to sleep or do real business, their territory could be attacked by someone in New Zealand.

"As players," says Frederick Ghahramani, managing director of Air Games Wireless, "you and I can gang up against a third person. It's like office politics, but dumbed down. That's the appeal from the user perspective."

Here's how McCormack explains his personal fascination with building and protecting an imaginary AtomicDove empire: "It's like having a plant in your house. You want it to grow. If you see it suffering, you're going backwards. It's a self-pride thing. You want to succeed in growing your army and making sure all the people in your little kingdom are happy and well. When someone comes and attacks you, you get defensive about it."

McCormack, who runs a company that provides application services for the Internet, travels regularly across North America. He uses AtomicDove as a fun way to kill time when his work or travel plans hit unexpected delays.

For Bobby Stoller, a Toronto-based business traveller who carries a Bell Mobility phone, the game of choice is Who Wants to Be a Millionaire. Stoller, a lawyer who works in business development with Davinci Technologies, spends about 200 days a year travelling to U.S. cities. He plays Millionaire for up to three hours a month, usually while waiting to board planes.

"It's a good way to release some stress," Stoller says. He finds the questions harder at each level than those on the TV equivalent. So far he's got close to the top a couple of times, but he's still trying to win an imaginary million dollars.

"I find it quite challenging," he says. "That's what keeps me coming back." Bell Mobility, for its part, promoted Millionaire with a sweepstakes in the last quarter of last year, giving a home entertainment system as the top prize. A total of six million visits to the site were recorded in December. Bell Mobility offers more than 60 games in all, including Eternal Hero from Montreal's Airborne Entertainment, Star Trek and Top Gun.

Phone companies, of course, are in it for the incremental revenue. If games bring in money and customers want games, then games they'll get. How much it will cost depends on the billing plan or phone card payment system being used, and whether there are extra charges for "premium" games.

If McCormack makes eight AtomicDove moves a day at a cost of 10 cents each, his addiction can add \$24 to his monthly phone bill. As for Stoller, his Millionaire game time is billed under a flat-rate corporate plan, so his company isn't hit with extra charges.

On the other hand, someone who pays by the minute and spends eight hours a day playing phone games, could have a monthly expenditure of hundreds of dollars.

As for McCormack, he admits he has become addicted to AtomicDove. "But," he adds, "I guess it's better than smoking."

Clarification

At the insistence of American Airlines' media department, last week's column listed the carrier among those U.S. airlines that won't accept on-line reservations from Canadians. Some surprised readers e-mailed to say they regularly book the airline on the Web. Here's American's explanation:

"According to Rob Friedman, managing director of personalized marketing for AA.com, 'A customer can book a flight originating in Canada on AA.com. However, since the site does not offer \$CDN pricing but rather \$USD pricing, AA.com does not actively promote the fact that Canadians can book on its site. In the near future, this will change as AA.com expects to offer \$CDN pricing.'"

The United Airlines Internet site that accepts bookings from Canadians with prices in Canadian dollars is <http://www.united.ca>. The U.S. Web site was listed last week.

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/LAC.20020220.TR20BIZ/TPStory/?query=%22atomicdove%22>