

Are cellphones meant to save time -- or waste it? These days, mobiles are the new Game Boys

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Alex Bajin is addicted. Every day for a year now, he's played the video game Atomic Dove, which is like a digital version of the board game RISK: Combatants build up empires and armies, then band together to trounce the most powerful players. "You're trying to manage this whole virtual world, sending out spies and taking out enemies. It's like playing God-pretty cool," Bajin says.

Except this 24-year-old isn't playing on his Sony PlayStation. When Bajin wants his Atomic Dove fix, he whips out his mobile phone, and starts mashing the keypad and staring at text on its tiny screen. His opponents are doing the same, from as far away as New Zealand and France. They battle one another all day long, with Bajin checking in several times an hour-even while driving to work as a tennis instructor at York University in Toronto.

"I was once at a red light and made this crucial attack. Then I thought, Damn, I'm going to have to defend myself in a few minutes, but I'll be doing 180 on the highway!"

And you thought Game Boys were seductive. Mobile phones are becoming today's new portable arcade. In the last two years, "data services" have been major selling points for cellphone makers, and customers have gone mad for games. Anywhere from 70 to 150 games are available, depending on the phone. It could be as simple as poker, or as complex as a jet-fighter simulation based on the movie Top Gun. On the Bell Mobility network alone, more than 50% of all phone web-browser usage is devoted to gaming, with users paying \$5 for 100 minutes of play.

Industry analysts at The Yankee Group predict mobile-phone "entertainment" (gaming, jokes, horoscopes) will be a \$1.2-billion industry in three years' time, and ARC Group predicts the number of cellphone gamers will reach 850 million by 2006.

Consider this an irony of our digital age. We create all these nifty tools to improve efficiency-but wind up using them to goof off.

"I like to say that people use their wireless devices either to save time or to kill time," jokes Ken Truffen, Bell Mobility's director of wireless internet and data development. "They play games waiting for the bus. They play games in boring meetings." As he points out, e-mail and news-headlines-which everyone thought would be the killer apps for mobile data-trail in popularity. Truffen himself is hooked on Bell's version of Who Wants To Be a Millionaire, based on the TV show.

For companies like Bell, however, this isn't about trivia games and fighting aliens-they're also fighting for revenue. Mobile phones are a brutally competitive market. Average revenue per cellphone in Canada plummeted to \$47 in 2001 from \$75 in 1995, and is slated to fall to \$36 by 2005, according to IDC Canada. "Service providers are really in a sort of panic to figure out new ways to make money," says The Yankee Group's Jeremy Depow.

And since it's driven by highly addictive behaviour, gaming could become a lucrative new revenue stream. Users might think twice before shelling out \$2 more a month for call-forwarding, but game-players don't hesitate. They'll pay. Already, Telus Mobility (which offers the Atomic Dove game) makes "a few bucks" per month on most players, says Robert Blumenthal, vice-president of products and services. A small number of hard-core players even rack up "a few hundred a month."

The video-game industry generates more revenue than Hollywood's box-office take, and this is a fresh slice of that pie. "[Players] will buy a few games per month. That's \$40 right there," says Blumenthal. "They'll go to the arcade and spend more. All together, they might spend \$100 a month. We're only a small part of that now-but we're going to grow."

What's more, games are the first step in a crucial part of technological development. Two years ago, when mobile providers began spending tens of millions to create the "mobile internet," no one had a clue what users would do with it. It is the classic paradigm: Build first, ask questions later. The problem is, if you don't find a compelling application quickly, you wind up like Motorola and Iridium-spending billions on a network that isn't used.

Even more important, games may be the perfect testing ground in the development of genuinely business-friendly applications. Video games had a catalytic effect on the computer industry 10 years ago. Players demanded low-cost but high-performing computers capable of rendering gorgeous 3D worlds; in producing such devices, the industry inadvertently paved the way for graphic business tools, from web browsers to PowerPoint to Flash animation.

Though today's phone games are pretty low-tech-mostly just static images and choose-your-own-adventure text games-developers are learning how to pack enormous functionality on a tiny screen and nine-key pad. "You have to be really smart with how you design these things," warns Brian Baglow of the British game designer Digital Bridges Ltd. (which made the Star Trek game I've been playing lately). "Because if you ask users to hit a button 1,000 times, they will go crazy."

In Vancouver, AirGames Wireless Inc.-makers of Atomic Dove-have released a stock-trading game called Mogul, and it's so seamlessly crafted that a real-life brokerage might want to steal its design. "Every button counts when you're using something out on the road and your attention is divided," says Frederick Ghahramani, AirGames' managing director. "When you're trading stocks, you want to just push it and go."

The phone-gaming trend will only accelerate. By the end of 2002, most Canadian carriers will offer phones that can download and run Java-based applications. Phones will become much more like PalmPilots-equipped with such offerings as "twitch" (action) games like wrestling and motocross-racing.

"We'll have much more arcade-style stuff," predicts David Neale, a vice-president at Rogers AT&T Wireless. And when carriers finally finish building their long-awaited "3G" networks-next year? In three years? Nobody really knows-phones will get DSL-class download speeds. That means games could include the same rich 3D graphics you see on your computer.

For now, players like Bajin are happy just to be killing opponents any way they can. When I last checked in with him, he was setting up a banzai attack with a player in Vancouver. "There's this guy out there going, 'You'll never beat me.' We're taking him out."

Talk about a brutal game of phone tag.

WHAT'S NEXT

IN ONE YEAR:

In Canada, more than 50% of all phone-data usage is for games and entertainment. Top-end Java-ready phones begin to ship, but few games exist. Telltale trend: Bored senseless in a meeting, you play a game of hangman.

IN THREE YEARS:

Mobile-phone gaming is a \$1.2-billion business globally, according to The Yankee Group. Java-based phones download everything from Tetris-style games to old-school arcade hits like Space Invaders. Telltale trend: You kill two hours a day secretly battling your co-workers.

IN FIVE YEARS:

Phones are as rich visually as old Sony PlayStations. Telltale trend: With productivity down the toilet, your boss implements a "no gaming" lock on all company mobile phones. Time to go back to computer solitaire.

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