Angry Birds, Uncommitted Players

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ABSTRACT
Mobile phones have been game-enabled since 1997. However, it seems that mobile phone games are only taking off now, in the 2010s. With mobile phones and, specially, smartphones, reaching critical mass games, in their mobile form are accessible to more and more people, young and old, men and women. Angry Birds, first released for iOS in December 2009, was the best-selling mobile game in 2011 (Reisinger 2011). In order to understand who is playing Angry Birds, how, and why, the author conducted a series of interviews with a group of Angry Birds players. The results of those interviews are here analyzed according to perspectives arisen from those conversations. Two main axis of analysis resulted from the interviews: gender gap and gaming background.

This study should be relevant to broaden the thinking about mobile games as meaningful experiences to players in different demographic groups.

Keywords
Mobile games, Angry Birds, casual, hardcore, gender, computer games

INTRODUCTION
In 1997, Nokia introduced games in their mobile communication devices for the first time (Wright 2008). Less than 10 years later, smartphones came into the market and, in 2007, they were reaching critical mass, mainly thanks to Apple's iPhone[1]. In 10 years, mobile games evolved from being a modest add-on to mobile phones to being a whole new and lucrative market.

In 1997, engineers hired by mobile phone manufacturers developed the games that could be played in mobile communication devices and the games were included in the phone's operating system. Nowadays, almost any programmer can develop games for mobile phones, and the revenue goes not only for the mobile phone manufacturer, but also to the game developer.

Mobile games are "games played on mobile platforms such as cell phones, PDAs and dedicated gaming devices (the Nintendo Game Boy Advance, the Nokia N-Gage)" (Davidsson et al. 2004 4). For simplification and focus purposes, this paper will consider "mobile games" only those played in mobile platforms whose main function is not gaming. This working definition includes, thus, mobile phones, PDAs, portable media

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players and tablets. It is important to point that portable consoles will be discarded from this working definition not because they are considered to be outside the realm of "mobile gaming technologies", but simply because they are, in nature, different from the other mobile devices that are not included in the definition. Their different focus in gaming activities makes them too different to be regarded in the same manner.

Today's mobile phones are filled with 'extra features'. They are more than 'just cellphones', they afford more than calling, receiving calls, texting and receiving text messages. Though those are still core functionalities, those devices are now debated also due to their other affordances - internet access, apps, games, etc. (Ishii 2003; Böhmer et al. 2011). Mobile phones offer, in one device, varied alternatives to pass the time, if communicating is not the purpose desired by the user at a certain time.

Mobile phones are taken for granted (Ling forthcoming). The "taken for grantedness" of mobile phones Ling describes is tied to the idea that, nowadays we expect others to be reachable via their mobile phones while, simultaneously others expect us to be reachable. If we can't be reached, we become a problem for others, and vice-versa. As a consequence of this "taken for grantedness", we carry our mobile phones with us all the time, independently from where we are and what we are doing. We try to remain potentially contactable at all times, while having the chance to call, text and play. Mobile phones increase, thus, the pervasive and ubiquitous potential of play and games by making them available at all times, at all places.

Angry Birds is a mobile game released in 2009 for the iPhone, developed by the Finnish company Rovio. Two years after its release, it has reached more than 500 million downloads and it is played in various platforms - iPhone, Android, Windows Phone, MacOS, Playstation 3, and more. The game is a worldwide phenomenon that is now going transmedia, with a feature movie in production and merchandising of all kinds being sold all around the world. Gameplay is simple - the player controls a slingshot in order to shoot different kinds of birds at structures that hold evil pigs, who have stolen the birds' eggs. The goal is to destroy those pigs and take revenge. Different birds have different destructive powers, so they are best suited to destroy different kinds of materials. The faster and more optimized the way the player takes revenge, the better her score. There is also a star system to quantify player performance, ranging fro 0 to 3 stars per level.

This paper compares stereotypes with realities related to mobile games and their players, through analyzing, specifically, Angry Birds and its players.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Game design literature usually points to the importance of defining a target audience when developing a game. Bateman and Boon (2006) call this approach demographic game design (14). In order to embrace different audiences' preferences and requirements, different designers and companies adopt different models of audience segmentation.

Hardcore/casual

Market segmentation is an economics and marketing term that describes a sub set of the market made of people who share a certain characteristic. Market segmentation[2] usually attends to characteristics like gender, interests, lifestyle, values, etc. (Ip and Jacobs 2004). Game companies tend to attend to this same kind of segmentation to define their audiences, as EA's audience model shows (Bateman and Boon 2006 19-20). This model

divides players into three groups: the hardcore gamers, the cool gamers and the mass-market/casual. The hardcore market cluster is the smallest and the most influential, having special 'power' over the cool gamers. Typically, the hardcore gamers read the specialist press, play demos and play the biggest number of games per year. The cool gamers have an hardcore gamer as adviser as to which games to buy and "tend to play the current top ten hits in the gaming charts" (20). The mass-market, the biggest cluster, has its game choices influenced by cool gamers and TV advertising, and tend to play the current top three games in the charts (20).

Ip and Jacobs (2004) attend to similar "components of gamer behavior:" general gaming attitudes and knowledge, playing habits and preferences, and buying habits (279). These three axis distinguish between two groups: hardcore and casual (281). The differences between these groups, they argue, are bigger than the differences between gender or age groups. Hardcore gamers have deeper knowledge of the industry, "exhibit positive attitudes towards the medium," discuss games in forums and with friends and inform their buying decision by the genre of the game (281).

Bateman and Boon's (2006) player typology includes eight categories and is based in a personality typology by Myers-Briggs (54). This new audience model goes by the name of DGD1 (Demographic Game Design 1). It aims at being a "tool to aid in market-oriented game design" (54) - its ends are the same as more common market-audience-models. The DGD1 defines four types of play styles: conqueror, manager, wanderer and participant (55). Each of these categories has a casual and hardcore subcategory. According to this typology, hardcore and casual gamers don't necessarily have completely different play styles, yet they represent variations of each big category of play style (56). Here, hardcore gamers are seen as players who "buy and play many games, enjoy longer play sessions, enjoy challenge, progression, and game mastery, tolerate a high dimensionality of control, see game playing as a lifestyle preference, and talking about games is a social component of their lives." Casual gamers, on the other hand, "buy fewer games, buy popular games, or play games recommended to them, enjoy short play sessions, prefer having fun, or immersing themselves in an atmospheric experience, generally require a low dimensionality of control, see game playing as another time-passing entertainment like TV or films" (57-58).

Some researchers criticize any kind of player categorization, arguing that play is diverse and, thus, the understanding of players can only be reached by a not-restricting investigation of "motivations and practices of gaming" (Kallio, Mäyrä and Kaipainen 2011 332). Kallio, Mäyrä and Kaipainen's evaluation model includes three components (intensity, sociability, and games actually played), each with three other indicators. Intensity regards length of gaming sessions, regularity of gaming and concentration on the game (336). Sociability varies according to physical space, outside the gaming situation, and virtual space (337). And games actually played concerns individual games or game devices, game genres and access to games (337). They found nine gamer mentalities, that they organize in three major categories: committed gamers, who "play frequently and/or long session and/or are socially attached to digital gamer communities", casual gamers, who "play occasionally and/or short session and/or alone and/or are not engrossed in the gaming situation", and gaming companions, who "play with children and/or mates and/or spouse for accompaniment" (333).

In the context of the hardcore/casual discussion, Carr (2006) alerts

> "From the perspective of game studies and game culture analysis, it might become increasingly important to distinguish between serious gamers and casual players, as these groups are likely to look to games for different pleasures, express different preferences, and engage in gaming in distinct ways. It does not follow that either group's engagement with computer games would be more meaningful, significant or credible - or that one group would be the more legitimate to study than the other" (177).

The definition of "casual games" - mobile games are usually included in this category - is tightly connected with the hardcore/casual segmentation. Casual games are, according to The IGDA Casual Game SIG (2008), "games with a low barrier to entry that can be enjoyed in short increments" (9). Casual games are games for everyone, "from young males playing casual spots and arcade games, to seniors playing online bridge" (14), or for women, "from 2001-2006, (...)[casual games were] designed to appeal to middle-aged women" (6). Carr (2006) looks at this question from a different perspective:

> "Emerging distinctions between hardcore and casual gamers might shift the focus from gender at an explicit level, but if fewer women have the time or income to devote to gaming on anything more than a casual basis, the division is likely to reflect a gender divide" (177).

Gender and video games

As mentioned earlier, the games industry typically includes the category of gender in its market segmentation. It was argued, at least until some years ago, that the gaming industry targeted mainly males (Fron et al. 2007). More recently, some studies have used numbers to show the opposite (Entertainment Software Association 2011).

Bryce and Rutter (2001) analyze the issues related to gendered gaming in three axis: game content, game spaces and activities (243). They criticize representations, which are usually stereotypical, and the use of themes of war, competition, and sports, "masculine" themes. Social and physical gaming spaces seem to be dominated by men as well (246). "Access to the technology and the gaming is controlled by the male player who assumes the role of expert by interpolating the female gamer into a subordinate role" (252). Lewis and Griffiths (2011) found reflections of this idea of male domination in a study of female casual-gamers. The participants in their study manifested the belief that play and technology mastery are somehow masculine, associated to male stereotypes like the "geeky guys" (256).

Diane Carr (2006) focuses her analysis of gendered gaming in representation, players, player culture, and aspects of the game industry (162). She claims context is important to understand the gendering of games. The game industry is male dominated, game magazines address mostly men, girls and women are less exposed to games and have, thus, "less first-hand experience of gaming" (169). She also questions why "games for boys" are not a matter of academic research and public discussion. "The assumed male audience is not imagined to be a homogeneous group and nor is this male audience generally referred to as a specialist market" (172). This view of female audience as an homogeneous market is also underlying the industry criticism in From Barbie to Mortal Kombat (1998). The authors share the idea that the industry in mainly focused in pleasing a male audience and highlight two examples of movements struggling to affirm female presence in gaming: the "Game Grrlz" and the "Girls' Games Movement". "Game Grrlz", female hardcore players, say they take pleasure in "boys games": "[game grrlz] have

never felt left out of the digital realm and they take pleasure in beating boys at their own games" (Stephanie Bergman quoted in Cassel and Jenkins 1998 328). The Girls' Games Movement is a game design movement concerned with bringing young girls into gaming, relying, the authors argue, on stereotypical views of their preferences, focusing on topics like communication and emotion (Cassel and Jenkins 1998 276). Most of the companies developing this kind of game were sold to bigger game companies and the concerns with gender have evolved (Kafai et al. 2008).

Ten years after From Barbie to Mortal Kombat, (1998), Cassel and Jenkins argue that times have changed. At that time, women were not accessing technology in the same way men were, when there was a "gap between the sexes in online participation" and "the computer was increasingly coded as a 'masculine' technology within the culture" (Kafai et al. 2008 5). In *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (2008), the discourses move away from the issue of including girls in gaming activities and educating them to technology, to focus on female representation levels among game design and the industry. "There is a marked increase over the past decade in the number of women playing games; some recent surveys have suggested that the majority of women have at least played games at some point, though they start playing games later, tend to play games to spend time with a boyfriend, tend to play a less diverse range of games, and play games for a shorter period of time per session. But there has been almost no increase in the number of women working within the game industry" (Kafai et al. 2008 13). In the same essay, Jenkins and Cassel remark that the female market is still seen as a secondary market and highlight that the areas of gaming that welcome women are "the fringes: casual games, serious and educational games, and advergaming."

As T.L. Taylor points in *Becoming a Player* (in Kafai et el. 2008), there are games that "are legitimized for women" (55). She mentions The Sims as an example, but, extending Cassel and Jenkins quote, casual, serious and educational games and advergames would be found among this group as well. Mobile Games, and Angry Birds, in particular, are casual games and are, therefore, part of the group of games that women are easily accepted to be playing.

METHODS

This paper is based on a series of interviews with Angry Birds players, conducted in a two month period. The subjects were recruited via social networking websites and were contacted individually. The interviews themselves were conducted via online chat and email.

Participants

The requirement for participation was playing or having played Angry Birds. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 50 years, though most participants were in their 20s. A similar number of female and males were interviewed, with the goal of informing a fair analysis of gender stereotypes. In total, 21 people, coming from 5 different countries participated in this small study. Participants are native from Finland (1), Italy (1), Portugal (16), Romania (2) and Spain (1).

This sample is quite limited, specially because most subjects are in their 20s and they are all part of the author's network. It is also important to consider the localized nature of the results. Even though participants come from five different countries, the majority (16 out of 21) comes from Portugal, a country with a specific game culture that influences the subjects' habits and, eventually, preferences. Therefore, it is important to make clear that

this study does not try to extrapolate its results for the whole population of mobile gamers, or even just the population of Angry Birds players. Instead, all results apply only to the sample analyzed.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The driving motor of the semi-structured interviews was understanding how did people see Angry Birds and mobile games in general, and what was their relationship with those. The interview's framework included questions revolving around three main axis: Angry Birds play-style, personal mobile gaming history and general gaming habits. The comparison between mobile gaming habits and other platforms' should serve the purpose of identifying relations between platform-specific habits. Since the interview was focused in the game Angry Birds, the issue of platform was never explored extensively. Participants were not questioned about the reasons to be using a certain platform, whereas platform preferences were part of the topics discussed.

Most of the variables questioned are tied to typical stereotypes for the identification of hardcore and casual players. The biggest influence over this research design, though, was the previously mentioned InSoGa model of gaming Mentalities, suggested by Kallio, Mäyrä and Kaipainen (2011). Two of the most influencing categories, taken from that model, were intensity of gaming and games played. The interviewees habits were traced through the length of their gaming sessions, regularity of gaming, concentration in the games, preferred games and platforms, game genres and access to games, contextualized within the subjects biography. In some cases it was even possible to trace a personal history of mobile gaming.

RESULTS

The participants' views of Angry Birds and mobile games were very similar, as well as their habits. Most participants are playing angry birds often (several times a week), for short periods of time and without feeling specially committed to the game. Mobile games, in general, are seen as a "volatile form of entertainment". As one of the interviewees puts it, "mobile phone games are more of bite-sized games for very short moments." This pattern is independent from age, background, gaming habits (in other platforms) or gender.

Mobile games are a new form of gaming for those who recently started working and see themselves lacking time to play like they used to. This is found especially among young men, who claim having reduced their video game playing more than they would want, and they wish they could play more. They spend less time playing video and computer games and spend more time playing mobile games. Sometimes, if the subject does not feel that "time spent playing one game" is the right measure of "how much I play", then the measurement used is frequency. Some reported having reduced their computer/video game playing from a daily practice to a weekly, monthly or sporadic one. Subjects reported mobile games fit new working-class-lifestyles better than other "more demanding" games.

The majority of the participants have had a mobile phone for more than 7 to 10 years now, so they are all familiar with mobile communication technologies. Experience with mobile phones is not a signal of experience with mobile games, though. Though most participants know Snake, and have played it, it is common to hear that playing on the mobile phone is a recent practice.

Gaming Background

The gaming habits of the participants were diverse, although the majority reported playing video and computer games with varying frequency. There was no apparent connection between the ways in which subjects played on the PC, for example, and on the mobile phone.

When asked to compare platforms, some interviewees refused to do it. They would not mind comparing mobile devices, though (phones with phones, handheld consoles between each other or with phones). This discourse echoed the notion of a hierarchy of platforms and games. Mobile phones and mobile games are, usually, the lowest ranked ones. The top rank varies according to individual preferences, being the PC the most cited. One person pointed the mobile phone as her favorite gaming platform.

Some subjects were particularly careful when comparing games they played both on mobile and PC, "the mobile game is smaller and different, but still fun to play." One of the interviewees separated games whose main function is "to entertain" from others that serve the purpose of "killing time". Non-mobile games are also called "serious games", in opposition to "non-serious and small games". Some subjects also remarked the relation between the skills developed by computer games and mobile games as justification for their different levels of "seriousness", "training a soccer team [in Football Manager] is more serious that shooting birds at some guys who stole eggs from us." Platforms are also different according to whether they motivate one to "sit down and play", like the PC or even Nintendo DS, and unlike mobile phones. The least judgmental distinction between PC and mobile games is based on their different lengths. When making this argument, subjects highlight that they spend similar times playing PC and mobile games, considering that the best way to measure time is through looking at the relation between time spent playing a game and its length.

MOBILE GAMING AND GENDER - THE ANGRY BIRDS CASE

Statistics show that women represent 53% of mobile gamers[3]. According to the Entertainment Software Association (2011), in 2011, females represented 42% of the video gamer population in the USA. These numbers can't account for why are men and women participating in gaming, and whether their participation is qualitatively different. To fill this gap, the focus of this paper is on the way males and females actually play.

The issues usually referred in literature about gender and gaming attend to a set of factors like representations, themes, access to technology, the gendering of spaces, the preconception that games are "entertainment for the boys", and advertising (Cassel and Jenkins 1998; Lewis and Griffiths 2002; Bryce and Rutter 2003; Carr 2006). From the conversations with the participants in this study, the most significant issues raised relate to access to technology and the idea of games as "entertainment for the boys". These two factors are grouped in what is here called "activities and technology".

Activities and Technology

When Bryce and Rutter (2001) mention "gendered activities", they refer to the fact that gaming is usually seen as a boys' activity (250). Gaming technology and access to it, they add, "incorporates masculine culture and as such excludes females through the promotion of the (…) gendering of technological artifacts" (252). Angry Birds shows a different scenario. The way girls and boys are playing the game is similar, and the devices in which they play are owned and controlled by boys and girls in the same way.

The men and women interviewed were playing Angry Birds in similar devices, that they have acquired at the same time, with no delay in access to technology by any of the gender groups. It is not considered strange, for the interviewees, that a girl owns the latest iPhone, for example. The majority of the interviewees acquired the game as soon as they had a smartphone, because they heard about the game from someone else, whose gender was never remarked. Among the group analyzed, access to technology was determined by income and not by gender.

Both men and women interviewed are comfortable with talking about games they play on the mobile phone and they have no problem in identifying themselves as "people who play mobile games". However, if the vocabulary used resonates computer game related terms, it is easier to detect gender-and-gaming-related prejudice. One of the women interviewed expressed a very strong view of gaming as a male practice. During the talk, she described her experiences with many different mobile games, which motivated the interviewer's use of the word "gamer". The interviewee reacted to this word: "God no [I am not a gamer]...my brother and my dad are serious gamers, I am not, I just play when I have time to spare (not a lot)".

HARDCORE VS CASUAL - THE ANGRY BIRDS CASE

The hardcore/casual distinction can be considered, in relation to mobile games, according to two different perspectives, leading to two different questions:

1. Can we identify "hardcore mobile gamer" and "casual mobile gamer" profiles?

2. How differently do "hardcore gamers" and "casual gamers" play Angry Birds?

Hardcore/casual mobile gamers

Most audience segmentations that present the hardcore/casual division rely on similar variables. I will take Ip and Jacobs '(2004) criteria as a reference, since they present a good summary of many different audience segmentation criteria. They distinguish gamer categories according to gaming attitudes and knowledge, playing habits, playing preferences and buying habits (275). The sample here analyzed shows that, using these criteria, it is impossible to identify hardcore or casual mobile gamers.

None of the interviewees reported playing Angry Birds for long sessions several times a week. Though most participants play several times a week, play sessions are usually short. The two participants reporting being able to play Angry Birds for several hours straight do not play this way in a regular basis.

Gaming attitudes and buying habits are the few variables that really vary across the sample interviewed. Some participants were especially enthusiastic about Angry Birds and mobile games, exhibiting more positive attitudes than the majority of players. It is common for players to own a big number of mobile games but not to play them at all, or to play them only sporadically and for short sessions. The most enthusiastic players of Angry Birds (in the way they speak about the game), do, indeed, own more mobile games, besides Angry Birds. In this sense, those players could be considered hardcore mobile gamers. However, those positive attitudes expressed towards mobile games are not translated in an especially enthusiastic way of playing the game. In addition, the majority of participants do not have the goal of playing all the mobile games they own all the way through, as fast as possible.

Hardcore and Casual gamers playing Angry Birds

The interviews conducted for this paper show that people who see himself or herself as hardcore players are as interested in Angry Birds as casual gamers are and they share Angry Birds playing habits – frequency, level of commitment, length of sessions, etc.

Ip and Jacobs (2004) consider game preferences as an indicator of gaming habits. Kallio, Mäyrä and Kaipainen's model of gaming mentalities also looks at platform preference to identify different profiles. According to them, preferring casual games and casual platforms is a signal that one is a casual gamer. In the sample analyzed, those who consider themselves hardcore gamers report not having mobile gaming as a first choice when the moment is one of "pure entertainment and fun". If the situation is one that does not allow for the use of other gaming platforms, their choice will be of mobile games. The particularity of hardcore gamers is that they express the idea of a hierarchy of games and gaming platforms that does not accept the conciliation of the hardcore and the mobile markets. However, they report enjoying mobile games and have similar motivations and habits as other mobile gamers who do not think of themselves as hardcore gamers.

CONCLUSION

Interviews to Angry Birds players and ex-players show that mobile games can be a habit with similar characteristics for people with different gender, ages and gaming backgrounds. Angry Birds seems is attracting different audiences in similar ways.

Gaming background and habits identified by the labels "hardcore" and "casual" are not an explanation or justification for preferring different mobile games or for playing those games in different ways. Independently from the gamer's profile, Angry Birds is played with similar focus and dedication by people who identify themselves as hardcore gamers and those described as casual gamers or even "non-gamers." The search for the "hardcore Angry Birds player" was frustrated and no such profile could be identified.

Concerns with games and gender have been expressed among academia during the short period of existence of game studies. If some ten or twenty years ago, researchers were trying to understand why was there a "male hegemony" among game players and games themselves, more recently the discourse has changed. Mobile games, and Angry Birds in particular, is a good example of homogeneity across gender. The group interviewed played the game with similar focuses, in similar situations, and with a similar frequency. In a nutshell, Angry Birds playing habits are a-gendered.

In the beginning of the 2000's, with the rise of mobile games, some game scholars drew their attention to early examples of such games. But now that mobile devices, mobile games and mobile audiences are changing, is it not time to look into this issue again?

ENDNOTES

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