

Hooked: The Attraction of Casual Mobile Games

Game designers are using human psychology to make mobile games irresistible to children and adults alike. Here's how you can help your children limit the time they spend on them.

For the umpteenth time, you tell your children to stop their games, put away the smartphones and get started on their homework. They leave their dinner half eaten, consumed instead with swiping, pinching and poking his fingers on the touch screen. And when was the last time they cleaned their room? Is it just you, or does it seem like every bit of your children's free time has been spent on mobile games lately?

If this sounds familiar, you are not alone. As smartphones and tablets become more widely used, the amount of time children spend playing games on them has become a growing concern for many parents.

Will my child's preoccupation with mobile games escalate into something more serious and become a harmful addiction? What can I do as a parent to prevent that? Before we delve into the answers to these burning questions on many parents' minds, let's understand mobile games and why they are so irresistible.

Easy entertainment

Video games played on mobile devices are usually casual games targeted at mass audiences. The popularity of these games has soared over the last few years; *Candy Crush Saga*, *Temple Run*, *Plants vs. Zombies*, *Subway Surfers*, *Minecraft* and other casual games were among the most downloaded apps for the iPad, iPhone and Android devices in 2013. *Candy Crush Saga*, also the top revenue-grossing app last year, has been downloaded more than 500 million times since its launch in 2012.

At first glance, casual games seem to offer innocent entertainment; yet, they can be extremely compelling. One reason is that they are so easy to play. Whatever genre they may be – puzzle, simulation, adventure, arcade or action, to name a few – their rules are simple and they often involve basic tasks such as matching, pointing and shooting, and managing time. Both adults and children can pick them up with no special skills needed. And because casual games can be played over short bouts of time, people find them convenient stress relievers on public transport and during breaks from tasks.

Psychology of games

While the nature of casual games makes them a cinch to play, game designers also take advantage of human psychology to get players hooked on playing the games and making in-game purchases. Here are some psychological factors at play:

- **People like to be challenged and rewarded**

According to psychologists, when we are fully immersed and focused in an activity, we are motivated by nothing else but the enjoyable process itself. This mental state of operation is known as "flow".

Game designers like to use flow principles to create psychologically rewarding experiences that compel players to keep on playing. For flow to occur, we need to feel suitably challenged; if a game is too easy, we will find it boring and leave. At the same time, we need to be able to master new skills to overcome the challenges. Many casual games are based on level progression; as we level up, so do our skills for overcoming more difficult obstacles at higher levels. This motivates us to continue playing.

Flow also happens when we feel we are in control during a game. Have you noticed that many casual games flash affirmative phrases such as “Good job!” and “Well done!” when we hit a target or accomplish a task? This feedback tells us that we are performing well and gives us the incentive to stay with the game.

But game designers also know that we tend to be interested for a longer time only if games are unpredictable, if we feel frustrated and accomplished by turns. That is why rewards and small wins are scheduled randomly in games.

- **Young people like to explore and discover fantasy worlds**

Many casual games allow children to immerse themselves in imaginary worlds and escape reality. *Minecraft* gets them building and creating, *Hay Day* lets them become farm managers and *Temple Run* and its spinoffs take them on fast-paced adventures in exotic locales. The excitement of discovering these virtual environments keeps them coming back for more.

- **Young people spend “money” in games more easily**

Many casual games are based on the freemium model. The games are free to play but in order to level or power up, complete tasks faster, get more “lives”, or add items such as buildings, pets and decorations to our possessions, we need to make in-game purchases with credit cards or in-game currency.

In-game currency can be earned during a game, or more easily bought with money without waiting. Because in-game currency is not real currency, its psychological value is lower, and people, even adults, tend to spend it more freely. Additionally, when children use their parents’ credit cards for in-game purchases, they may not feel the pinch of spending as it is not their own money.

They are also less capable of resisting the temptation to make in-game purchases because the prefrontal cortices of their brains, responsible for controlling impulses and making complex decisions, are still immature.

Is my child addicted to games?

A 2010 study funded by the Inter-Ministry Cyber Wellness Steering Committee (ICSC) found that almost 9 per cent of young people in Singapore were “pathological gamers”. These were addicts whose school work and social skills suffered as a result of playing video games for 37.5 hours each week on average. This was double the amount of time non-addicts spent.

One thing is for sure: Not all young people who like to play games are addicts. Rather, experts have found, some are more prone to addiction if they are facing problems such as low self-esteem and poor relationships with their friends and families; they are more easily hooked on games as a form of escape. Still, if screen time is left unchecked, they lose precious hours that could be spent on other beneficial activities, such as face-to-face socialising, homework, sports and hobbies. The American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended a limit of two hours of screen time per day for preschoolers. For older children, discuss their needs (for example, school work and entertainment) with them and determine together a suitable amount of screen time.

Kicking the habit

Parents should monitor their children's time spent on games and look out for warning signs of unhealthy game use (*see box below for more*). To prevent your children from becoming reliant on games from a young age, avoid using games and digital devices as babysitters.

If you want to help your children kick the habit of excessive gaming, it may be more helpful to start off slowly. Talk to them about the possible harmful effects of too much gaming and the possibility of addiction. Let them know that instead of removing their privileges of playing games, you are going to set a few house rules for responsible gaming. The rules can include the following:

- No mobile devices allowed during mealtimes.
- Set aside time for everything, including time for homework and other activities. Screen time, including for playing games on mobiles or computers, is limited to not more than two hours per day (or any moderate amount of time you are comfortable with).
- Play games only in common areas such as the living room.
- Take breaks regularly from gaming.

If you find that you may require professional help, get in touch with counselling centres such as TOUCH Cyber Wellness and Fei Yue Community Services. They offer prevention and counselling programmes for young people who are gaming excessively or addicted to games.

Warning signs of unhealthy game use

- Your child is spending more and more time playing games.
- He cannot stop thinking and talking about games and is always planning the next opportunity to play.
- He tries to hide or lie about his gaming activities.
- He appears moody and irritable when told to stop playing or to cut down on gaming.
- He is withdrawn from his social circle and no longer does the activities he used to like.
- He neglects his personal hygiene, chores and other responsibilities.