

State of Mobile Games in South Africa

By Mark van Diggelen

No matter how you look at it, gaming remains a popular time waster for some, whereas others take their gaming quite seriously. In the past gaming has primarily been enjoyed on large devices, such as PC's and the popular game consoles, including Xbox, Playstation and Wii. This trend is quickly moving towards mobile devices, this is been driven by factors including the higher penetration of smartphones, the affordability of these devices, easier access to app stores, increased penetration of Flash on mobile devices and the ever growing installed basic of the Opera Mini browser.

One just needs to take a look at what content types are the most popular on the various mobile application stores, games are generally the most popular or in the top 3, alongside personalisation applications and music. This trend is true across the Nokia Ovi, Apple, Blackberry and Android app stores. The app stores in themselves have created a market opportunity for game developers to reach a global audience in a relatively short period of time. This with very few barriers to entry, other than understanding the various SDK's and submission processes. The greatest problem for developers is that their content can easily become lost amongst the thousands of other titles on offer. Previously game developers had to try secure distribution agreements with either the mobile operators themselves or mobile content aggregators and this was no easy task.

In the past smartphones or the typical handsets were targeted at business users, these devices were typically the Blackberry's and were primarily used by business professionals. This trend is steadily changing and today it's become quite a trend for the youth to be seen with their Blackberry's and smartphones.

Until recently mobile games were generally Java based and needed to be purchased, downloaded and then installed, to be played. This trend is starting to change with the higher penetration of Flash enabled devices, the installed base of devices with Flash Lite and Flash is now in excess of 1 Billion devices globally. With Flash, users are able to play single and multi player games, through their handsets web browser, thus allowing real time interaction, personalisation and recognition in the form of high score logging, leaderboards and tournaments. SkillPod Media and Integrat have launched their mobile games portal, Play4Games.co.za, with support for all the most popular smart phone handsets. The site has been branded as Play4Games and forms part of Integrat's mobile entertainment brand Play4. The platform makes use of the Integrat High Gate mobile payments platform and the SkillPod Media mobile games platform.

Flash games have in many instances, brought the costs of game development down, due to its flexibility when it comes to scaling for various screen sizes and the ability to be fully customised, this affords advertisers the opportunity to create themed games, place their brand and products within the games and more importantly all the games can be translated to ensure advertisers and brand owners reach their target market in the language that they are most comfortable with.

The gap between the features found on notebook computers and smartphones is narrowing at warp speed with many of the features, previously reserved for high end phones, now being offered as standard on many of the new handsets. These features include, Bluetooth, Wifi, GPS, gyroscopes, accelerometers, high quality graphics and impressive processing power. This translates to great gaming experience and will only get better as technology improves and the costs come down, due to mainstream take up of these devices.

Research figures show that worldwide mobile game sales will reach- €7 Billion by 2013 (Source: BuddeComm). This will be fuelled by greater penetration of new generation handsets, cheaper data costs and increased connectivity speeds, fuelled by the links of 4G and increased access to wireless networks. The mobile web is on the increase and in South Africa more users access the web from their mobile phones than from computers.

Web browsers play an important role in those growth, as they are striving to improve the functionality, user experience and speed of the mobile web. Opera's iPhone browser was downloaded more than 2.6 million times, during April, creating 70% of user growth in the month for Opera's mobile browser. In June alone more than 26.4% of cellphone browsing has been done through Opera's browser, according to Web analytics firm StatCounter.

In conclusion it is safe to say that mobile gaming is here to stay, both locally and internationally and it remains an incredibly popular form of entertainment and technology is driving the growth from a multitude of angles.