

Finland's 'Angry Birds' shoot to global fame

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"Angry Birds" characters are seen here at the company's offices in Espoo, Finland. When game developer Rovio released "Angry Birds" onto Apple's iPhone in 2009, no one at the company expected this nonsensical little game would become the most popular paid iPhone application in 61 countries, with more than 100 million downloads for a range of devices.

Spectators fall silent as Jonas Koivula slingshots a boomeranging parrot over enemy lines in a devastating flanking manoeuvre during Finland's national Angry Birds championship finals.

Cheers erupt seconds later as the 19-year-old is declared undisputed

champion of Angry Birds, a mobile phone game that has shot to pop culture stardom and launched a small Finnish software company into worldwide fame.

"I've only been playing for a little over a month. I don't even have it on my own phone," Koivula admits during the competition in Helsinki.

But millions of other [mobile users](#) have downloaded the now-famous game and are tapping away at their devices, catapulting cartoonish birds into absurd fortresses built by little green pigs who have stolen the birds' eggs.

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"In 2009 we thought that 400,000 (downloads) was our best-case scenario," 31-year-old Rovio co-founder Niklas Hed tells AFP.

But the game quickly proved to be a monster hit thanks to its brilliant rhythm and levels that are challenging yet never so difficult that a player quits out of frustration, says Finnish mobile games expert Tuija Linden.

"When Angry Birds first came out I played like I was obsessed," admits Linden, the editor-in-chief of Finnish games magazine Pelit.

"You always know that at some point you'll get through the tough level and then it will get easier again ... it's never let me down," she tells AFP.



Rovio CEO Mikael Hed poses with "Angry Birds" characters at the company premises in Espoo. When game developer Rovio released Angry Birds onto Apple's iPhone in 2009 no one at the company expected this nonsensical little game would become the most popular paid iPhone application in 61 countries, with more than 100 million downloads for a range of devices.

The rise of Rovio is the stuff of programmer legends: Hed and two friends formed a company straight out of university, toiling for a few years in obscurity until they hit upon a simple, addictive game that instantly became a hit.

Hed says Rovio's colossal success with Angry Birds is down to a savvy initial distribution strategy via Apple's [iPhone](#) as well as the fact that the concept capitalises on mobile phone users' desire to fill up short periods of time with easy fun.

"With Angry Birds you get instant gratification in 40 seconds," says Hed.

The game has inspired a host of pop culture tributes, including American talk show host Conan O'Brien's construction of a huge live-action Angry Birds game and Israeli comedy show Eretz Nehederet's skit about failed peace talks between pigs and birds.

Even former Guns'n'Roses guitarist Slash was prompted to tweet last December, "Angry Birds is like a drug, only cheaper."

Instead of working on new games, Rovio is now in full-time Angry Birds franchising mode with an ever-increasing merchandise line, plans for an animated television series, rumours of a feature-length film, and a constant stream of new game updates to keep customers hooked.



Rovio company premises with Angry Birds characters are pictured in Espoo, Finland. Rovio's colossal success with Angry Birds is down to a savvy initial distribution strategy via Apple's iPhone as well as the fact that the concept capitalises on mobile phone users' desire to fill up short periods of time with easy fun.

"Many other games came and went from the top 10, but Angry Birds just stuck there like a fly you can't swat away," says Hed.

It's even become a matter of national pride.

Finland's government, for example, invited Rovio chief executive Mikael Hed, Niklas Hed's cousin, to speak with visiting French Minister for European Affairs Laurent Wauquiez in January as an example of Finnish innovation in the IT sector.

He taught the visiting minister how to slingshot his first steely-eyed red bird into a pig fortress.

"My children play this, but I've never done so myself," Wauquiez said, as he launched his second, third and fourth bird.

Back at the [Angry Birds](#) competition in Helsinki, new Finnish champ Koivula says he really has no secret to playing well.

"I just play it sometimes in the evening when I have nothing else to do," he says, noting however, "this past week I probably played more than usual."

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