

Social gaming a big winner in smartphone boom

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An exhibitor demonstrates a smartphone at the CommunicAsia exhibition and conference in Singapore. Internet-enabled smartphones as well as tablets are liberating social gamers from the physical confines of home and office, and more titles specifically designed for handheld devices are on their way.

More virtual livestock looks set to be traded and petulant fowl hurled at targets as social gaming takes hold in the booming mobile phone market, industry experts say.

Social gaming, made popular by titles such as "Farmville" and "Angry Birds", was one of the closely followed topics at last week's CommunicAsia trade fair in Singapore, where telecom executives meet annually to check on new trends.

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gamers from the physical confines of home and office, and more titles specifically designed for [handheld devices](#) are on their way.

Asia-Pacific smartphone sales are expected to reach 200 million a year by 2016, a third of all mobile phones sold in the region, according to telecom consultancy Ovum.

"At least 90 percent of gamers will be on mobile in the future," said Jeffrey Jiang, a director at Singapore-based Touch Dimensions, which develops games for various platforms.

He said his firm's clients now favour [social games](#) designed for mobile phones rather than personal computers or consoles such as the [Xbox 360](#).

"When I started in the industry, all the projects are mostly PC, hardly any mobile. But now most of the projects that people ask from us is about mobile," he told AFP.

Jiang, whose firm creates games for mobile brands such as the [iPhone](#), [Android](#) and Nokia, said light social gamers rather than hardcore [videogame](#) players would be the drivers of developer industry growth.

"The majority of the population are going to be casual gamers and casual gamers are not really that willing to play their games just on the PC... Everyone has mobile devices so it's the logical shift."

"Farmville", which enables players and their friends to turn themselves into rural folk ploughing fields and trading pigs and cows, is the most popular game on [Facebook](#) and has made its developer Zynga a fortune.

With Zynga preparing to offer its shares soon, The [Wall Street Journal](#) has quoted sources as saying the developer could be valued at \$7 billion to \$9 billion after making \$400 million in profit on approximately \$850

million in revenue last year.



A visitor playing an online game with a Blackberry 'play book' at the CommunicAsia exhibition and conference in Singapore. Social game developers make money by selling their games as paid applications on mobile platforms such as Apple's AppStore, with various upgrades available as users become more addicted.

More than 250 million people a month play Zynga games which also include "CityVille", "FrontierVille", "Café World", "YoVille" and "Vampire Wars", according to the developer.

In "Angry Birds", developed by Finnish company Rovio, players catapult birds at enemy pigs which have stolen their eggs -- players post their scores and discuss the game on social media sites.

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Advertising space is also available within their virtual worlds.

David Ko, senior vice president for Zynga, said some 1.1 billion smartphones -- mobile devices with features such as video cameras and Internet capability -- are expected to be shipped worldwide in 2015, double this year's forecast.

This creates a "tremendous opportunity" to reach more players, he said.

Ko said gamers have pressed Zynga to devote more resources to mobile platforms, "so an important part of our strategy is making sure that we have mobile extensions of all of our IPs (intellectual properties) going forward."

Nokia, the world's leading mobile phone maker, said gamers were the biggest customers of its applications store Ovi.

At Apple's AppStore, mobile games are the best-selling items, filling nine out of the top 10 slots.

Even BlackBerry, a brand more synonymous with businessmen rather than the gaming fraternity, showcased the gaming capabilities of its first tablet model, the Playbook at CommunicAsia.

It set up four flatscreen televisions connected to Playbooks enabling players to compete in the racing game "Need for Speed".

Thomas Crampton, a Hong Kong-based media consultant, said the rise of the smartphone made [social gaming](#) viable.

"The connectiveness to the Internet is important because it gives you that social link and the social aspect of gaming is really going to be a huge driving factor," said Crampton, Asia-Pacific director of Ogilvy Public Relations' global social media team.

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