

# Playing mobile games at work is a productivity killer

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Credit: Alex Cabrera

A programmer at a prestigious IT company was ducking out of meetings, taking calls that didn't exist, hiding in the bathroom, and missing responsibilities. Her boss warned her to straighten up, but she was back at it a week later.

It wasn't drugs or a personal crisis. She was playing a game on her phone.

A study from Arizona State University published this month found that playing mobile games on the job can take a major toll on [work performance](#).

This is as much a story of generations as it is technological impact. In the new economy, where so many people are self-employed or working gig jobs, there's less of a firm divide between work and play than ever before. This is a problem so new that no previous generation has had to deal with it before. Some people can manage it. Some can't.

"We did not find a right answer," said Stephen Carradini, assistant professor of technical communication in the College of Integrative Sciences and Arts and co-author of the study. "There's lots of ways for us to do this."

Lords Mobile is a [video game](#) played on smartphones. It is a massively multiplayer [online game](#), meaning people compete against each other around the clock. It's not a game designed to walk away from, even if you want to. You build a castle and join a group, known as a guild. If you're not logged in and someone attacks your castle or your guild goes into battle with enemies, an alert is sent to your phone. Naturally, you can buy all sorts of things that help you play, but you're not paying with elf ducats: You hand over real-world cash.

There are more than 500 kingdoms in the game. Every five days, each kingdom has a battle over which guild will rule it. To become ruler of the kingdom, a guild needs to defend the base continuously for an hour and a half. Failing to join could mean losing your castle and all the goods you spent real money on and angering your guild colleagues.

Carradini and co-author Anna Hommadova of the Hugh Downs School Of Human Communication at ASU called the game's neediness and urgency a "constant risk mechanism."

"It was very aggressive," he said. "It surprised me—the intensity that it demands of players. ... Constant risk is a lot to ask of a player."

Work performance suffered from [game play](#) in two types of interference: time and strain. Time obviously hurt because people were playing, not working. One player in the study reported staying up all night in a battle. He kept playing, thinking it wouldn't go on much longer. It did. Eventually he signed off, but he was four hours late to work. (He lost the battle to boot.)

Strain was identified as the harder of the two problems to overcome. Stress from the game often spilled over into work. Players felt guilty if they blew off a request for help or the need to fight a battle. A self-employed CPA was very good about dividing his work and play. Others played when there was no work to do. A warehouse manager whose workplace banned phones had no choice but to not play during work hours. Some people played between tasks because it cleared their heads.

Players had what Carradini calls "focus displacement," where people are not focused on the top priorities.

All the players knew they shouldn't have been playing at work, but they did it anyway. Is that addictive behavior? Carradini said no.

"One of the markers of whether or not you're addicted to gaming is whether you can hold a job or not," he said. "We did not observe people losing their job over their gameplay. We found that they were having problems. ... We were not able to identify consistently that the outcomes of their work were struggling."

Findings were not all negative. Some players, including a graphic designer, said the game helped bleed off stress. "I have burned castles because of my work sometimes," the designer said. "I zeroed five people

and felt so good. It took my mind off work." "Zeroing" means defeating a player entirely, including depleting almost all of their in-game items.

There were some slight benefits to the game. Players swapped professional advice and expertise in game chats. The CPA talked about tax reforms. A tour guide in Bali offered discounts to any guild members vacationing on the island.

The findings surprised Carradini.

"I knew that people would play games at work," he said. "But I didn't know much of the mechanics of how that would happen. ... There was an initial hump where we realized that we were dealing with something we did not expect."

The generational stigma may persist. American society at large is going to frown on someone in a cubefarm battling digital hordes at 2 p.m. on a Tuesday. In the past, someone may have snuck a GameBoy into work, and there might be an office basketball hoop, but those weren't clamoring for your attention 24/7.

"If your work is still getting done, then it may be an addiction, but it may also be that it's just part of the way that you live your life, maybe part of the way that you've integrated social media and games into your life," Carradini said. "And so then you start looking at outcomes and that starts to push beyond the range of our study. But I do think that there are a lot of norms that are shifting in terms of how people think about their personal devices, about their recreation, about what work looks like."

He calls it "work-[game](#) balance," with the same meaning and implications of "work-life balance."

"I think it's important for people who are playing games to realize that

playing games becomes a part of your life, especially playing [mobile games](#)," he said. "And to reflect on that, to analyze what you're playing, how it's integrated into your life, that's an important thing to do."

The study was published in *New Media and Society*.

**More information:** Anya Hommadova Lu et al. Work–game balance: Work interference, social capital, and tactical play in a mobile massively multiplayer online real-time strategy game, *New Media & Society* (2019). DOI: [10.1177/1461444819889957](https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819889957)

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