

Your Candy Crush or Mobile Legends habit is nothing to be ashamed of

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Mobile games are more than child's play, says the writer. They may seem mindless, frivolous and isolating, but they should be celebrated for enhancing our cognitive engagement, achievement orientation and social connection.
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Your Candy Crush or Mobile Legends habit is nothing to be ashamed of

Such games may give our overscheduled brains a small reset amid the relentless pressures of modern life.



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Take any MRT or bus and you'll see the familiar glow of an army of smartphone screens. Some on Netflix, others answering e-mails and still others on their social media feeds.

Then there are those engrossed in their games, whether it is moving coloured blocks, deciphering word puzzles, managing imaginary cities or fighting virtual battles. Their screens emit bursts of light, fingers tapping and moving in a frenzy of activity.

Even as they leave the train, they continue playing, their eyes glued to the screen.

For a country that places such a high premium on work, productivity and academic

achievement, it appears that Singaporeans take their play very seriously too. To be precise, their mobile game play.

Many of us may instinctively roll our eyes and dismiss these games as frivolous diversions and time-wasting addictions. But it's worth asking what draws so many busy, educated and achievement-oriented people to mobile games in the first place.

Rather than seeing them as a guilty pleasure or something to be ashamed of, these games can bring us some benefits.

SEEMINGLY MINDLESS, BUT COGNITIVELY ENGAGING

Mobile games may seem mindless. But they are also cognitively engaging.

Manipulating blocks at high speed to fit them into visible gaps demands tremendous concentration, yet offers a welcome reprieve from the weightier issues one must battle in our professional, social or personal realms.

Stealing several minutes from high-stakes endeavours to focus squarely on a fundamentally inconsequential task feels exquisitely liberating in our overscheduled lives.

Ensuring that the virtual car you're steering does not crash can imbue one with a satisfying sense of mission, but insulates you from the dreadful reality of a real-life collision.

Therein lies the joy of play, that one's energies can be channelled towards a simple task with clear goals and the absence of life-shattering outcomes.

These mobile games also occupy an extraordinary position by dint of their portability. They demand no additional equipment beyond your phone and, being always within reach, can be slipped into the little pockets of time that invariably crop up in our daily churn.

Whether we are waiting for our number to be called at the clinic or foodcourt, resting between reps at the gym or catching a break in our workday, mobile games allow fleeting interludes of "dead time" to be enlivened with adrenaline rushes and thrills of achievement.

Unravelling a bewildering alphabet soup? Check. Harvested the crops on your farm? Check.

Served dessert to a cafe full of fussy diners? Check, check, check.

Each mini-activity commands your attention, focuses your energy and sharpens your concentration, refreshing you for your next real-life undertaking.

Rather than distract you from your work, these bursts of mobile game play can actually be restorative.

Organisational psychologists label these brief, self-directed activities of under 10 minutes, engaged in during your workday, as micro-recovery. They enable us to disconnect from mentally draining work, replenish our cognitive capacity and improve our emotional regulation without sacrificing productivity.

So, a quick game during the workday does serve a purpose. They should not be regarded as a guilty pleasure, but should be enjoyed without shame.

FRIVOLOUS, OR ACHIEVEMENT-ORIENTED?

To be sure, mobile games have earned themselves a bad rap. They are often overly stimulating and brutally loud, involving silly, trifling scenarios. From protecting your plant collection against

invading zombies to sprucing up your pet hotel to pamper your furry patrons, the mobile game world is no haven for the serious-minded.

But they fulfil a critical human need. In our datafied lives, we are constantly tracking our progress: how many steps we take, how many lessons we have completed and how healthy our savings are. Mobile games speak this language of achievement perfectly.

Designed to be played in brief snatches of time, they offer an instant reward cycle where you complete a task, score points and level up, all within minutes. They reward persistence, provide immediate feedback and make progress visible and perceptible.

Every session ends with a palpable sense of accomplishment: a new level, a completed quest or a stronger avatar. Unlike many real-world goals, progress within games is transparent, measurable and immediate.

ISOLATING, OR SOCIAL?

At first glance, mobile game players seem ensconced in their own solitary bubbles – just them and their screens.

But these games can foster a social connection as well.

Peer a bit closer at the phone screen of your seatmate on the MRT, and you may find him building virtual worlds, waging battles or playing chess with other online players. The same connectivity enabling us to communicate with friends gives us the latitude to play with them too.

Given the ubiquity of smartphones, inviting friends to play mobile games together is a cinch. These shared experiences help forge a common vocabulary and even a collective mission in team games.

Even solitary games create common cultural reference points. Asking someone whether they have reached a certain level in Candy Crush, caught a rare Pokemon or solved the day's Wordle is considerably more engaging than chatting about the latest movie or football match.

Game designers have also infused individual games with social dimensions, allowing players to follow the progress of friends playing the same game, send each other felicitations for ascending higher game levels and posting milestones via social media channels.

MORE THAN CHILD'S PLAY

Of course, not all mobile games are created equal, and no game can be all things to all people. As consumers, we should be thoughtful and deliberate about the mobile games we choose to play.

Scrutinise our daily rhythms to identify what kinds of breathers we seek, when, for how long and which mobile games can satisfy those needs.

Recognise that their accessibility means we can play them whenever we like, but by the same token, we run the risk of playing them excessively.

And beware of games that exploit our psychological vulnerabilities through endless notifications and in-app purchases, deliberately hooking rather than just engaging us. Seek games that are crafted with care, offering moments of creativity, challenge or calm.

But at the end of the day, mobile games are more than child's play. They may seem mindless, frivolous and isolating, but they should be celebrated for enhancing our cognitive engagement, achievement orientation and social connection.

Their ability to grant us moments of freedom in our relentless schedules, allowing us to recalibrate and recharge, is particularly welcome in our hurried and harried lives. They can also be a salve for the pressures of modern life, making even insignificant moments feel productive, uplifting and just a little more joyful.

Play on then, fastest finger first.

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