

Top 10 trends in mobile gameplay

Apple's iPhone has fuelled an explosion in innovative, original mobile games since the launch of the App Store in July 2008.

Indie developers and large publishers alike are stretching their creative muscles, with the effects also starting to be felt on other smartphones. Here's ten of the current mobile gameplay trends that are defining what titles will be big in 2010.

1. Sweet Music

With 25 million downloads of its Tap Tap Revenge games, Tapulous has proved that there's a big appetite for classy music games on iPhone – and that you can sell music downloads to those players within the game itself.

Its new racing game Riddim Ribbon hopes for similar success. However, there are plenty of rivals trying to follow suit. Appy Entertainment's Tune Runner and Drop D Studios' Tap Studio Pro let people play along to the songs stored on their iPhone.

Meanwhile, the company behind music app TuneWiki is working on a mobile game called Lyrics Legend based around song lyrics.

2. On Location

Location-based mobile games are as old as the hills – remember BotFighters? But they're enjoying a new lease of life on iPhone and other smartphones.

MeanFreePath's Turf Wars is a social mafia game that lets players claim 'turf' in their real-world neighbourhood, while Glu Mobile's 1000 puts Pokemon and Google Maps into a GPS blender for location-based collecting fun.

Nokia also recently delivered on its promises of games tying into its Ovi Maps service with Ovi Maps Racing, which turns your local streets into race-tracks.

And while proper augmented reality games are still thin on the ground, AR gaming is expected to be big in the months to come.

3. Console Capers

Look at the App Store's Top Grossing chart, and you'll see that big console brands are making lots of money on iPhone – especially when they come bearing colons.

Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars and Assassin's Creed 2: Discovery were sizeable hits for Rockstar Games and Ubisoft respectively, while Activision went one better on the punctuation front with Call of Duty: World at War: Zombies.

Meanwhile, EA Mobile has topped the charts with a string of its parent company's big console franchises, while Gameloft has a nice line in own-IP titles heavily inspired by console classics.

Its N.O.V.A. is distinctly Halo-esque, GT Racing Academy is very Gran Turismo, and Blades of Fury IS Soul Calibur.

4. Virtual Items

Apple's launch of in-app payments, plus the whopping great revenues being made on Facebook by firms like Zynga and Playfish, is getting iPhone game developers hot for virtual items.

Besides songs, Tapulous is making decent money from avatar clothing in Tap Tap Revenge 3, while EA has started selling themed sets for The Sims 3 at 59p a pop.

You can buy a T-Rex skin for Pocket God, a new beach level for Flick Fishing, and download 20 extra levels for I-play's Paradise Quest puzzler – and this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Some games, like ngmoco's Eliminate Pro and SGN's F.A.S.T., are going the whole hog with a freemium model, where the game is free and entirely funded by in-app virtual item purchases.

5. Doodle Everything

Heard of Doodle Jump? You can't avoid it on the App Store: Lima Sky's addictive action game has been a fixture at the top of the chart ever since its release in March last year.

Now it's spawning a wave of games copying its hand-drawn graphical style – although their developers are making sure potential buyers don't miss the link. Doodle Bombs, Doodle Army, Doodle Blitz, Doodle Jeep, Doodle Escape...

No genre is safe. And while none of these games has hit the commercial heights of their inspiration, it's clear that the Doodle aesthetic is here to stay – and will likely spread to other mobile and non-mobile platforms.

6. 'Doing a Farmville'

We mentioned earlier Zynga's big Facebook revenues, a large part of which are down to its quite-literally barn-storming Farmville social game.

It hasn't gone mobile yet, but there is no shortage of iPhone games trying to make a success of the ideas behind it. iFarm from Playmesh is the closest copy, and it was downloaded one million times in ten days after its release last year. A new game called Tap Farm is hoping to follow in its footsteps.

Other current examples are TAG Games' Astro Ranch, which is like Farmville in space, and ngmoco's We Rule, which is like Farmville with a kingdom rather than a farm.

7. Retro A-Go-Go

Retro games have always been popular on mobile, as the sales figures for Tetris, Pac-Man and Space Invaders show. That trend is evolving in two different directions in 2010, though.

First, there's the boom in emulators of old games consoles – either licensed like Manomio's Commodore 64 and Sega's upcoming Ultimate Genesis, or unlicensed like the numerous NES and Game Boy emulators available on Android.

Other developers are focusing on giving old games an iPhone update. UK firm Revolution Software has released a 'Director's Cut' of its Broken Sword adventure, while Taito brought a 21st century sheen to Space Invaders Infinity Gene.

8. Checking In

Social location apps like Foursquare and Gowalla aren't really games. Instead, they apply game-like elements to location-based social networking, awarding points and achievement badges for people who are out on the town lots.

However, bigger than both is Booyah's MyTown, which recently signed up its one millionth user. It's like a real-world Monopoly, where people 'check in' to locations in their city, but can also buy the virtual versions, upgrade them and charge other players rent.

Its success is sure to spawn more imitators in 2010, turning people's social lives into massively multiplayer gaming experiences.

9. Meet The Twin-Sticks

A rapidly-growing sub-genre on iPhone is the twin-stick shooter, so named because it involves two virtual joysticks – one each at the bottom left and bottom right of the screen – and lots of shooting.

Chillingo's iDracula showed there was money in it, before the same company's Minigore proved the point. Now there's a steady flow, including Guerilla Bob, Daisy Mae's Alien Buffet, Meteor Blitz, MetalWars, Garters & Ghouls...

Although originally inspired by console joypads, the twin-stick control system is ideally suited to touchscreen mobile phones – hence its ongoing popularity.

10. Bums'n'Boobs

Would you believe it, there's a seedier side to mobile gaming. Still. Apple may be fairly strict when it comes to adult content, but that hasn't stopped a flood of 'sexy' (i.e. profoundly unsexy) games from launching on the App Store – usually with self-explanatory titles.

Sexy Maid Service is a maid-based dust 'em up, while Tic Tac Boobs is Tic Tac Toe with, yes, boobs. Meanwhile, Tehra Dark Warrior is a big-budget 3D action-adventure whose big selling points are the buttocks of its thong-clad heroine.

And talking of bottoms, PooPong is, in the words of its App Store blurb, "Pong with poop instead of a ball! Plus fart sounds!" A proud moment for mobile gaming, we're sure you'll agree.