Pocket Gems achieves multimillion-dollar sales growth with Google App Engine

At a Glance

What they wanted to do
- Focus on developing games without worrying about hardware or scalability issues
- Differentiate products by being purely focused on mobile
- Stay on the cutting edge with new titles and game features

What they did
- Used Google App Engine to run the gaming platform
- Moved to Google's high-replication data store to meet demanding uptime needs

What they accomplished
- Launched one of the most successful iPhone apps ever using Google App Engine's platform
- Ranked among the top five highest-grossing iPhone apps for the first six months of 2011
- Achieved mind-share, market share and profitability with mobile games that users can share with friends

Organization
Founded in 2009 by two Cornell University graduates, Pocket Gems quickly became a pioneer in mobile social gaming. The company – headquartered in San Francisco – has developed a series of best-selling games for mobile devices, including Tap Zoo, Tap Pet Hotel and Tap Jungle.

Challenge
To excel in the crowded field of mobile games, Pocket Gems founders Daniel Terry and Harlan Crystal knew they needed to make all the right moves – from building the right games to selecting the right development platform.

Pocket Gems was one of the first companies to offer its games for free and to generate revenue by selling virtual goods to players. Because the company was just starting up, Terry and Crystal were concerned about the cost of buying and maintaining servers, but they needed a scalable solution that could handle any amount of traffic in case a game became popular.

Solution
In 2009, inspired by an article Terry read, the pair chose Google App Engine as their development platform.

"Google App Engine made it really easy to build and deploy our apps without worrying about things like hardware, redundancy, load balancing and kernel upgrades," explains Crystal, who also serves as chief technology officer. "Google App Engine does all of that for us."

> *"We were fortunate to be on Google App Engine. If we had used a different technology, we might not have been able to scale quickly enough. Instead, Google App Engine took care of everything and we didn't have to worry."*
> —Harlan Crystal, co-founder and CTO, Pocket Gems

With Google App Engine, Terry and Crystal are able to focus on revenue-generating games and feature development rather than IT maintenance. "We had only one server engineer on staff through June 2011," Crystal says. "I've worked at companies that had dozens of people maintaining server arms, maintaining air conditioners and repairing power supplies just to handle hundreds of hits-per-second. We literally don't have a single person doing any of that, and yet we're dealing with tens of thousands of hits per second and doing it more effectively. Google App Engine lets us focus on what we do best: making hit games that are enjoyable and fun."

About Google App Engine

Google App Engine enables businesses to build and host web apps on the same systems that power Google applications. Google App Engine offers fast development and deployment; effortless administration, with no need to worry about hardware, patches or backups; and simple scalability.

For more information visit
www.google.com/enterprise/appengine

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The Pocket Gems team remains dedicated to building the best online games using the latest Google App Engine features, such as task queues and memcache. The ability to handle increased traffic without drastically increasing server support staff is especially important as they continue to add gaming features. They also have seen an improvement in the ability to handle more server requests (hits) since switching to Google's high-replication data store.

"Some of the new things we've done, like delivering dynamic content to users through Google App Engine, have driven our hits-per-second from hundreds to thousands overnight," says David Underhill, director of server engineering at Pocket Gems. "We didn't have to spend a lot of time making that happen from a scalability standpoint because Google App Engine handles that for us."

Results

Pocket Gems wasted no time putting Google App Engine's scalability to the test. All of the company's apps have quickly risen to the top of Apple's App Store charts, and Tap Zoo and Tap Pet Hotel continue to rank as some of the store's highest-grossing apps. "We were fortunate to be on Google App Engine," Crystal says. "If we had used a different technology, we might not have been able to scale quickly enough. Instead, Google App Engine took care of everything, and we didn't have to worry."

In January 2011, Pocket Gems had its first multimillion-dollar month in sales and continues to build on that growth, making it one of the top grossing freemium gaming companies. With Google App Engine's support, Pocket Gems has built a small empire of mobile games – including Tap Farm, Tap Jungle, Tap Store, Tap Zoo, Tap Zoo Arctic, Tap Pet Hotel and Tap Petshop–that delights a loyal following and has been downloaded by more than 40 million users. Now, Terry and Crystal are focusing on ways to further tap Google App Engine to expand their franchise.

"We're really excited about the Android platform," Crystal says. "I'm hopeful that the Tap series will become one of the most popular Android apps, too. We've been using Google App Engine since 2009, so we've seen it change and progress since it started. It works very well for us, and the people at Google have been really responsive to our needs. We recommend the product to any business."