Cartoon Crush, by Zenith Games – Made with Unity

Don't ignore the data

Prepare your next mobile game for long-term success.

Learn how to bring players into your game's community
so they stay and become repeat customers.

unity

Contents

Introduction

The competitive mobile game industry continues to grow. Analysts suggest that over the forecast period of 2020–2025, [users will reach a compound annual growth rate of 14%](); hours spent playing mobile games will see roughly 10% growth year over year; and the declining cost of internet data packs will contribute to even more interest in the platform.

Where there's growth, opportunities and opportunists come knocking. Over the past several years, more big studios and publishers have either dedicated increased resources to expanding their mobile game offerings or are dipping their toes in the water for the first time. In either case, it's clear that there's a thirst to make the next big mobile game.

The size of your studio shouldn't impact the likelihood of your success in the mobile games space, since there are more than enough users for the field to generate billions in revenue for years to come. The hard part is standing apart from such a crowded group. Getting your game noticed by a sizable chunk of this massive potential audience may prove difficult if you're not prepared.

What's more, while finding your audience is important, it's equally essential that you keep them around long enough to foster a community that will nurture your game, grow its prominence and attract future players. Even if you're the hot, shiny new game that players are gravitating toward, it's substance and depth that will keep players in the fold for the long haul.

Chapter one

Understanding the games industry

Winning at game-making means understanding the industry. And while things change fast in gaming, trends emerge when you look at the data over time. Analytical research from deltaDNA looks at key growth factors such as player acquisition, conversion and retention over 100 free-to-play titles spanning the last five years. Here are some of the key insights from that data.

Successful mobile games have seen more players spending more money when they stay involved in the evolving nature and scope of each title's development arc. At the same time, the industry has developed more organic, less artificial approaches to advertising and acquisition efforts to attract new players.

The data science around becoming a massively popular game is out there. It's also easier to manage how you spend money and balance that against expectations of players' lifetime value. However, because this approach can be used by creators around the world, this international competition has increased the cost of acquiring additional users year over year.

The games marketplace is expanding rapidly – in just the past five years, the world has added 40% more smartphone owners, totaling more than a billion new potential players of mobile games. It has become more pivotal than ever to maximize the opportunities for players to engage with your title and add to its value by joining the community that follows your game.

Understanding the analytics and managing data about your users can only become more valuable in the future, since younger players are more likely to spend on the games they love.

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Chapter two

Why you need your game's appeal to last

To give your video game a long shelf life, you need to build a solid base of content that will sustain your audience for days, weeks, months and years to come. This idea isn't unique to smartphone titles – non-MMO console and PC titles also try to make games' popularity last at least as long as development.

But we're here to talk about strategies for building successful *mobile* games, where the importance of founding a long-lived title is paramount to climbing up the charts and establishing mobile dominance.

Using deltaDNA's analysis of Apptopia iOS data from July of 2020, nine of the 10 top-grossing games from the U.S. were first released over a year ago. Same goes in the Asia-Pacific (APAC) region charts, where eight of the top 10 were more than a year old. In the U.S. top-grossing 100, where 90 were first released more than a year prior, and 51 titles are at least three years old. This trend is even more pronounced in the top 100-grossing games list in APAC markets, as 73% of games are at least a year old and 44% came out more than three years ago.

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The primary takeaway here is that the most successful mobile game titles retain their audience with ongoing content for a long period of time. They generate revenue by keeping players engaged enough to sustain developers while they build more content, producing a self-sustaining core business loop.

Think about mobile games' success as a long-haul process rather than a get-rich-quick scheme. Sure, you might be one of the few who score a fast, easy win, but wouldn't it be better to make a game that stays popular for several years?
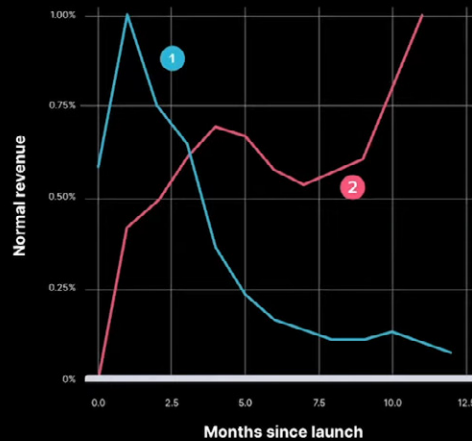
Chapter three

The free-to-play game lifecycle

Looking at that deltaDNA data once again, we see that about 65% of titles using the free-to-play monetization structure have a strong peak in the launch month, then fade in popularity. In these cases, the normal revenue declines below sustainable levels within 12 months of release. However, 35% of these titles have a modest launch, grow steadily and peak periodically with big content updates provided post-launch.

Reading between the lines, you can see a games development approach that works well for big box studios operating in both console and mobile markets. Their strategy is to find a popular game format by churning out project after project, then they they build upon whatever ideas the market decides are worth investing in.

Most mobile developers aren't big box studios, however. That's fine; not every game will work with that kind of lifecycle. Instead, we're starting to see a more sustainability-driven initiative as more games are clearly aiming for steady growth.

Most developers who create a free-to-play mobile game see their project have one of two lifespans.

There are certainly difficulties in building for a slower growth path. Increasing revenue, daily active users, monthly active users and session length comes at the expense of creating substantive content updates post-launch. It requires a delicate balance that might call for soft launches in smaller markets so you can fine-tune your title before releasing it to a more global audience.

So, unless you have the resources to back multiple teams, all your eggs will be in fewer baskets when you go for the long-term outlook. Additionally, the right monetization approach doesn't erase development issues like a middling gameplay loop, poor UI or UX implementation, or punishing mechanics players don't like.

You need to understand what your audience wants – but it's worth it, because the right players can stick around long enough to pay huge dividends.

Strategies for engaging and retaining players

We've talked about the development lifecycles and content aggregation plans for these two kinds of mobile games approaches, but now let's dig into how you can actually get players to engage with your mobile game longer.

It's best to focus on implementing engagement initiatives well after you've refined and mastered the core game loop and mechanics – preferably after testing their effectiveness with a soft launch. Once you've launched globally and plan to develop content with a long tail, *that's* when you start giving players ways to win free rewards.

The simplest method to keep players engaged for months or even years is daily rewards. Successful mobile titles that have added that mechanic have seen retention rates increase by 5–10%.

"I can say that after implementing a daily reward mechanic to the game, it increases the retention (rate) at least five to 10 percent. So it is a huge impact."

– Erkay Uzun, Cofounder of Unico Studios, *Brain Test* 2 and *Word Pearls*

Another tactic, daily tasks, not only offers players rewards for exploring parts of the game, but this also helps to give you greater control of the user's session duration. By requiring a certain level of interaction with the game, this method compels players to engage with the content systems rather than becoming drip-feeds for freebie giveaways.

Daily rewards or other task activations can also be tweaked to prime user engagement. Ramping up reward increments over time with connection bonuses or task challenge series gets players more involved with your title's progression. This strategy also allows developers to onboard and test new game mechanics or gameplay elements through the daily challenges.

Daily tasks can also help you to stave off players who are burning through your content offerings too quickly.

Daily missions: Case study

— A puzzle game introduced daily challenges and saw retention increase when comparing before and after results – while the developer's comparison games' retention dropped significantly over the same period.

Difference - With mechanic			Difference - Comparator		
d1	d3	d7	d1	d3	d7
1.2%	0.9%	2.0%	-9.1%	-12.4%	-12.4%
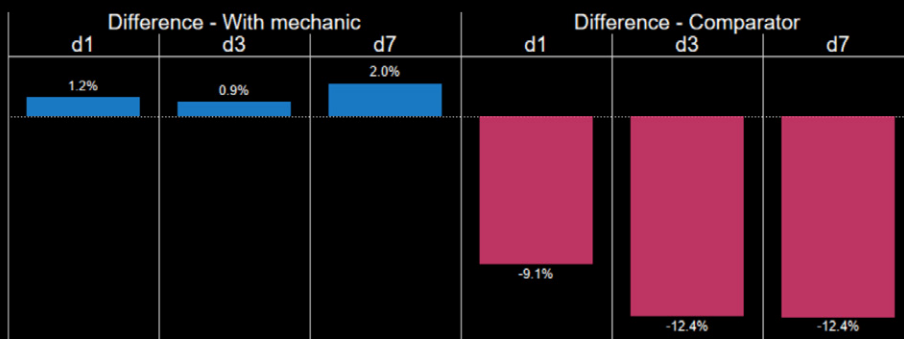
Chapter five

# Using data to prevent player dropoff

One of the biggest upsides in developing a long-life mobile game is the data it provides. You can draw on the gameplay data of your users not only to understand your game better, but also to identify ways to make your game more fun.

As Unico Studio's *Brain Test 2* was beginning to scale after its soft launch, developers were able to look at a funnel analysis as part of their [Unity Analytics data](#). They noted that players got through the first six levels at the expected retention rate, then experienced a huge dropoff before completing the seventh level. Players left at roughly 3% or less on levels three to six, but that cratered to a 21.5% drop after level six.

This dropoff reflects a difficulty spike too early in the game, which forced players out of their community before they could be encouraged to return for daily rewards and tasks.

## How do games keep players going for months or years?

Brain Test 2 – difficulty balancing
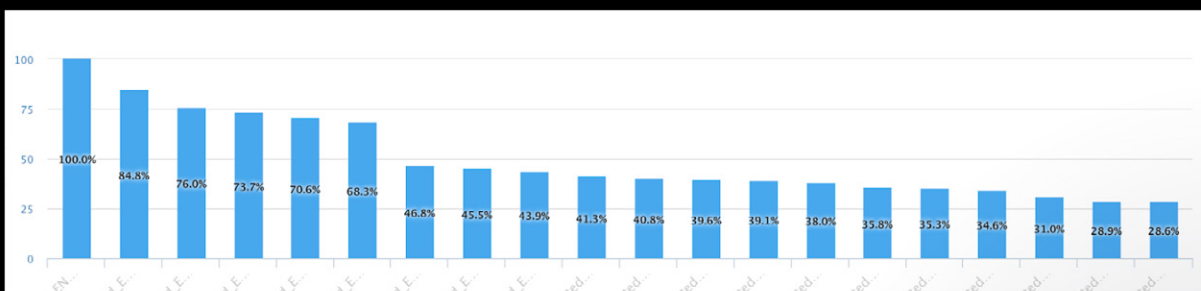
Seeing this, the developers rebalanced level seven to encourage a more natural engagement progression. This adjustment helped them to retain more players over time – but without looking at the funnel analysis, it would have been difficult to determine what went wrong.

That is just one example of how a mobile game's early core loop can trip up new players. Many developers fall into the trap of building in-game problems that can only be solved by monetizable solutions. When extracting money from your player base becomes your priority, it can destroy good-faith initiatives such as daily tasks and rewards, as they tend to look money-driven.

Knowing how to parse your own data and implement strategies for a live game can be daunting, especially when your growth rates stagnate. Unity's Game Growth Program empowers indie mobile developers with an evaluation to help you optimize key performance indicators and even get help funding your user acquisition strategy to find the right audience for your game. This service allows you to maintain full creative control of your title while upgrading your player engagement and business model. It's always helpful to get another perspective on areas where you're struggling.
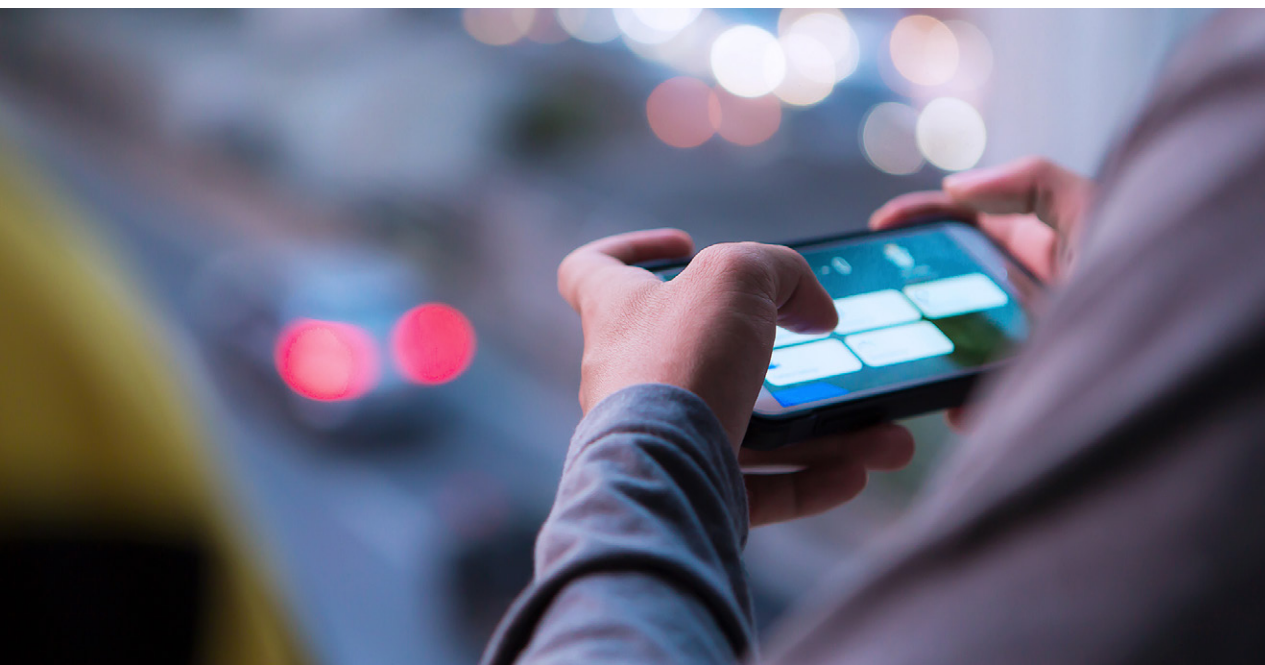
Key takeaways

When you're releasing a new mobile game, you should think about prioritizing longevity over a shotgun approach. Players who stay entertained will stick around to sustain your bottom line while you create updates. This approach maximizes the amount of fun your long-term fans will enjoy while drawing more players into your growing community, slowly but surely, over time.

Though business strategy pales in comparison to the importance of a strong core gameplay loop, retention efforts like onboarding, player progression, and daily rewards and tasks help to sustain your community. It's much more important than revenue and player monetization, since an engaged, entertained group will show their love with in-app purchases.

This can also be the launch point for capitalizing your gameplay data metrics, since it helps you to understand what your players want and how to give them sustained, fulfilling content. Unity developers can always apply for the Game Growth Program for help scaling up and meeting the demands of their fans.

Unity Pro comes with tools that can help ensure you're building and improving your game to the fullest. To learn more about Unity's mobile game development tools for analytics or the Game Growth Program, speak with our experts to determine the best approach for your project's needs.

Castle Fusion,
by Shark Jump – Made with Unity

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