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In 2009 a small Finnish mobile software firm, Rovio mobile, released a game for Apple’s iOS operating system that strongly imprinted on the reception and dissemination of the devices using it. Angry Birds, originally conceived as a game for Apple mobile devices – the iPhone, iPad and iPod Touch – has become a lucrative cross-platform franchise – spawning multiple sequels – which has at the time of writing generated over 200 million downloads (Dredge, 2011). In April 2011, just before this introduction was written, one of the game’s sequels, Angry Birds Rio, garnered 10 million downloads in the 10 days following its release (dag, 2011). The game soon rivalled Apple’s devices for ubiquity. With the emergence of covers of the game’s theme song on YouTube, and its incorporation into the routines of talk show comedians, the physics puzzler became, in 2010 and 2011, a genuine pop-cultural phenomenon.

Angry Birds is, like so many other games that have accompanied emerging technologies and styles of interaction in their broad dissemination, a simple affair. Employing the touch screens that iOS devices share with many new-generation mobile devices, the game asks the player to stretch back a slingshot with their fingertip, in order to fire the titular limbless cartoon birds at little green pigs. The pigs, who have apparently stolen the birds’ eggs, inhabit an off-screen space that is hidden as the player aims, and comes into view as the birds arc toward them. As the game ascends in difficulty, the player must also try to knock over the increasingly elaborate wooden and concrete structures the pigs are sheltering behind. If they are successful they can accumulate points and advance levels. But the game never offers a straight shot – the player needs to account for the parabolic trajectory of the bird on the way to the pig in its lair.

The central challenge the game presents to the player is understanding and harnessing its physics. How far should they pull back the elastic on the slingshot? At what angle should they fire the birds at the pigs and their shelters? What should they aim at to maximize the structural damage to the pigs’ shelters, and bring them crashing down around them? To succeed, the player must understand, in the tips of their fingers, the relationship between their actions on the touch screen and a little system with its own imperatives, its own gravity. They must learn (or relearn) the subtleties of the touch-screen interface. Their progress in the game is, among other things, a token of their embodied understanding of that interface.

The game’s antecedents are a grab bag. But in a strong sense it reinstates one of the oldest styles of gameplay around. Two-dimensional games in simple Newtonian worlds like this have been around since, at the very latest, Atari’s Breakout. This was prototyped as an arcade game for Atari founder Nolan Bushnell by Steve Wozniak and a young Steve Jobs in 1975. Jobs used the capital to found his own company, which eventually produced the devices and operating systems that Angry Birds was made for.

The simple rebound physics of Breakout asks players to judge a ball’s angles of reflection to knock down barriers and ‘free’ their bouncing ball. It has proved durable. Successive generations of games technologies have enabled us to play endless versions of the game.
search of the iPhone App Store reveals dozens of Breakout clones. Like Angry Birds, the four-decade old game is well adapted to the small, touch-screen interface of the iPhone. It also matches well with styles of play based on snatched moments, or ameliorating the boredom of commuting, or playfully learning the capacities of a new device.

You could even argue that the first commercial video game, Atari’s Pong is a distant ancestor to Angry Birds. It required that users anticipate and react to angles of reflection for a ‘ball’ careering across that game’s eerie, empty playing field. Certainly projectile challenges in early games like Atari’s Missile Command (from 1980) provide the elements of a lineage. But the designers’ account of their game also suggests other, seemingly contingent sources of inspiration. The game was designed around a screenshot of the birds provided by a Rovio designer – another example of visual inspiration leading game design. The adversarial pigs were chosen as a topical reference because swine flu was ravaging the planet at the time. And the gameplay was designed to be simple. When asked to explain the game’s appeal, Rovio CEO Mikael Hed said:

There’s this old wisdom: It has to be easy to pick up and play but hard to master. The ‘easy to learn’ part was really important to us. When you see one screenshot of the game you know what you have to do. Angry Birds is simple, but it still has depth. It has to be so much fun that players want to return to the game over and over again. Angry Birds achieved precisely that. (Rigney, 2010)

The ‘old wisdom’ strongly resembles Nolan Bushnell’s account of his own design decisions in creating Pong in 1972. After the commercial failure of his complicated Space War port, Computer Space, Bushnell knew his breakout hit would need to be simpler. He said: ‘You had to read the instructions before you could play, people didn’t want to read instructions. To be successful, I had to come up with a game people already knew how to play; something so simple that any drunk in any bar could play’ (Winter, 1996–2010). The entrepreneur and designer in Bushnell overcame the engineer, who had forgotten that the systemic relationship between interface and manipulable on-screen objects was utterly new, that if that relationship was made clearer, inexperienced players could be drawn into the game’s magic circle.

The echoed commitment to simplicity is no accident. When we look back over the history of games and mobile platforms, what we see is not so much a recent ‘casual revolution’ that has brought about the success of a range of games with broad appeal. Rather, we detect a long history of simple games playing a crucial role in ‘breaking’ specific technologies, and ensuring their mass uptake.

Just as Pong and other early video games were the leading edge for introducing the technologies and embodied practices of graphical user interfaces to a broad public, key games have played a major role in fostering pleasurable interactions with mobile technologies. Tetris, another game offering simple laws and regular forces that players must anticipate, was crucial to the success of the first generation of Nintendo Gameboys. Before spreading throughout the entire ecosystem of gaming platforms, Tetris made the pleasures of mobile gaming accessible to a wide audience. (And again, dozens of Tetris clones are available via the App Store for Apple’s iOS devices. It is a game that one suspects will outlast its first players.)

Early Nokia phones featuring Snake also made their players comfortable with the miniaturized interface of the first generation of mobile phones with a mass uptake. As for
Angry Birds, it makes a pleasurable game of refining our interactions with the touch screen interfaces of iOS devices. Small differences in direction and distance in pulling back the slingshot over a miniscule distance make a large difference in the final outcome. At the same time it counts as an innovative employment of the sensitivity of the interface. It helped establish the iOS devices definitively as gaming platforms. It also offered proof of concept for the iOS devices as vectors for the mass distribution of cheap, simple games. Unlike earlier, more specialized hybrid phone/gaming devices such as the Nokia N-Gage, those devices are now a major industrial focus for a substantial subset of the gaming industry. Its price point (initially it sold at US$0.99) not only helped sell the game in large numbers, but drew a number of customers to Apple’s App Store, many perhaps for the first time. It also facilitated countless sign-ups to Apple’s ‘Game Centre’, which is an attempt to introduce a social dimension to casual gaming, just as console-makers have done with more ‘hardcore’ online gaming networks. Many worry about the implications of the ‘walled garden’ that they take Apple to be building with its ecosystem of devices and retail outlets. Some of these worries are justified, but Angry Birds has demonstrated to an industry that it is possible to profit within the structures Apple has set up. There is little doubt that the App Store and the Game Centre will mediate a significant expansion of game culture in a new direction.

The claim that games like Angry Birds can act as ‘killer apps’ for certain mobile devices does not reduce to an argument – analogous to those retailed by advocates of ‘gamification’ – that games can act as a pleasurable entree into more serious tasks, or act as a kind of ‘bait’ or sweetener for product marketing or consumer research. But it is a claim that mobility and play have been conjoined for some time. That new interfaces, new ways of making images and signs manipulable, often have their passage eased by a ludic intervention, or better, invitation to use and understand the devices that mobilize them.

Another game utilizing the new capacities of smartphones, launched earlier in 2009, is Foursquare, which allows players with GPS-enabled devices to enjoy a style of play that blends social networking, urban flaneurie, and elements of questing. Foursquare asks players to use their phones to ‘check in’ to locations on their urban rounds – coffee shops, bars, shopping centres, offices. Players accumulate ‘friends’ as in other social networking platforms, with whom they compete to accumulate points won by logging their path through the city. They can leave recommendations and tips for other players, and of course businesses are invited to extend Foursquare-specific promotions to players. The game gives more points, and therefore privileges exploring new places, travelling long distances between check-ins, and going to new categories of place. (For example, players might be awarded extra points for their ‘first restaurant’.) Players who check in to any particular place regularly enough stand a chance of becoming its ‘mayor’, thereby attaining more points and a kind of cachet, but they can be displaced by others if they slacken in the frequency of their visits.

Alison Gazzard’s article in this issue explores the implications of Foursquare in depth. Here, though, it suffices to say that Foursquare underlines the playfulness of social networking itself, which may cause us to rethink understandings of play which game studies has derived from the closed, the rule-bound, the agonistic dimensions of less porous games. The conjunction of mobile devices and social networking may require a reorientation towards considering paidea, or open-ended, less rule-driven play, as a strongly emerging characteristic of more porous games whose magic circle, or boundary with the world, is more fuzzy. Here it is worth noting Facebook’s ‘check-in’ function on its SmartPhone port as a response to Foursquare. If essentialist versions of ‘gameness’ do not allow us to consider
the sticky playfulness of social networks, perhaps we need to put them aside and allow ourselves to consider play where we find it.

Foursquare’s gameplay also forces us to consider how mobile games on new-generation devices with the capacity for location-specificity are reconstructing the spaces of everyday life. Styles of play which have previously only had an experimental life – Alternate Reality Gaming or mixed-reality urban questing – are now echoed in mainstream social networking technologies like Foursquare. Foursquare projects social networks onto the spaces we occupy on our daily rounds, making our networks of friendship and acquaintance intersect with a range of paths through the city. Notwithstanding its mass uptake and its open-ended playfulness, Foursquare seems anything but casual.

The emergence of games like Angry Birds and Foursquare compel us to disregard any boundaries we may discern as having emerged between Game Studies and studies of mobility and mobile devices. Games like these, their relationship with the devices they inhabit, and the cultures of use emerging around them suggest that we cannot understand contemporary styles of mobility without understanding play, nor understand changes in gameplay and game culture without understanding mobility.

This special issue of Convergence presents articles that think through the implications of new conjunctions of mobility and play in the present. Authors depart from phenomena like the games already discussed in this introduction to consider the mobile interface, the changing boundary between play and the everyday, the role of players in constructing play, increasingly open-ended styles of gameplay, and mobile gaming’s role in the reconstruction of urban space.

Larissa Hjorth’s article, ‘Mobile@game cultures: The place of urban mobile gaming’ continues her long work on mobile play. Hjorth argues that the last decade has erased and inverted the distinction which held that mobile games were ‘casual’. Mobile games utilizing the location-awareness of contemporary platforms have taught us new ways of experiencing space, and enabled an understanding of place to happen on a number of levels. A close examination of the experiments of the Korean Dotplay group underpins her theoretical claims.

In ‘The magic circle and the mobility of play’, Chris Moore offers the idea that play itself is inherently mobile. Interrogating the separation of play and the everyday built in to the idea of the ‘magic circle’, Moore considers how players are mobile across games and platforms in a way that often exceeds or extends the visions of game designers. Moore offers the idea of the ‘gameur’ as an identity that traverses different hardware and software elements in producing new styles of play.

In ‘Location, location, location: Collecting space and place in mobile media’, Alison Gazzard asks whether location-sensitive mobile devices and social networking games like Foursquare, Layar and Argh are bringing about a ‘remapping’ of the spaces of everyday life. The portable Global Positioning Systems we carry around allow us to record and experience our quotidian ramblings in new ways. In doing so we are producing new maps, which are less utilitarian direction-finding technologies, and more a new kind of cultural artefact. Christian McCrea’s ‘We play in public: The nature and context of portable gaming systems’ uses close scrutiny of key platforms and games to argue for a distinction between ‘portable’ and ‘mobile’ gaming. McCrea shows that portable consoles like the Nintendo DS and the
PlayStation portable are different from convergent mobile platforms, and games on these platforms offer distinctive, deeper forms of engagement relative to mobile games. Ingrid Richardson’s ‘The hybrid ontology of mobile gaming’ offers a phenomenology of the socio-somatic aspects of mobile devices and mobile gaming, showing how the shift away from the purely ‘phonic’ functions of older mobile devices impacts on the relationships between technology, the human and embodiment in everyday contexts.

Celia Lam’s article, ‘Portable media affected spectatorship’, offers the results of an empirical study that examined the effects on spectatorship when audiovisual and game content is adapted or translated to the smaller screens of mobile devices. Her findings are important for researchers and content-makers: while basic understandings of audiovisual and game texts are preserved on the small screen, there is evidence that some nuance is lost. This has wider implications for creative professionals and an entertainment industry gearing itself to mobile distribution.

Jason Wilson’s article, ‘Playing with politics’ shows how Australian ‘political fans’ using mobile media and social networking technologies have constructed a kind of open-ended play using the artefacts of mediated democracy as a raw material. Wilson focuses his attention on Twitter ‘fakers’ who offer satirical impersonations of public figures for the entertainment of other users. Can we understand this playful performativity within the rubric of mobile gaming?

The issue aims to open up conversations in game studies and studies of mobility that expand the range of questions the fields have in common. In addition, the articles here touch on other fields – film theory, philosophy, cultural theory, media studies, media theory, political communication – which might work to enrich the burgeoning scholarly conversation around mobile games.

We hope that, like a well-aimed Angry Bird, it hits its target and breaks down some barriers.

References