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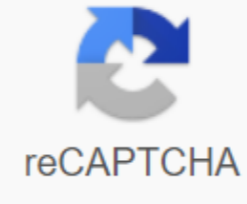
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Multiplayer game apps

The first mobile games in their time were great. Just like Pac-Man and Donkey Kong in The Canes, or Trap or Super Mario on Early Consoles, BrickBreaker on BlackBerry, Bejeweled on Palm OS, or Tap Tap Revenge on iOS. But, like any early game, we played the first mobile games only, or maybe with a few friends. Over time, however, the computer went online, and so did consoles. From Ultima to EverQuest to World of Warcraft, Halo to Call of Duty and Battlefield 4, PC and console games have become increasingly social and multiplayer. Very much so. Now, with ubiquitous Wi-Fi and persistent mobile connections, so has mobile and so has mobile gaming. And since mobile is not limited to an arcade or lounge, mobile players can participate in the action anytime, and anywhere, and bring with them additional technology and features such as GPS and social networks beyond games. This has led to new innovations such as push notifications for challenges, video and audio streaming on TVs, and asynchronous playback. And it's just the beginning. Real Racing 3 and Ingress are just the beginning when it comes to multiplayer and MMO gaming on mobile. How far have we come, how well does it work, and how far can multiplayer scale be on mobile? From Phil Nickinson, Daniel Rubino, Kevin Michaluk & Rene Ritchie Play Scenes like these are a little more complicated in the mobile space, though. For one, it's hard to munch on Cheetos when you have a phone or tablet on your hands. Casual gaming - pick it up, put it down, then get back later - is where it is now. And that means a turn for the asynchronous game. You have more than one person playing together, but not at the same time. Turn-based multiplayer games. Think of Words with Friends, which has amassed millions of players, many of whom take advantage of the series based on asynchronous gameplay to run games against multiple people (and more simultaneous games are good for the bottom lines of gaming companies.) The reason this type of asynchronous game has become so popular is two-way. One is because we're more cornered for time than ever before. (Don't worry that we spend so much time on mindless games.) It's hard to carve out a 30-minute window in the middle of the day to play a full game with something. But one minute, 30 times a day? It's a lot easier to squeeze. Although in fact nothing more than a rehash of the classic board game Scrabble, Zynga's words with friends have proven to be a defining force in asynchronous mobile Words with friends was the first asynchronous game, nor is it the best applied, but it was the most successful by far. Since its 2009 release, Words With Friends has become available on Android, iOS and Windows Phone, as well as as an app on Facebook. Based on asynchronous social gameplay, words with friends were updated to include one system for opponents. In a bizarre twist of fate, 2012 saw Zynga team up with Scrabble-maker Hasbro to release a natural Words with board game friends. The reason this kind of asynchronous game has become so popular is two-way. One is because we're more cornered for time than ever before. (Don't worry that we spend so much time on mindless games.) It's hard to carve out a 30-minute window in the middle of the day to play a full game with something. But one minute, 30 times a day? It's a lot easier to squeeze. This is linked to the second reason. There is a latency on the network you are on. 4G LTE data is great, but not quite there for hardcore multiplayer gaming. Theoretically the latency of modern LTE should be on the same level as hardcore networks, but it never seems to really live up to the theory. And there's the real delay of the people you're playing against. Like you, they have busy lives. But a minute here and there, back and forth, is possible as long as you're content to stick with more casual turn-based games. And for multiplayer games to work, you have to have people playing against them. That means some kind of gaming network. Microsoft has Xbox, which has expanded into Windows Phone, and Apple has its Game Center, and BlackBerry has its own game network - Games - as well. Google is expected to come up with something in 2013. But for the most part it was outside the parties that have ruled this nest. Think of Synga. Think of Facebook. Think GREE (formerly OpenFeint). Services that allow games to talk to each other, regardless of the platform. That won't be any less important anytime soon. Such a prospect is of course still possible for mobile, but until 4G LTE is more prevalent besides wi-fi hotspots, it will be difficult to release a game where the thrust of history requires the active, live participation of hundreds, if not thousands, of players. Similarly, battery and time limitations will of course play a role, since game developers and players will have to take into account things like residual power before committing to a community campaign. Do people really want to play an MMO on mobile? The very nature of the mobile implies little attention and limited engagement capacity for long-term gameplay, while your home computer or console encourages you to relax and spend time on the project. That's why, despite stress from hardcore gamers, simple puzzle games often gain the most attention on smartphones these days. First Shooters may wow us with their graphics, but it's the 30-second time-waster that gets the most exposure. There is also the question of costs for both the developer and the consumer. While there will always be niche genres in gaming out there, the price of developing support MMOs and their online hardware is not insignificant. World of Warcraft - the archetypal MMO desktop - cost Vivendi spent $63 million and four years on development alone, and have spent hundreds of millions of dollars since the start of 2004 to maintain its servers and build new extensions. The first really popular MMO was Ultima Online. Released in 1997, Ultima reached the peak of about 250,000 subscribers. EverQuest and Asheron's Call came two years later, bringing together more than 400,000 and 200,000 players, respectively. World of Warcraft came in 2004 and quickly broke all records for MMOs. At its peak, WoW counted more than 12 million active subscriptions. Other MMOs have struggled to replicate WoW's success, with Bioware investing $150-$200 million in Star Wars: The Old Republic and not even hitting two million players. Indeed, most MMOs have a finite lifespan after which developers retire to the virtual world because there are not enough active players that generate sufficient revenue to maintain servers. It is rare that MMO like World of Warcraft lasts a decade or more. It's one thing to have a disconnected game that's old and no longer up to date, but still playing, it's quite another if you invest significant time and money and won't even load anymore because the servers aren't there anymore. But this is an issue with MMOs in general, not just mobile. Can MMOs last on mobile? Can their revenue stream be significant and continuous? Will people pay monthly subscriptions? Developers have enough trouble persuading users to fork over 99 cents for a game, let alone a subscription to keep the game. answer is yes, but only if done correctly and when technology allows it. We are close in 2013 to this perspective, but until someone creates the first mobile World of Warcraft (and with mobile we mean a new approach to reinventing the MMO category for smartphones, not just a port) MMOs as we know them will continue to remain on the desktop or console. The one saving grace for MMOs is to redefine what we mean by the term and expand it to include asynchronous gameplay, where players can take turns at their own convenience. This model has worked for many less serious games, and can certainly work for the MMO, as long as players are willing to accept such a strategy. Don't look beyond the rise of successful cross-platform chat services like WhatsApp Messenger as an example of how important multi-platform support is. Go to the app store for any of the mobile platforms during last year, and you'll almost always find WhatsApp at or near the top of the

download charts. Availability between WhatsApp platforms has led to mass adoption, with the service currently supporting more than 200 million monthly users - more than Twitter. The first multiplayer games in PDAs and the first smartphones worked either by passing the device from player to player or by transmitting turn-based moves over meticulous infrared connections. Mobile players have a number of options at their disposal, depending on the game and platform. Advanced Bluetooth and Wi-Fi radios allow real-time real-time connections from device to device, and mobile data allows for a long-distance and time-delayed form of the old-school infrared game. New technologies, such as NFC, make multiplayer play even easier to arrange. The proliferation of high-speed and low latency LTE radio technology also means making real-time multiplayer gaming over cellular connections a real possibility. There's a good reason for that. Users want to chat with their friends, family and colleagues, regardless of the type of phone they buy. And the same goes for games. If I discover a hot new game and want to challenge my buddy at work to play it (because I think I'll beat him!), there's nothing more frustrating than him not being able to play against me because he uses a phone from a different company and the game isn't available on his device yet. Over the last few years we've seen this script many times – an addictive game like Words with Friends or Letterpress comes to iOS first, and then only after a while starts to move to other platforms. And sometimes the game never leaves the limits of the iOS App Store. From a business point of view, it's understandable why the platform blockade is happening – even the largest of the companies have limited resources with which to work and iOS and Android each offer hundreds of millions of potential customers, making it a success to get the biggest initial return on investment by powering only one platform. But for users, it sucks. The type of phone you own shouldn't be a limiting factor in who you want to play games against, especially given how popular mobile gaming has become. Over the past year we've started to see a slow improvement in multi-platform support for apps and games on mobile devices, and that's a trend we hope we'll see continue. It's a trend that should continue if mobile gaming is on the scale, especially if we always want to see MMOs take off on mobile. For an MMO to be successful in the long run, it takes many users, and that means a large potential user base to draw from. The only way to get to everyone on mobile is to support all the major platforms. Period. We're in transition right now. We're in turbulence. important players from Microsoft's Xbox Live on Facebook, Apple's Game Center to BlackBerry Games, and smaller players like Mobage and GREE. It is fragmented, constantly changing, and not always fully functional. I wouldn't kid myself believing a multi-platform, open standard gaming network could become in existence, much less thrive and become dominant in today's market. Although I would like nothing more than to be able to play with everyone I know, on every type of device, anyone with the resources to do it has any interest in a gaming equivalent of web or email, and certainly no manufacturer would have any incentive to use it if they did. Every major mobile platform today has a gaming network to call its own. iOS has Game Center, Android has Google Play games, BlackBerry has Games and Xbox Live. In addition to platform gaming networks, there are a number of third-party gaming networks, offering the advantage of multiple multiplayer platform, at least when the game exists cross platform. Zynga, GREE, Sony, Gameloft, Mobage, and others all have their own gaming networks connected to their own games. However, there are some things I hope to get, and soon. Like value. Microsoft's Xbox Live Gold costs more than it is mostly free competitors, and the premium features it offers are sometimes annoying (such as access to Netflix, which we're already paying for!) -- but make it worth it. Save all my games to me in the cloud and let me download them to any device that supports them, as long as I'm logged into my account. Sync my game data between devices so I can stop playing in one location on a piece of hardware and continue to play in another location on a different hardware segment. (Realistic anti-piracy restrictions endure, of course.) Then do everything you can to make my matches, show my achievements, and handle my communications in the game as skillfully and discreetly as possible. In other words, gaming networks need to evolve into real, cloud-based, features-based social networks. They're fragmented, frustrated, and fun like hell, and they're so close... Back in the day, there was nothing more powerful than a Treo or an old-school BlackBerry. Few people ever owned one, and ran nothing much more demanding than Solitaire or BrickBreaker. Over time, however, our devices became more powerful. They got better screens, denser than tv or desktop in many cases, and better graphics chips. And just like computers and consoles, they went online. It took years -- sometimes what it seemed forever -- to get Wi-Fi so we could access the fast broadband internet, and years longer -- what's more than forever? -- to get functional 4G LTE so our speed was no longer connected to broadband. As technology grew, so did adaptation. Mobile and tablets went from being specialized nerd devices to mainstream technology. With this power and popularity, mobile games and mobile games became not only good, it became massively good. Or did they? Just as exclusive consoles have the advantage of large spaces to fill with hungry power processors, they also have the ability to connect directly to a hardwired internet connection and take advantage of all the high speeds and low latency available. Mobile devices can't do it that well. Multiplayer gaming on mobile has necessarily taken a number of routes, from traditional live cooperative or head-to-head shooter or cursor to turn based board games into time-shifting contests. Multiplayer has even taken on new aspects that only mobile can allow. An example is Ingress - a game where the massively multiplayer online game meets geocaching meets danger. It's inspired a new breed of social gaming, taking the online aspects and dragging them into the real world. Networks also need to evolve to better support the unique needs of anytime, anywhere multiplayer gaming. Humans are social creatures. Mobile devices are social devices. It's a race that seems to be going on in gaming paradise, we just haven't gotten there yet. Where do you think multiplayer mobile games, and mobile MMOs should go next? What could they do to impress you? You're the one who's