

How Mobile Data Plans Shape Mobile Gaming Experiences

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INTRODUCTION

Mobile games are one of the most profitable forms of gaming in the world estimated at 140.5 billion U.S. dollars in 2022, accounting for approximately 51% of all total gaming revenue (Clement, 2022). Despite this, mobile gaming is often not discussed within game studies or gaming culture. Juul (2009) situates them within a ‘casual revolution’ - an industry and cultural shift as mimetic and downloadable games started to gain popularity. While the argument here is that we shouldn’t think of games within a binary of hardcore/casual (Juul, 2009) but rather acknowledge about the shifting landscape of how we understand gaming practices, markets, and design (Wilson and Leaver, 2016), mobile gaming is still treated as a peripheral gaming objecting within game studies. Mobile culture scholars have discussed mobile gaming as part of mobile cultures (Goggin, 2006), as apps part of a larger infrastructure (Goggin, 2021), tied to a temporality of waiting (Keogh and Richardson, 2018), and as an ambient media oscillating between a foreground, background, and middle ground (Hjorth and Richardson, 2020). While these are all true, their grounding in Western understanding of mobile technology and markets which fails to account for how they contribute to a larger ‘gaming culture’ and to account for the specific regional markets or specific regional gaming cultures (Liboriussen and Martin, 2016). For Southeast Asia, mobile games are not ‘casual’ or a shift in the market - they are the market. Southeast Asia is the world’s fastest growing mobile game market, with mobile gaming accounting for 69% of the overall market, accumulating \$2.6 billion USD in 2019 alone (Fernandes, 2019). According to more recent data, 80% of game players in Southeast Asia play on mobile devices, compared to 69% on PC and 57% on consoles (Newzoo, 2020). Gaming in Southeast Asia has been influenced by the development of personal and communal gaming practices in Japan and South Korea, as well as a recent rise in mobile gaming in China (Jin, 2017). The games industry has origins in global gaming companies outsourcing labour and establishing regional headquarters from such as Ubisoft Singapore (Jin, 2017) eventuating in culturally customised games (Schleiner, 2020). As such, Southeast Asia is uniquely positioned as an example of what Liboriussen and Martin (2016) term regional game studies and challenges established axes of global play and binaries of East vs West and North vs South (Schleiner, 2020). The emergence of mobile games as the current dominant form of gaming provides a unique point of investigation to explore aspects of global gaming and gaming infrastructures.

This paper explores the emergence of ‘mobile first’ gaming cultures in Southeast Asia, focusing on the relationship between mobile data plans and mobile gaming in Malaysia. Following the work of Anh (2021), who explores internet adoption and discourse have informed gaming cultures throughout Japan, South Korea, and China, this research explores how mobile infrastructures such as mobile payment plans, data allowances, mobile transactions and payment systems, and the integration of mobile devices into competitive gaming (eSports) shape ‘mobile first’ gaming regions and cultures. This paper is a segment from a larger research project exploring such mobile gaming infrastructures, focusing primarily on mobile plans and their relationship to gaming. As a country with 28.36 smartphone users (Müller, 2021), 20.1 million gamers, 75% of which play mobile, and a total gaming revenue of \$673 million USD in 2019 (Elliot, 2020), Malaysia provides a good case study to explore the relationship between mobile infrastructures. This paper explores how mobile plans shape and contribute to a mobile game culture by investigating what games are given emphasis, via advertising, or free data allowances, gives specific shape to how a mobile gaming culture form. Looking at data plans from the top mobile plan providers in Malaysia reveals an implied sociality and competitive element to gaming, as well as how specific forms of mobile gaming economies are being re-enforced by mobile plan providers. Whether or not these games are in plans because they’re popular or they’re popular because they’re in mobile plans is difficult to conclude. Instead, this paper suggests that their presence within this essential mobile infrastructure implies an impact and re-enforcement of particular forms of gameplay that shapes ideas around what mobile game culture could be. This research provides important frameworks for understanding the role of mobile infrastructures in shaping mobile gaming culture and cultural specificity around mobile infrastructures and regional gaming industries, markets, and cultures allows us to think beyond a legacy of mobile games as purely peripheral devices.

BIO

Kyle Moore is a lecturer in Digital Media at Swinburne University of Technology. He researches playful and playable mobile and locative media, exploring the social, cultural, and situated nature of mobile technology, mobile games, and emerging mixed reality technology. He has also been part of a collaborative research team exploring children’s perspectives of digital gaming technologies, cultures, and economies. Currently he is exploring discursive and technical within location-based game design and industries and the commodification of place and play through maps and the underlying infrastructures of mobile gaming.

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