

Facebook, MySpace Gamemakers Turn to iPhone

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Playdom and Playfish, two companies that boast the most popular games on social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, have a new target for their communication-centric games: iPhone.

Playdom will release a version of *Mobsters*, the number-one game on MySpace with 13 million registered users, for iPhone this year. Playfish, whose game *Pet Society* is one of only two Facebook games with over 10 million players, has already launched games on Apple's device.

Yes, the App Store already boasts a dizzying array of games of all stripes. But when it comes to leveraging the power of the always-on, always-connected devices, who could be better equipped than the gurus who've conquered social networking sites, helping people kill time in their browsers for years? Playdom and Playfish are leading the charge to connect social networks, gaming, and always-on handheld devices.

Playdom characterizes its titles as "casual MMOs." By the strict definition of the genre, the 21.8 million active users that Playdom has amassed across all of its titles certainly makes them massive. And a focus on shorter play sessions, which the company averages at about 11 minutes long, fits right into the playing habits of casual gamers.

With titles ranging from *Sorority Life*, in which everyone is a twenty-something fashionista, to *Mobsters*, in which everyone is a homicidal gangster, Playdom's social gaming offerings target a wide swath of demographics, and are always just a web page away.

"We're not a social network application company," explains Playdom cofounder Rick Thompson. "At the end of the day, we're about people connecting with other folks, for gameplay."

With the *Mobsters* iPhone app, players will be able to control their crime syndicates wherever they are, eliminating any pesky down time that results from having to go to work or school.

With Facebook's exploding popularity, so too has Playfish's reach been expanding in leaps and bounds. When *Wired.com* last spoke with the developer in October 2008, it had amassed over 22 million registered players. In the ensuing five months, Playfish says that number has grown to over 60 million registrants.

Every day, three to five million people play one of its games. Its most popular app, *Pet Society*, is a cross between *The Sims* and Tamagotchi. *Who Has The Biggest Brain* pits players in brain-training competitions against their friends.

Biggest Brain was the first game to make use of Facebook Connect, which allows Facebook and iPhone users to play games together. Playfish says the rest of its Facebook library will eventually make the jump to iPhone.

The big boys aren't ignoring this trend, either. Electronic Arts has rolled out a cross-platform version of *Scrabble*, allowing an iPhone user and a Facebook user to match wits.

"Social networks are the next-generation platform," says Playfish CEO Kristian Segerstråle. "It's not a question of the quality of the technology... you just couldn't invite your friends before."

In other words, you might know a lot of friends who won't spend the time, money or effort to buy an Xbox 360 and a copy of *Gears of War 2*, but spend all day screwing around on Facebook. Even with the progress that Nintendo has made with the Wii and DS, there is still a wide gulf between people who will pay for a gaming console and those who refuse to venture beyond their browsers and phones.

Social game developers like Playfish and Playdom are taking the Long Tail approach to commerce. Their games are always-in-development, iterative projects that evolve as users clamor for new features. In fact, Playdom says that its *Mobsters* iPhone app is partly the result of users complaining that they couldn't get the MySpace to work properly on the iPhone's browser.

The games run on the microtransaction model — they're free to play, but players can spend money to unlock new features without having to put in the effort.

And thanks to the massive pool of potential customers provided by Facebook and MySpace, the cost to market these games is almost nil. Playfish's latest game *Restaurant City* hasn't even been formally announced yet, but the open beta is already soaring in popularity. The game world is populated by your friends list, and once you've interacted with someone they're invited to sign up and join you.

"The idea is to use your iPhone as the access device... to your social graph, your address book directory," Segerstråle remarks.

Whatever your thoughts on the viability of Apple's gadget as a gaming platform, the always-on, always-connected device is giving users a chance to maintain a single gaming experience, whenever and wherever they'd like. Developers get a chance to cash in on app sales — and with the iPhone's 3.0 update, on impulse micro-transaction revenue, too. And for gamers and non-gamers alike, this means there's no end to having fun with our friends.