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OUR FASHION EDITOR'S PICKS

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Game On

When the going gets tough, women seem to be retreating to the world of simple, colourful computer games. And for good reason, because it's been proven that they have stress-relieving benefits. MELANIE MORRIS travels to Seattle, the home of casual gaming, to find out more.

And right now, one of the biggest growth areas for game developers isn't the technologically-adept pre-teens, nor is it the young professional male, with his first blast of independence and his 54-inch plasma TV. Nope, the fastest growth areas in gaming is within the female market, and in particular, the ones aged 35 plus.

Before you think this odd, remember "video games" include those fun puzzle apps you can download for your iPad or phone; and the Facebook freebies like FarmVille or Mafia Wars, where you develop virtual worlds. Likewise, on Facebook there's the massively popular Bejeweled Blitz, the minute-long game that pits you against your pals on a weekly leaderboard.

But back in Dublin, my forty-something-year-old girlfriend are hooked on Words With Friends, a game like Scrabble that you play at your own speed, one-on-one, using GSM or Wi-Fi to connect you to your opponent; consider it Pilates for the brain.

It's not surprising that women have taken to casual gaming. Dr Carmen Russoillo, director of the Psychophysiology Lab and Biofeedback Clinic at East Carolina University, has studied the psychological and behavioural effect of gaming for the past 20 years. "We looked at the demographics of those gravitating to certain casual games and found the structures down, by firing the birds in an angle-sensitive catapult.)

FEMALES SEEK SOMETHING DIFFERENT IN GAMING TO MEN, THEY'RE LOOKING FOR COPING METHODS, AND THEY LIKE THE POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS, IT TRANSPORTS THEM TO A SAFE ENVIRONMENT, WHERE THEY CAN GO INTO THEIR OWN WORLD.

One of those games need a traditional handset or "console" like a Nintendo, PlayStation or Xbox to play them, and so they are referred to in the industry as casual games - ones you can play simply and quickly in a number of different ways (ie "platform"). And this easy access end of the market is the part that is appealing to women in vastly growing numbers.

Yup, women are flocking to computer games for a little break from life; for a bit of escapism; to shift gears between work, home, kids, sleep to kill time waiting for a bus; to keep in touch with friends or family; or, interestingly enough, to de-stress and chill out. In short, casual games are the new gin and tonic.

As if to illustrate the point perfectly, I met a lady on the light rail in Seattle when I visited the American city to attend Casual Connect, the sort of "fashion week" for the casual gaming industry. Judith (aged 68) and I got chatting and I asked if she played any games. "Yes," she replied. "I got an iPhone the other day, and my bank manager loaded Angry Birds onto it for me." (For those who don't know, Angry Birds is an addictive physics-type game whereby you use a flock of furtive feathered friends to knock average player is 65 years old and female," says Dr Russoillo. "We stumbled upon this and wanted to learn more, so we ran clinical tests. We prescribed a group to play games for a month - 30 minutes a time, three times a week, with at least 24 hours between sessions. A control group was given a similar but different pastime, such as surfing the net." The findings? "Some games absolutely lower stress, improve mood and wellbeing, improve relaxation and lift depression. So much so, we're currently working with developers who are creating games to reduce post-traumatic stress in the US Marine Corps."

But the fact that women, aged 35 plus, find them uplifting? "Well, 35 ... that's when depression kicks in with women," Dr Russoillo points out succinctly. "Females seek something different in gaming to men. They're looking for coping methods, and they like the positive affirmations they get, like when the screen blasts 'good job'. It transports them to a safe environment, where they can go into their own world."

Dr Russoillo explains how these simple, colourful games work on our subconscious. "They work on the Autonomic Nervous System, which is the real thinker in the body. It's the part of the brain that's responsible..."
for our survival, the fight or flight part. These games relax the Autonomic Nervous System, unlike, say, a shooting game, which jacks up the brain.”

So, enough of the science. Now we know gaming is good for us, where to start? I would suggest by downloading anything by a company called PopCap. Their games are just the sort of ones everyone can get the hang of in a matter of minutes, and thoroughly enjoy.

Founded by three young geeks in 2000, the PopCap story is as feel-good as the games they develop. Jason Kapalka, now PopCap’s chief creative officer, created the company’s flagship game, Bejeweled, way back then, and it went supernova. For the uninhibited, Bejeweled is a puzzle game, not badly unlike the oldie-but-goodie Tetris, where you have to position three or more of the descending jewels to make them disappear — simple, fun, addictive. Wrapped up in his new discovery, Jason and his code-writer buddy Brian Fiete left their jobs and joined forces with a third young man, John Vechev, and set up shop, possibly from their bedrooms.

The rest, as they say, is history. Bejeweled is adored the world over, with more than ten million people now playing Bejeweled Blitz on Facebook alone. It’s also available on just about every other platform, with over 50 million copies sold to date. A copy is still bought every 4.3 seconds.

PopCap has another game, Peggle, which is equally addictive and playable. This involves zapping pegs or dots on the screen, formed in an ever-increasingly complex layout. Bejeweled and Peggle are just the sort of games Dr Russoniello is using in his studies, and the ones he finds have the most positive effects on his female test subjects — they’ll even help with insomnia, because they keep the player still whilst simultaneously relaxing the brain — “like a modern form of meditation,” says Russoniello. Personally, I’ve swapped my bedtime book for a few minutes of Bejeweled, and it works a treat.

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my trip to Seattle to learn about the casual gaming industry came at a particularly pertinent time, because I arrived the week after PopCap games had been bought out by EA Games in a deal worth close to $1 billion (cue Dr Evil finger gesture). EA are the crowd who produce the FIFA franchise of video games, which earns them billions of dollars each year. In comparison to EA’s empire ruling, PopCap are the indie kids whose cute confections were not really classed as “proper” games among the industry elite, until recently. But fast-forward a few jumps in technology, and some changes in gaming habits, and EA want some of PopCap’s magic dust, for sure.

This buy-out comes with particular significance because, as founder John Vechey tells me, “In 2004, we were offered a buy-out for $70 million, but we declined and invested in a CEO instead.” Last month, led by Dave Roberts (the CEO), they finally had their arms twisted, and the wait was worthwhile. Although, as a result, Vechey and his partners have become prime young fodder (they’re all still in their thirties) for preying wealth managers, keen to get their mitts on the boys’ mushrooming millions – a proper First World problem.

It’s certainly a young people’s industry. Most game developers, code-writers and artists are in their twenties and early thirties, and long hours are spent playing and tweaking formats until they’re just right. This is how a hit is found, apparently. As PopCap’s Jason Kapalka explains about Bejeweled Blitz, the competitive Facebook version of Bejeweled, which goes against the clock: “We were running tests on a three-minute version of the game, but had abbreviated it to ten seconds, as we were looking for a bug. Suddenly, we realised that shorter was more fun. It opened our eyes to trying a 60-second game, which turned out to be the optimum.”

PopCap employs 400 creative, design, support, and techie people, all of whom adore working for the company. It’s easy to see why. The Seattle HQ is full of quirky cuteness. Like whiteboard walls that you can write straight on, and wipe off. Everywhere, there are stuffed toys and beanies hanging, made from their star game characters. On each floor, there are games rooms, relaxation rooms and kitchens filled with snacks, bagels, tasty treats and fridges full of soda. On Fridays, there’s beer and pizza too.

BEJEWELED AND PEGGLE ARE JUST THE SORT OF GAMES DR RUSSONIELLO IS USING IN HIS STUDIES, AND THE ONES HE FINDS HAVE THE MOST POSITIVE EFFECTS ON FEMALE SUBJECTS – THEY’LL EVEN HELP WITH INSOMNIA, “LIKE A MODERN FORM OF MEDITATION.”

PopCap has a “workforce culture” department, who ensure the vibe is always happy at work. Got something niggleing? Well, you can pop in for an off-the-record chat with Ellen Maret at any time. Too busy on a creative breakthrough to collect your cleaning? No bother, someone from workforce culture will do it for you. This is the sort of place that any young, or young-at-heart person wants to work.

But it’s not all touchy-feely, warm-fuzzy stuff. As Dr Russoniello put it, “those guys can barely keep up with counting the cash they’re making from Bejeweled”. And while the founders might claim to be geeks, they’re geeks who are all tall, tanned and slim from holidays, and healthy interests in outdoor pursuits. Brian, the original games developer, is married to a hot wife, wears Prada sport, and winters in Miami. Equally, when I visited PopCap Towers, I noticed he didn’t have a posh corner office. In fact, he still pulls all-nighters, working with his team out on the open-plan floor. Even after the buy-out.

Because time doesn’t stand still in gaming. Nobody knows where the next big hit is going to come from, or what we’ll all be doing with technology three years from now. So it’s back to the drawing board over and over again to reinvent the wheel, to perfect perfection.

The trick to making these games such a success is to make them easy. But like the “no make-up make-up” look is one of the hardest to nail, and just as Dolly Parton says, “it costs a lot to look this cheap”, quality casual games may appear simple, but it’s just an illusion.