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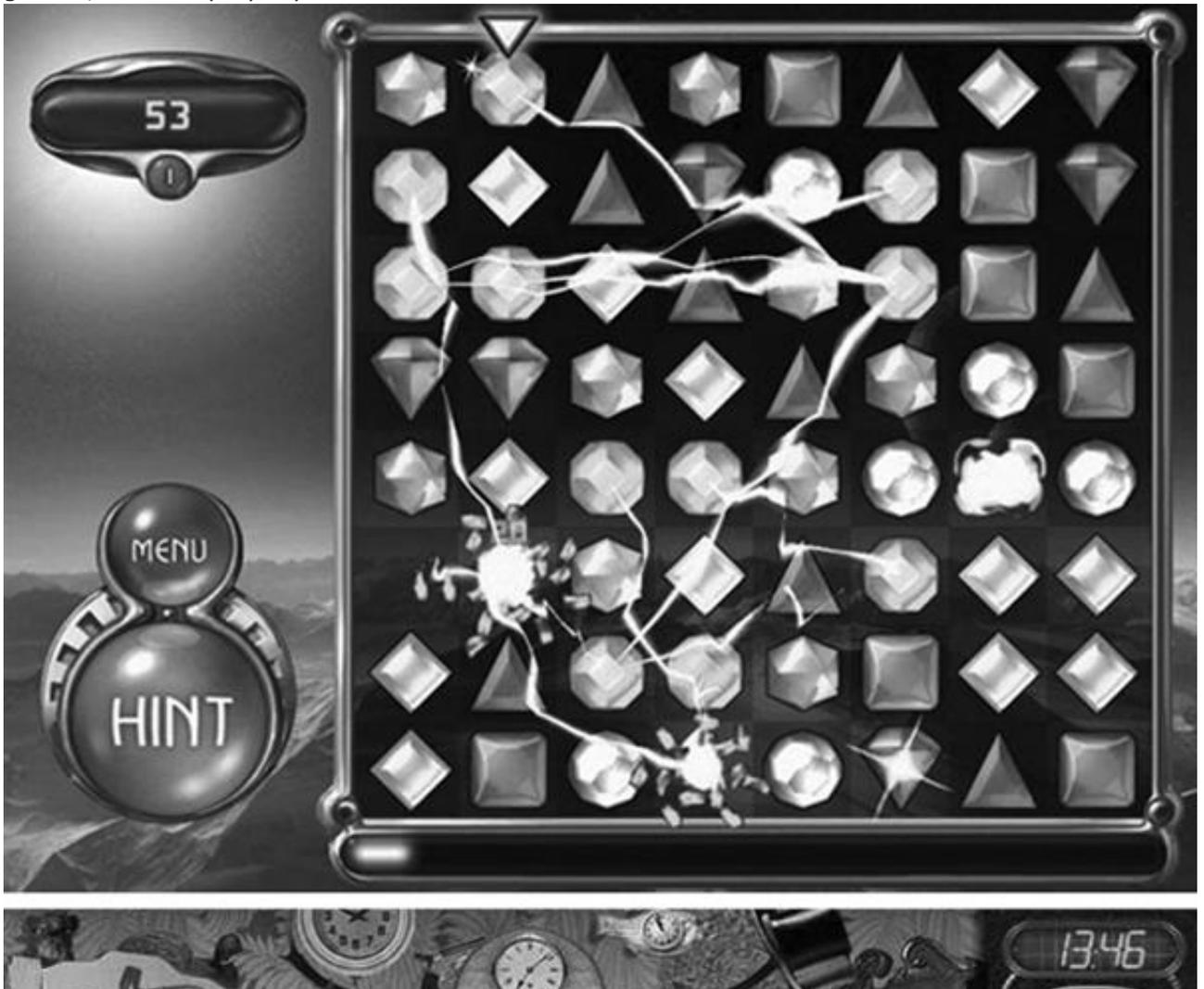
Encyclopedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming

By: Mark J. P. Wolf, Editor

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casual games

There are several ways to approach and define what casual games are and what they do, though none of them are definitive. Typically, the prime characteristic of casual games is that they are considered easy, making them thereby suitable as a "casual pastime," rather than for long and immersive gameplay experiences. However, many classic **board games** and puzzle games are also generally categorized under casual games, and these games can be rather difficult and complex at more advanced levels of **play**. According to a popular maxim, casual games are "easy to learn, difficult to master." Thus, not all games that are considered casual necessarily lead to play styles that are casual or laid back. Consequently, it is important to differentiate between casual games, people who prefer to play these games, and the play style involved.





Bejeweled 2 (PopCap Games, 2004) [top], *Mystery Case Files: Huntsville* (Big Fish Games, 2005) [center], and *Winterbells* (Orisinal, 2008) [bottom]. (Frans Mäyrä)

The concept of casual games was originally intended for marketing purposes, and these games continue to be a growing business area. The IGDA White Paper on Casual Games labels them as “games for the rest of us” and states that casual games are typically designed and marketed in a neutral, inclusive manner, hopefully attracting people of all ages and genders. Some casual game providers have claimed that the majority of their

customers are female; a customer survey published by PopCap Games, one of the leading developers and publishers of casual games, claimed in 2006 that “76% of casual game players are female, with an average age of 48.” Yet in so-called hardcore gamers’ discussion forums, it is easy to find antipathy toward casual games. Rather than being completely gender and age neutral, casual games have a distinctive aesthetics and stimulate the growth of a game culture specific to them. Their common emphasis on

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“cuteness” and easy **accessibility** stands in clear opposition to the complexity and dark, often violent themes that dominate the form and dynamics of popular “hardcore” genres like first-person **shooting games**, for example. The popular perception of casual games and video games in general, however, continues to change.

The history of casual games is as long as the history of games itself. Many classic games (such as mahjong, card games like solitaire, or board games of the “three-in-a-row” variety) are currently considered casual games. The powerful expansion of the digital casual games market is nevertheless a rather recent phenomenon. Early examples of casual games include the version of Solitaire shipped with Windows operating systems, but it was the expansion of the World Wide Web and broadband connectivity that opened up the space for mass-market casual games to emerge. Several key companies opened their on-line casual game services around the turn of the century: Pogo.com in 1998, PopCap Games in 2000, and Big Fish Games in 2002. Their revenue and distribution models started diversifying the games **industry**, providing new opportunities for casual games. According to the IGDA’s 2008 White Paper, six popular casual game business models currently exist: (1) Try and Buy Downloadable Games, (2) **Advergaming**, (3) Ad-supported **Web Games**, (4) **Console** Downloads, (5) Skill Games, and (6) Microtransaction Supported Games. In terms of playable content, the genres of casual games provided through these channels are similar; for example, various puzzle games are popular in all these categories.

On-line distribution models have also provided access for independent, small-scale games, such as those found at “Orisinal: Morning Sunshine,” a website of original Flash games by Ferry Halim. The field of casual games can also provide room for experimentation. For example, some successful student game projects were later revised and released as commercial video games, such as *Flow* (2006) by Jenova Chen and Nicholas Clark. Since a new generation of video game consoles (the **Microsoft Xbox 360**, **Sony PlayStation 3**, and **Nintendo Wii**) were introduced with Internet connectivity and built-in on-line marketplaces, the development and distribution of casual games to video game consoles has started to grow. This has particularly stimulated the rise of casual-style **sports games**. Also, the introduction of games into smartphones and social networking sites such as Facebook has accelerated the growth of casual and social games. Meanwhile, there is still room for innovation in the traditional web-based domain of casual games, as proved by the “Mystery Case Files” series introduced by Big Fish Games in 2005, which adapts traditions of puzzle and **adventure games** into a novel form of crime-themed “hidden object” games.

Frans Mäyrä

Further Reading

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