

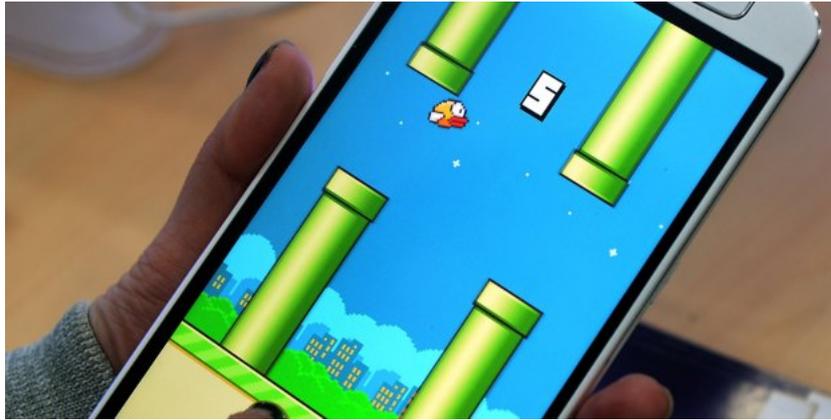


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The Flappy Bird of Paradise



By Marty Kaplan



HOANG DINH NAM VIA GETTY IMAGES

Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, but Flappy Bird is definitely not just a game.

If you've been on an aboriginal walkabout, you may not know that, until yesterday, Flappy Bird was the most popular iPhone and Android app on the planet. Its appeal lies neither in its crappy graphics nor its nonexistent story, but in its addictive difficulty. You win by tapping on your screen to prevent birds from hitting pipes in their flight path. Or rather, you don't win; innumerable social media posts confess to racking up humiliatingly low scores after embarrassingly time-eating attempts.

Downloading Flappy Bird is free, but the ads it delivers have reportedly been bringing in \$50,000 a day to its Vietnamese developer, Nguyen Ha Dong. Yet on Sunday, Dong, tweeting "I cannot take this anymore," pulled the game down. What he cannot take is unclear. What is clear is how vulnerable we humans are to having our attention hijacked.

I would not be surprised if, one fine day, functional magnetic resonance imaging were to show that the same regions of the brain that are activated by cocaine or heroin were also lit up by Flappy Bird. It would not be shocking to learn that all that tap-tap-tapping on cellphone screens causes squirts of dopamine or oxytocin to take us to our happy place. I can certainly imagine that the Flappy Bird high is physiologically indistinguishable from the pleasures provided by Vermeer, Jay Z or Louis C.K. What intrigues me isn't that there are biochemical manifestations of the rapture that Flappy Bird induces, but that some kid in Hanoi with Pong-level coding chops can take down civilization's grid.

Flappy Bird is not, of course, cyber-warfare. It's a game, and game crazes, from mah-jongg to Sudoku, have often swept the world. Being digital doesn't necessarily make Flappy Bird more neurologically insidious than other games; the Internet is just its distribution system. Dong isn't a dark genius, and he hasn't discovered some key to the human psyche. He's just lucky, and if Flappy Bird hadn't come along to distract us, some other dumb birdie would do. What matters — what makes it more than just a game — isn't this particular cause of our distraction, but the chronic condition that makes us ache to be transported out of ourselves.

That condition is sleepwalking. We are blind to the richness of being. Every moment offers infinite opportunities to marvel at the sheer existence of anything, to be grateful not only for the things our senses perceive, but also for the miracle that we have senses

through which to appreciate them. Yet instead of being attentive to the here and now, our monkey-minds replace that awareness with the incessant, yammering interior narrative that we mistake for insight. A tragedy, a health scare, a celebration: yes, there are occasions that do return our attention to what really matters. But they are, by definition, occasional. Our mindfulness is at best episodic; our usual baseline is mindlessness.

This is both universally true, and also specific to our time. Ancient texts attest to our species' obliviousness, a malady that occurs across cultures and centuries. But there are also economic and political causes of our numbness; we experience a surplus alienation from our selves and from nature, an especially modern emptiness that springs from our reduction to cogs in a corporate consumer society. We misinterpret our anomie as boredom. It is not the cacophony of the commercial claims on our attention that has shortened our attention spans; it is the soullessness that the market economy demands that has sent us searching for self-medication.

Thirty years ago, in his jeremiad *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman predicted that entertainment would conquer all other social domains, from news and politics to religion and education. The root meaning of entertainment is "something that occupies our attention," and Postman feared that the imperative to monetize attention — to assemble audiences, sell eyeballs, build brands — would privilege stimulation over reason and make us slaves to our appetites. It was not in the totalitarianism of George Orwell's *1984* that Postman saw the dystopia we're on the brink of succumbing to, but rather in the society portrayed by Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where distraction — fun — is the drug of choice.

But Huxley is also the author of a lesser-known work, *Island*, his last novel, which depicts not the narcotized terminus of humanity, but a utopia. Its most arresting feature: mynah birds that call out reminders to the island's human inhabitants. "Attention," they have been trained to parrot, attempting to wake people from their inveterate sleepwalking. "Here and now, boys," the birds insist, "here and now!" Paradise is mindfulness.

You lose yourself in Flappy Bird. You find yourself in the birds of here and now. Flappy Bird takes our attention. Huxley's birds give it back to us.

Game on.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, where you can email me if you'd like.

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