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Flappy Bird Mobile: Freeing the Yellow Bird from Psychological Prison

I was Flappy Bird. I moved along with just enough bounce to keep me going, at the mercy of the person tapping the screen, except no one was there. The taps—the little jolts that sustained me—were infinitesimal dopamine hits from eight-second Tiktok videos.

I leave school. As soon as I enter the car and exchange some gut-wrenchingly bland greeting with my dad, my headphones go in. Dreadfully tangled string headphones, if I might add; since I can't sit and wait for my preferred (and much easier-to-use) AirPods to charge. Privilege taken for granted and comfort traded for quickness yet again. Why, though? Something about the waiting, the delayed gratification involved in charging the AirPods to 100% is repulsive. So I pop in my still-tangled string headphones and open TikTok. Every couple videos my dad says something to me and the rage of ten thousand soldiers flowing from my core fills the gaps between every cell of my body, spilling out in a tight-lipped "mhm." Why is he talking so much? I don't want to talk about my day. Why aren't we home yet?

I'm overreacting. I feel bad.

I'm home. I have a to-do list and I can tell you right now it's not getting started. See, I'm between games right now, out of bounce. I need to press start and get the taps going if I want to get through these tubes...erm...assignments...any time soon. TikTok is open again. This video is too long, scroll. This person is talking too slowly, scroll. Dad texts me saying it's dinner time, scroll. Wait, I have to eat, people need food. To the kitchen. I scarf down the first food since I last ate 10 hours ago. Guess I forgot to eat again. I'm full and I'm being spoken to now, so time to retreat. See you tomorrow morning, Dad.

It took me several years and a belated diagnosis of ADHD to realize that this wasn't normal.

To clarify, I don't believe I "got" ADHD from TikTok, it was always there. However, as a kid I could watch whole movies, read whole books, and share how my day went with my parents. But since I've started fiending for these blips of marginally funny content, I saw the decline of any attention span or fleck of patience I could've brought into adolescence. It wasn't just me either.

I tried to fix myself by putting my phone down and taking in my surroundings, which made me seem strange, since my surroundings were people on TikTok and I was just staring at them. I spoke, only to be met with the icy response I gave my Dad. It was undeniable that living in a virtual environment full of micro trends that materialize and dissolve at warp speed, getting attuned to this altered passage of time, left us all living vicariously through the trendsetters whose videos we watched, with no real stake in physical life.

I sat with this until an unrelated breakup left me more sad than I was willing to remain, and I restructured my life entirely, starting with a self portrait. TikTok closed, my hands covered in crusty paint, my room smelling like ink, my ears buzzing with the sound of my pen making hatching marks atop the loud colors, it was heavenly. All my senses were beaming and I felt divinely human. Every piece since has made me feel the same.

Reflecting on the experience of getting back into my art, I'm deeply grateful for the human life I live, for the fact that I have five senses and the ability to create, and for the way I can adorn my physical environment with something so fulfilling. I am grateful to exist in this body that can do all these things and I feel no need to operate through the body of another.

On February 10, 2014 the Flappy Bird mobile game was taken off the App Store. The yellow bird's flight will never again be dependent on those little taps; and since I've fallen in love with art and life, my identity will never again be blunted by an addiction to TikTok trends and videos.

