

Ambient Insight's

Brain School – Am I Smarter Now? (Director's Cut)

By Tyson Greer



"We Put Research into Practice"
www.ambientinsight.com

Mobile Game Review by:
Tyson Greer, Chief Executive Officer

Published: May 2008

*To learn more about our research services, email:
info@ambientinsight.com*

Ambient Insight Copyright Policy: All rights reserved. All media and research data published by Ambient Insight are protected by copyright. Unauthorized use of Ambient Insight research without prior permission is prohibited. Ambient Insight research products provide valuable financial data only to the individual purchaser or the purchasing organization. Purchasers may not modify or repurpose the information and financial data in our research in any manner. Specific distribution rights are provided based on the license model granted at time of purchase.

Quoting Ambient Insight Research: Permission is required to use quotes, tables, diagrams, or charts from Ambient Insight research in press releases, promotional material, external presentations, or commercial publications. Permission from Ambient Insight is required to reproduce or distribute in entirety any table, paragraph, section, or report.

Note: A shorter version of this article was originally published in May 2008 on the Microsoft Windows Mobile Web site at:

<http://www.microsoft.com/windowsmobile/articles/brainschool.msp>

All images courtesy of Mastersoft Mobile Solutions:

<http://www.mastersoftmobilesolutions.com/index.php>

Brain School – Am I Smarter Now?

I plan to have one heck of a graduation party when I graduate from Brain School. **Brain School** from Mastersoft Mobile Solutions is one of a growing number of new “mental trainer” puzzle games for mobile devices and this one has staying power.

This product, as with other puzzle games that are driving most of the mobile game revenues, has broad appeal that goes far beyond the typical console gamer demographic of 18-24 year old males.

Back to School, This Time It's Cool

The school metaphor runs through the special features associated with the game, such as grades, exams, school reports, and the sometimes-comical Career Advisor adds an extra bit of fun.



© 2008 Mastersoft

Figure 1 – Brain School's Career Advisor

To complete a year, you have to pass five different levels of five different puzzles and pass an exam. One of the things that keeps Brain School interesting is the different types of games as well as the sheer

number of games. Brain School has a whopping 20 different games, which is more than any brain training game I've seen, and each game has multiple variations.

Although some of the games can be found in other brain trainer products, there are several, such as the nefarious "Plastic Puzzle," you won't find anywhere else.

The school theme infuses many of the Brain School games, such as School Register that tests your ability to remember as many schoolmates as possible and School Bus, remembering how many pupils got on and off the bus and how many are left at the end. There are also math games, matching games, music games, word games, and of course sudoku.



Figure 2 – How many classmates can you remember?

Some of the challenges are a race-against-the-clock, and as I found out, if you're not fast enough the time runs out and you're back at square one. This adds a pleasantly frantic aspect to the games. Build up your skill and build up your speed.

I also learned I had to override any twinge of disappointment at not getting one answer right, because indulging even a nanosecond of that response slowed my speed. It is true that you learn from your mistakes: Get over it and get on with it.

Other games are purely achievement-based; they take more thoughtful concentration and have no time limits. You try them and try them and try them, until you accomplish the goal. Along the way, besides whatever "brain gains" you may get, you may also learn something about your own approach to problem solving and the level of your own perseverance.

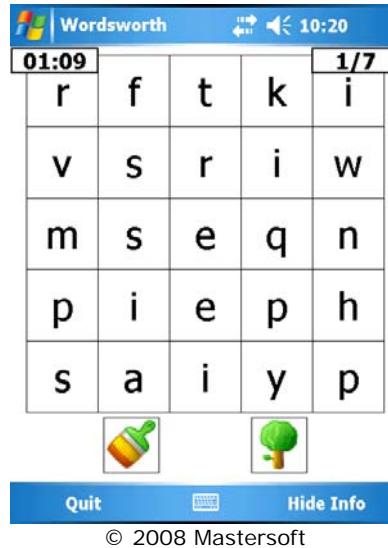


Figure 3 – Timed test-taking in Brain School.

Each puzzle type targets different brain skills, such as logic, memory, concentration, and spatial awareness. The first year starts with tracking the coin under “Magic Hats,” comparing “Heavier, Heaviest” objects, speeding through basic arithmetic in “Simple Sums,” spatial recognition in “Shape Math” and the “Plastic Puzzle” shapes.

Each puzzle type targets different brain skills, such as logic, memory, concentration, and spatial awareness.

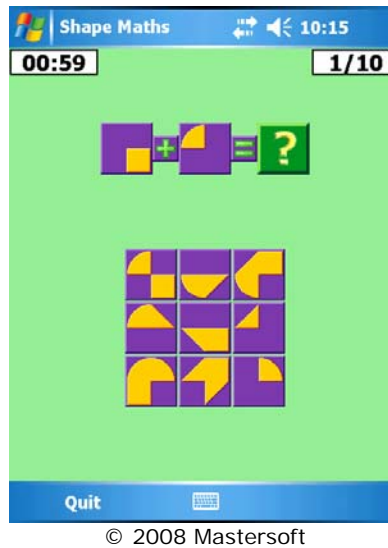


Figure 4 – Shapes and math game in Brain School.

Typically, you have to complete two or more games in a section. As the year progresses, not only does each of these games get increasingly difficult but random elements come into play. Back in the days when I went to school, even though I did have to walk in the snow five miles uphill each way; I did not have to score an A+ in five levels of five games, plus pass an exam, in order to proceed to the next grade.

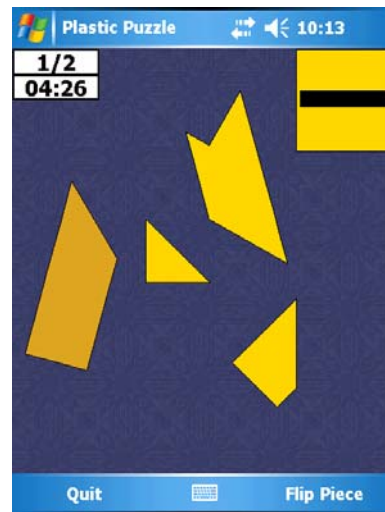
That's the part about this mobile game's staying power. Unlike many puzzle games, you won't breeze through this entire program in a day or two, then look around and say "I'm done. I won. What's next?"

Game Play and Play and Play and Play...

Part of the delight of Brain School is not only that you can compete against up to ten other players on your device, but also you always compete against your self, trying to improve your score. So, even when I earned an A+ in "Heavier, Heaviest" (rather quickly I might add), I played again and again to challenge myself to beat my "Personal Best." However, it wasn't that easy with the infernal "Plastic Puzzle" game.

Dominic Masters, the brains behind Brain School, said during a Windows Live Messenger interview from his location in the United Kingdom that he got the idea for this unique electronic game from "Christmas Crackers," those traditional holiday noisemakers, especially popular in Great Britain, which pop out a little toy or puzzle prize with a loud "snap!" That makes it sound so delightful and Dickensian. I used to palm off those little puzzle things to my elder son.

The so-called "Level 1 – Easy" of the Brain School Plastic Puzzle game is hard! Read the forums and you'll agree that if anyone was around while you struggled, you might find yourself trying to persuade them it was "Talk like a Sailor Day." But, the game can be won.



© 2008 Mastersoft

Figure 5 –Level 1 of Plastic Puzzle, one of games unique to Brain School.

In the spirit of full disclosure: After an undisclosed number of tries on the first of two Plastic Puzzle games in Level 1, including trying to make the wrong shape and considering a call to Support because my game was missing a piece; I called in a consultant. After all, I'm writing on a deadline.

What is appealing about the Brain School is that it is fun to return to a challenge, even after you've mastered it.

To his enduring delight, my elder son Erik, the one to whom I used to hand those cracker puzzles, mastered the challenge in four minutes. His time includes the few seconds it took to become familiar with the UI, which is well designed. Then Mr. Show-Off did the second puzzle in Level 1 in about five minutes. In the spirit of journalistic integrity, after he left, I did complete them both on my own rather quickly. Well, fairly quickly.

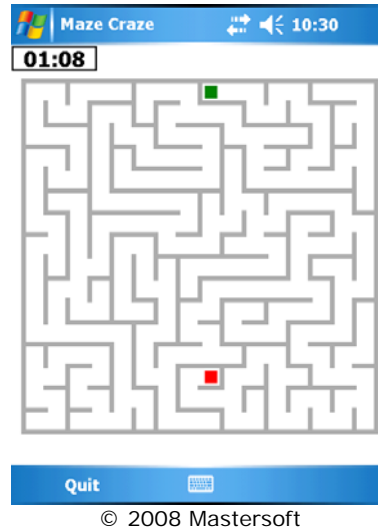


Figure 6 –MazeCraze is harder than it looks in Brain School.

What is appealing about the Brain School is that it is fun to return to a challenge, even after you've mastered it.

Features

Besides those features that carry on the school metaphor, Brain School also has program features that deliver a fine gaming experience:

- **Automatic pause** – If your mobile phone rings, the game pauses automatically until you return. (No demerits for talking in class.)
- **High marks for user interface** – Crisp instructions, engaging graphics, intuitive menus, and a good array of progress tracking screens make the game enjoyable to use again and again.
- **Multiple players** – You can enter up to 10 profiles, each able to track their own scores and progress. Good for families, good for friends.
- **Touch or non-touch screens** – Available in touch or non-touch screen version
- **Responsive support** – Besides the community forum, e-mails to Support are answered promptly and thoroughly.

What this school doesn't have is bake sales, homework, school uniforms, school lunches, or bullies who are after your lunch money.

Learning from the community

Perhaps one reason for Mastersoft games' success is the involvement of a very loyal community that contributes feedback and that leads to improved usability.



Figure 7 – Kakuro, the second most popular game after Sudoku.

In fact, the Mastersoft mission statement, *"innovative software designed by you developed by us"* reflects community participation in choice of games and game play.

The buzz about brain training

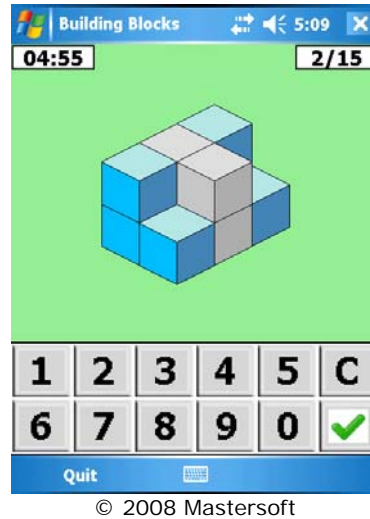
What started as research by cognitive scientists and educational psychologists in Japan, bloomed into the brain or mental training game phenomena in Japan, and spread worldwide.

According to a report (*The US Market for Handheld and Mobile Game-based Learning Products: 2007-2012 Forecast and Analysis*) by Sam S. Adkins, Ambient Insight's chief research officer, "The brain trainer games are intended to improve cognitive functions such as learning and memory. The intent of the designers is to provide a user with a gaming experience that produces a change in behavior (learning) that can be recalled or repeated later (memory)."

In the U.S., the new field called "educational neuroscience" is generating a lot of heat and light. Adkins also reports, "A study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* showed that people who engaged in mental exercises, such as challenging, interactive games, at least four times a week reduced the probabilities of Alzheimer's and dementia by as much as 65-75% compared to those who did not play at all or only played once a week. "

The intent of the designers is to provide a user with a gaming experience that produces a change in behavior (learning) that can be recalled or repeated later (memory).

Although some scientists debunk the “Mozart Effect” on developing spatial reasoning in babies, there are studies that seem to support the positive effects of mental training. For example, one study found an overlap between the brain’s representations of numerical magnitude and physical size, and that both types of assessment share the same brain circuitry.



*Figure 8 – The **Building Blocks** of a healthier brain.*

So , it is conceivable that practicing mobile brain games such as the “Simple Sums,” which require a fast response to addition, multiplication, division, and subtraction, or “Heavier, Heaviest,” which calls for quick judgement comparing weight of shapes on a balancing scale, might exercise this fundamental neural network for brains of all ages.

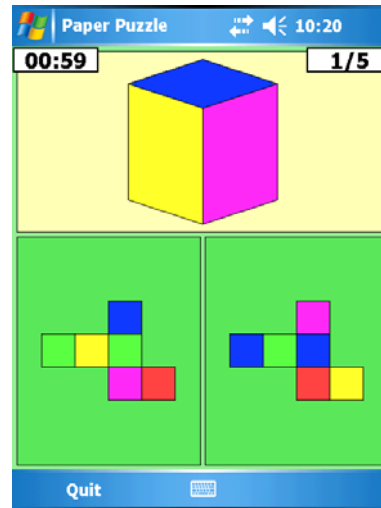
Benefits of brain training?

Am I smarter after going to Brain School? Too soon to know, but I did notice right away that the way to raise my score was to amp up my focus. That in itself is a valuable observation. Keeping your eye focused on the one top hat that has the coin under it as several top hats whirl around the screen certainly challenges your ability to tune out distractions.

Dominic Masters likened the experience of playing Brain School games to having “a mild cup of coffee” and I would agree. A few minutes of playing prompts intense focusing and feels unexpectedly rejuvenating or refreshing. Like getting up from your desk and taking your brain for a short brisk walk. It gets easier to re-trigger this “focus state”—like getting in the zone for an athlete—on cue.

One thing that seems obvious is the benefits of this game play to improving eye-hand coordination, especially in time-based games. The challenge of Simple Sums is not only to pay strict attention to whether the math symbol calls for dividing or multiplying two numbers, but

also to tap the correct numbers of the on-screen keypad and the checkmark to turn in your answer—and do it faster than last time.



© 2008 Mastersoft

Figure 9 – Paper Puzzle tones up spatial skills.

So, Brain School might be a good warm up exercise before you sit down to avoid snakes, get goods, slay dragons, or rid your world of creepy invaders on your mobile device.

So, Brain School might be a good warm up exercise before you sit down to avoid snakes, get goods, slay dragons, or rid your world of creepy invaders on your mobile device.

Getting into Brain School

I had a little difficulty moving from the Trial version to the full version. The problem turned out to be a memory shortage on my device; Brain School needs about 15 Mb of free storage to operate those 20 games. After a little housecleaning of my device and shifting some Microsoft Office PowerPoint presentations to my storage card, I had room to run it.

Because the product does not include an autorun program for registration, you have to do it manually: Open the program, tap **Menu**, select **Help**, select **Register**, and then follow the prompts to enter your registration code. You will receive your unlock code in email. Although these directions are on page 8 of the 50-page Help file, I don't think I've ever read a Help file before jumping in, and especially if a game is the goal. But, I did earn another "A+" for problem solving.

Note: A shorter version of this article was originally published in May 2008 on the Microsoft Windows Mobile Web site at:

<http://www.microsoft.com/windowsmobile/articles/brainschool.msp>

All images courtesy of Mastersoft Mobile Solutions:

<http://www.mastersoftmobilesolutions.com/index.php>



“We Put Research into Practice”
www.ambientinsight.com

***To learn more about our research services, email:
info@ambientinsight.com***

Ambient Insight Copyright Policy: All rights reserved. All media and research data published by Ambient Insight are protected by copyright. Unauthorized use of Ambient Insight research without prior permission is prohibited. Ambient Insight research products provide valuable financial data only to the individual purchaser or the purchasing organization. Purchasers may not modify or repurpose the information and financial data in our research in any manner. Specific distribution rights are provided based on the license model granted at time of purchase.

Quoting Ambient Insight Research: Permission is required to use quotes, tables, diagrams, or charts from Ambient Insight research in press releases, promotional material, external presentations, or commercial publications. Permission from Ambient Insight is required to reproduce or distribute in entirety any table, paragraph, section, or report.