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From the Baltimore Sun

Brain Games will give adults all the challenge they can handle

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When our boys were young, I would yield to temptation from time to time and buy them hand-held electronic games - tiny versions of blackjack, frogger, poker, pinball or some other pleasant time-waster. They were fun, easy to use and didn't require a major investment.



So I had a feeling of pleasant déjà vu when I unwrapped Radica's Brain Games, a little gadget with a monochrome LCD screen that looked a lot like the beeping boxes the kids enjoyed.

But this was different in one key respect. Although the packaging reads "Ages 8 and up," the game is aimed squarely at adults, and by adults, I mean the boomer generation and its elders.

Most of the Brain Games in this little machine were seriously challenging - or maybe I'm just getting old. Which is the whole point of a movement by the electronic game industry to capitalize on research showing that staying mentally agile can help ward off some of the ravages of age, including dementia.

For game makers, it's a market that's too tempting to ignore, considering that by 2030 almost a third of the U.S. population will be 65 or older.

And a sizable number of those folks are at least comfortable with technology, if not exactly tech-savvy.

Certainly there's little doubt that exercise - mental as well as physical - can ease the aging process.

A 2003 study published in the New England Journal of Medicine indicated that seniors who worked crossword puzzles, played games or musical instruments, or engaged in serious reading were less likely to develop

dementia than their mentally sedentary counterparts.

A more elaborate study of 2,000 seniors published in the Dec. 20 issue of Journal of the American Medical Association showed that even a relatively short course of focused mental training sessions could improve overall functioning and make it easier for older people to perform everyday tasks.

Computers are great at this kind of thing, and the result has been a flow of products that start at less than 20 bucks and range upward of, well, a lot of money.

At the high end of the mental-exercise-for-oldies spectrum are stand-alone computers such as the \$6,000 [m]Power system by Dakim Inc. of Santa Clara., Calif. (www.dakim.com).

Marketed mainly to retirement communities, nursing homes, senior centers and other institutions, it provides users with a variety of exercises to improve memory, critical thinking and other practical skills using a variety of multimedia tools, including clips from well-known movies.

Okay, that's a bit pricey for folks who want to exercise their brains at home. For a much smaller investment you can pick up a copy of the Brain Fitness Program for Individuals (\$395 and up) from Posit Science (www.positscience.com), or the \$139 MindFit Personal Edition brain workout program from SharpBrains (www.sharpbrains.com). Both run on standard PCs.

If you or someone in the house already own a Nintendo DS hand-held game machine (about \$200), you can trade a \$20 bill for the company's highly regarded Brain Age fitness title, based on the work of Japanese neuroscientist Ryuta Kawashima. Brain fitness gadgets, books and software have turned into something of a mania in Japan, where life expectancies are among the world's highest.

To investigate the mental-exercise movement without paying the equivalent of a gym membership, consider spending that \$20 on Radica's self-contained Brain Games.

This rounded white box, with a low-tech, monochrome liquid crystal display, runs on a couple of AAA batteries and offers five exercises designed by Dr. Gary Small, a professor of psychiatry and director of the UCLA Center on Aging (www.drgarysmall.com).

Small, the author of three books on memory and longevity, promotes a three-step memory improvement system called "Look, Snap, Connect."

As the name suggests, you focus first on the new information you want to remember, then create a mental snapshot of it with some meaningful personal detail, and finally, connect it to someone or something you know.

Mnemonic devices like this have been around forever, and many of them can help if you practice and apply them. That's where the Brain Games gadget comes in - it provides a daily workout and records your progress.

Controlled by a keypad with 20 buttons, it provides five exercises that are easy to learn but often difficult to master:

- Sequence displays four or more numbers on a grid for a couple of seconds. You have to remember the order of the numbers and repeat it using the keypad. I found this one difficult from the start.

- Flashcard is a basic exercise in addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. Although I usually think of myself as a "word" person, I'm pretty good doing arithmetic in my head, so I aced this one - at least in the first couple of levels.
- Mind Game uses a cartoon image of an absent-minded professor to test your ability to keep track of a running total of numbers as "thoughts" enter and leave the prof's head. This is the basic device that card counters use in blackjack to determine when the deck is "hot."
- Word Hunt displays a common word - your challenge is to make a set number of words from the same letters. Although I write for a living, this puzzle turned out to be harder than I thought - particularly when it came to teasing out the last word or two.
- Recall is a devious little game that asks you to memorize a list of words and then recall as many as you can - but only after you've played a few unrelated games. This one can be really tough, but that's the whole point.

Brain Games keeps track of your total score and can display a history of the games you've played to help track your progress.

All of this works pretty well. In fact, my main gripe is the keypad. The keys are small, which could make the game console difficult for older people with arthritis of the hands.

But the main challenge here is mental - these games do give the brain a workout, and for a relatively small investment. Only time will tell if they'll really help your mind stay young.

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For more information visit www.radicagames.com

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