Computer games have long been derided by critics as mindless, brain-rotting fun but a new type of game is turning this perception on its head.

According to the BBC news service, Nintendo have produced a series of games to help exercise the brain whilst a person still has fun. The company have sold nearly five million copies of its DS brain training games since the series inception in Japan a year ago.

The first title in the series, Dr Kawashima's Brain Training: How Old Is Your Brain? sees players follow a daily regime of brain-enhancing exercises and is due to be released in the UK in June. The ‘training’ comprises a variety of mini-games designed to give brains a workout.

Activities include solving simple maths problems, drawing pictures on the Nintendo DS touchscreen, counting people going in and out of a house, and reading classic literature aloud into the device’s microphone.

Players are given a brain age reflecting their performance. Over time, your brain age should get younger as you achieve better scores. It obviously doesn’t take into account alcohol and drug abuse, watching too much daytime TV, or genetic disposition toward senility!

The games' success is down to more than just a neat game play gimmick. Unlike Nintendo’s fictional creations, such as Donkey Kong or Mario, Dr Kawashima is actually a leading Japanese brain expert and works at Tohuku University's New Industry Creation Hatchery Centre. He is one of the country's top researchers into brain imaging and is also a best-selling author.

Nintendo’s President Satoru Iwata personally shepherded the idea of a brain-enhancing game through production after hearing a member of Nintendo's board of directors saying that he knew nobody his own age who played games. Nintendo is explicitly targeting an older usually non game playing audience with the title.

Dr Kawashima's Brain Training will be the first video game ever to be advertised and featured in Saga magazine, for instance.

‘As these new types of games gain in popularity, we must find new and different ways to bring them to new audiences, many of whom will have never played a traditional videogame before,’ explained a Nintendo spokesperson.

Mobile a go go…
Nintendo isn't the only company developing brain training games. Mobile phone developer Upstart Games is creating IQ Academy, a reworking of the Japanese mobile title Right Brain Paradise, which has been a big hit in Asia.

IQ Academy gauges a person’s performance via various tasks of recognition, logical prediction and spatial resolution. It then rates the player and mixes up the puzzles offered next time, promoting further improvement.

Whereas Nintendo's games use the DS's stylus and touchscreen, IQ Academy employs a simple multiple choice system.

'The nice thing about IQ Academy is that it doesn't require any specialist hardware to work,' said Barry O'Neill, CEO of Upstart Games. 'Almost anyone with a mobile phone will be able to download and play it.'

'Not everyone wants to play first-person action titles or role-playing games,' he continued. 'Games that can challenge you from a mental perspective without falling into a gamer genre cliché are proving very popular.'

Upstart Games plans further IQ Academy games, including a 3D version that presents the player with spatial awareness challenges.

**PSP punching its intellectual weight**

In Japan publishers are challenging Nintendo with their own intelligence-focussed games.
Sega is working with Kenichiro Mogi, a senior researcher at Sony Computer Science Research Lab, on a thinking-based game for Sony's PSP handheld.

Additionally, Bandai Namco is looking to integrate the action-orientated gameplay of its Point Blank arcade titles into a new brain game.

Here in the UK, Nintendo will follow up Dr Kawashima's Brain Training with Big Brain Academy later this year. BBA estimates the weight of your brain from your performance in a series of tests and compares your brain to great brains from history, which could be either reassuring or rather depressing!

And finally, last year's brain-teasing craze, Sudoku, is also getting a digital makeover. Carol Vorderman's Sudoku, released late last year on the PC, will arrive in a PSP version this June.

**May 06**