BANANAGRAMMER

A blog for fans of Bananagrams, word games, puzzles, and amazing things

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Review of the Bananagrams iPhone app

The Bananagrams application for iPhone and iPod touch is now available [link to iTunes Store] for $4.99. [Update (03/2010): It is on sale for 99 cents.] It is pretty much an exact port of the Bananagrams game on Facebook and seems to differ only in the interface.

When playing offline, you can play the two one-player games: Solo Cafe (which is timed and involves forming a grid from 21 tiles, with no peeling (though dumping is an option)) and Solitaire (also timed, but requires peeling to finish the 36 or 72 tile bunch).

You can move around to different parts of the board by putting two fingers on the screen and dragging the board. You can also zoom into or away from the board by using the standard iPhone pinching motion.

If you put your finger right on top of a tile to select it, it should pop up a little bit above your finger tip so you can see what letter you are holding. (It leaves behind a white square outline to indicate the actual tile position). You then drag the tile (in pretty much exactly the same way that you use a mouse to drag a tile in the online version of the Bananagrams game) and then remove your finger off the screen to drop the tile where your finger was last touching.

One improvement over the Flash version of Bananagrams is that the iPhone version takes advantage of multi-touch technology by allowing you to select multiple individual tiles at the same time. Put one finger on one tile, a second on another tile, and a third on yet another tile, and you can move them all around independently. I confess that I have not been able to work this into my game yet, but this feature has serious potential.

It also has the ability to select a group of tiles at the same time, which works pretty much like selecting a bunch of file icons in a typical computer operating system graphical interface: 1) Click on the screen somewhere (by pressing your finger). 2) Drag somewhere else to form a rectangle, bounded by the first and last points. 3) Everything inside has been selected and can be (for instance) dragged simultaneously.

I think that there is a bug in the current implementation though, since there is no visual indication that the rectangular selection is taking place; you just have to imagine it. Once you have completed the selection, the selected tiles light up (slightly). Also, the option to rotate the selected tiles (which I described here for the Facebook version) is currently unavailable.

The game works in both landscape and portrait orientations, though I find that I have to start off in the portrait orientation (so there are the initially overturned tiles on the top and my grid on the bottom). After the grid has formed and the peeling has begun, it sometimes feels more natural to rotate the device and switch to the landscape orientation (depending on the shape of the grid).

As with the online version, if you accumulate enough points you can acquire different tile sets and backgrounds (as shown in the example above).

[At this point, I decided to consider the game for a while longer, ultimately returning six months later to finish this review.]

It would be nice if you could keep playing music while playing Bananagrams. I think that if a song is playing when Bananagrams is launched, you should have the option to suppress sound effects and listen to what you want.

When playing offline, the program does not retain your best time. When playing solitaire Bananagrams (which is a pretty good simulation of an actual Bananagrams game if you play the 36-tile version), I like to time myself and try to beat my own best time. Offline statistics-keeping would be a nice feature.

The online functionality works a bit fitfully over a slow Internet connection. The game needs to transfer things like icons (for player avatars) and background images for the board. It can take a while to transmit game results (which is surprising since very little data needs to be sent). Sometimes a dialog box would pop up saying that the game had lost the network connection, and other times I would play all the way through, and then at the end, the game would fail to report the results to the central server. If you have a decent Internet connection, this should not be a problem.

Other bugs: I got into this situation where I could not scroll the board any further to the right, and my letters were right up against this edge. A workaround is to grab all the tiles and move them away from the edge of the board. Also, though I clicked on the "Remember Me" option for logging into my account, the program has forgotten my login information at least once so far. (It is the e-mail address that you need to log in with, not the name that you register under.)

I'm not so crazy about the size of the iPhone screen. You can resize the game so either you can see the whole board simultaneously but the tiles are small (and sometimes hard to select) or so the tiles are big enough to easily select (like, you can see them pop up from around your fingertip) but then you have

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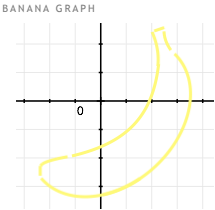Results of the First World Palindrome Championship - Invalid Date

to pan around to see different parts of the game. The iPad, on the other hand, will probably be the ideal platform for this game once Large Animal Games releases an iPad-optimized version (not that I know that this is under development).

The final verdict: I am probably not in the target market for this game. I love Bananagrams, but I don't play iPhone games very much. Still, I sometimes fire up the app and play a few rounds of the 36-tile version of "Bananagrams Solitaire". It's OK for that. Who this game is really for is Facebook Bananagrams addicts and people with fast Internet connections. If you fit into these two categories, the bugs described above will probably fade from memory as you get caught up in the online Bananagrams slugfests which is where the action really is.

In closing, "Carpe aríenam!" [Seize the banana!].

POSTED BY SURLY TEABAG ✉   **COMMENTS**

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SURLY TEABAG

Efficiency freak: Refers to himself in the third person. Often drops the subject of the sentence. Only reads the first half of palindromes.

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