

# The New Zealand Herald

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Andrew Baker's IQube, which started life as a student assignment, teaches children spatial reasoning skills. Picture / Paul Estcourt

## Forgotten game a hot item

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By Georgina Bond

A student project that gathered dust in an old shoebox for 10 years has become a potential goldmine for its creator.

And with distributors fighting over the rights to sell the IQube overseas, Andrew Baker can't believe he neglected the 3D puzzle for so long.

It started as an assignment when he was at teachers' college 11 years ago. Faced with creating a game to teach mathematical concepts to children, he devised 13 pentominos, or five-piece blocks (the game calls these Qbits), which must be assembled to form a perfect cube, with each of the six coloured dots facing in the same direction.

IQube was designed to develop spatial reasoning skills - the ability to mentally manipulate something in your head - which are needed to create or build things or to read a map.

Although it crossed his mind that IQube would make a good educational game, Baker packed it away in a shoebox and shelved it in a cupboard.

He never made it into the classroom either. After stints as a tennis coach and ski instructor in Europe and the US, he headed into the pharmaceutical industry, where he is general manager of a multinational company in Auckland.

When Baker dusted off the blocks for his young daughters to play with last year, he realised he might have underrated the concept.

He started an after-hours project to refine the puzzle and to come up with four multiplayer board games for the pieces.

"I didn't want it to be like the Rubik's Cube - once you do it you put it away. I thought additional games would help to extend its life."

Commercialising the idea has been done on a shoestring, with the internet making the bulk of it affordable.

Baker put out a general bid over the Made in China.com website to find a manufacturer for the wooden pieces. After sorting through some terrible samples, he hit upon a supplier who made a quality product at a viable price.

Shocked at the prices from local graphic designers, Baker turned to the web again for a logo design, offering US\$125 on an American website for the best IQube logo.

From among the top three entrants, he also found someone to design the box for US\$250 and they also went on to develop the website.

Paying for a display booth at the Melbourne Toy, Hobby and Nursery Fair in April was the first serious money Baker spent on the business.

The investment paid off more than his family could have hoped for, catapulting them into business.

Wife Briggita had agreed to go to Melbourne on the basis that she would get time to shop, but the pair found themselves flat out for five days, selling and negotiating rights among eight distributors competing for the game, among them the US inventor of Pictionary.

"In our wildest dreams, we wouldn't have anticipated the response," said Baker.

Now they cannot believe the naivety with which they approached the fair, booking the smallest booth and building a makeshift stand from plumbing supplies and a backdrop sewn by Baker's mother.

But that did not seem to deter interest in the product, which gave them confidence to place a production order for 7500 units on their return.

Locally, IQube has been taken up by wooden toy and games distribution specialist Brightway Products and has been on the shelves at Educational Experience stores for five weeks, retailing for \$39.95. It will be in Whitcoulls' stores by Christmas.

The company has one Australian distributor. Others for Canada, the US and Japan are still being lined up.

More than 200 IQubes have been sold through the website in the past two weeks.

The pair plan to go after business in the big boardgame markets of Europe, North America, Scandinavia, Israel and Asia, from where most of the internet orders have come from so far.

Baker now works in two business worlds - a large multinational by day and a fledgling home-based business by night.

Briggita, who left work as a recruitment manager to have their two children, manages the accounts, web sales and marketing from home.

Although it has caused them a few sleepless nights, particularly after parting with hundreds of thousands of dollars for the first production run, they say it is now worth it as the stock is

moving quickly and the re-orders are coming in.

Protecting their intellectual property has been another hefty cost. The concept is patented here and they have international patent PCTs, which hold their right to file for patents in their 10 target countries before anyone else for 18 months.

This will give them time to find the \$8000 needed to protect IQube in each of those markets.

Winning a Harvard-based Parents Choice Award for the IQube in June is also helping to open doors globally.

Baker's creativity is undimmed by all the work. On a plane to Sydney a few weeks ago, an idea for a new game popped into his head. He spent the rest of the flight scribbling the details on a sick bag.

He plans to commercialise this, spurred on by the success of IQube.

"If I hadn't given it a go, I wouldn't have liked to have lived wondering, what if?"