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App academy: the student developers building the Windows Phone ecosystem

By [Tom Warren](#) on March 29, 2012 01:28 pm 119Comments



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Microsoft might seem focused on its "[smoked by Windows Phone](#)" campaign or its [big upcoming Nokia Lumia 900 launch](#), but scrape beneath this glossy surface and you'll discover some interesting work carried on without the typical pizzazz of the marketing world. Ben Lower, a senior product manager for Windows Phone, is behind a number of efforts that focus on student developers and involve a significant amount of investment from the company. Competitions like [XAPFest](#), [Imagine Cup](#), and [Big App on Campus](#) have all raised awareness of Windows Phone amongst students, but do these efforts lead to reward for Microsoft? With games developers displaying a [lack of interest](#) in Windows Phone, will Microsoft's students bring new hope to its mobile platform?

Section TOC Title





Microsoft re-entered the mobile world with Windows Phone 7 in late 2010 after scrapping its stylus-burdened Windows Mobile operating system. Although critics argue the company doesn't have enough [quality applications](#) yet, many have been quick to praise Microsoft's design and user interface efforts. Microsoft can't solve its app situation overnight, but its focus on bringing the top apps to Windows Phone and student activities suggest that it's in the race for the long term. Lower said that, following an emphasis on student developers with the release of Microsoft's latest 7.5 Mango update, "we've seen an 8-times increase in the number of student apps published each month." Prior to the release of Mango, students created an average of 450 apps a month, and this figure has now risen to over 3,500 per month.

Microsoft's app situation can't be fixed overnight

Lower believes students are taking advantage of a young platform and creating unique apps thanks to free developer tools, an ever expanding Marketplace, and the chance of app promotion. [Jake Poznanski](#), 22, interned with Microsoft during the summer before the release of Windows Phone handsets, and teamed up with 22-year old roommate Sam Kaufmann to create several Windows Phone games. "Initially my friends were like, 'oh dude you're making 25 cents a day on these apps, you're wasting your time' and I'm like it's fine I'll keep doing it," said Poznanski. The persistence resulted in the pair creating a [Solitaire game](#) that was a "huge success" and has over 6,000 ratings on the Windows Phone Marketplace. "We knew then that we had a very good thing going, and we decided to just keep creating apps," added Poznanski. Several games have also been [ported over](#) to Android, but Kaufmann says they haven't been as well received on Google's platform after the early success on Windows Phone, which could be attributed to the broader range of offerings in Google's Android Market. Still, the pair's success does show that there are gaps in the smaller Windows Phone Marketplace waiting to be filled.

"Every time we make a new game we make it on Windows Phone first," says Kaufmann. "We consider ourselves primarily a Windows Phone game studio." The faith in Microsoft's platform is surprising, but Kaufmann believes it's easier to develop Windows Phone games thanks to the developer tools. Discussing the [Android SDK](#) and emulators vs. [Windows Phone equivalents](#), Kaufmann says the two "just do not compare," and that Microsoft's tools are better performing and easier to use. Poznanski believes that iOS and Android APIs are a lot more fleshed out than Windows Phone, but that the core functionality is "quite a bit cleaner on Windows Phone."

The pair agreed there are still things missing from Windows Phone like easy Facebook / Twitter integration and an in-app purchasing platform. These missing features have held back some rival developers, and even meant that big apps like Skype have had to wait until the Windows Phone 7.5 release to take advantage of essential APIs. The insistence on being a Windows Phone game studio is a big risk, but it's one that they took together. After the pair graduated, Kaufmann went on to work at Amazon, and Poznanski joined Space Exploration Technologies. Their Windows Phone games became so popular that they started up [Random Salad Games LLC](#) and quit their day jobs after just six months of employment, thanks to the advertising revenue from the free games.

They aren't alone in their success, either.

[Quinn Damerell](#), a 21-year old student at Purdue University, worked on several Android applications before venturing into Windows Phone, with [one particular app](#) racking up over 120,000 downloads. Citing annoyances with Android, including having to code hacks for extra UI elements like Samsung's TouchWiz, Damerell found success with [Baconit](#) — an unofficial Reddit app for Windows Phone. "Android is nice and powerful but I honestly think of it as Linux in a sense," says Damerell. "It's nice to use but it often has its weird little tweaks." He considered iOS or Windows Phone initially, but eventually took advantage of Microsoft's [DreamSpark program](#) that offers students free developer tools and a Windows Phone Marketplace registration (worth \$99). Damerell looked around at other Reddit apps and thought he could do better. He started off with a design concept and his Baconit app has snowballed in popularity since its release in December, racking up nearly 30,000 downloads in the Marketplace.

"Android is nice and powerful but I honestly think of it as Linux in a sense."

"One of the best things about Windows Phone is the live tiles," says Damerell, and Baconit can pin animated tiles to the Home Screen. "I see Windows 8 and I'm so jealous of all those pretty live tiles and animations and stuff, I'm really hoping in forward versions [of Windows Phone] maybe you'll get some live tile control," he says. Although Baconit has surged in popularity, the application is free and isn't ad-supported. "I hate ads, they're ugly," says Damerell. The success has led him to accept a full-time position at Microsoft that begins after his studies finish this summer. "I've always wanted to work at a bigger company since I was in high school," he says. "I hoped I would work at Google or Microsoft." He interviewed at Google and Microsoft last summer and "ended up having to choose between the two" before opting to work in the mobile browser team at Microsoft.



"I think they're missing a big opportunity by making it so that you can only develop Windows apps on Windows."

Of course, not all developers are wooed by Windows Phone. We spoke to 21 year old student Jeremy Olson, who won [Apple's student design award](#) last year. A self taught iOS developer, he created the popular Grades iOS application, which has been featured in Apple's App Store a number of times. The success helped him launch [Tapiy](#) and continue creating mobile applications. He says he is concerned by Microsoft's approach to students. Olson discovered last year's [student "App-a-thon" contest](#) where the first 1,000 students who created a Windows Phone app won a free game, and the one who published the most apps won a Windows Phone. "I was just a little bit bothered by that," he says. "I think they say that they're trying to go for quality instead of quantity, but the way the contest works it seems like it would indicate otherwise."

Although Olson says Windows Phone "looks really nice," he has no plans to develop apps on the platform just yet. "The main problem is the number of people who have phones," says Olson. "I haven't seen too many of them in the wild." The lack of devices in consumers' hands makes it difficult for developers like Olson to invest time and money into the Windows Phone platform, because they typically have to sell thousands of low-cost apps to turn a profit. "I'd like to see some success stories come out of the Marketplace, and I'm not sure I've seen that yet," he says. "Microsoft just needs to prove their platform is better."

During our discussions on his iOS development, Olson raises an interesting point about attracting developers to the Windows Phone platform. "I think they're missing a big opportunity by making it so that you can only develop Windows apps on Windows." Microsoft's Windows Phone tools are not available to Mac developers and Olson feels that's a mistake. "A lot of the people who are doing great stuff just like Mac better, I think they have to accept that fact," he says. "They're not going to switch to Windows just to make Windows apps." He argues Microsoft needs to make tools available for OS X, but concedes that Windows 8's allowance of HTML5 and Javascript is an "interesting approach." It's too early to say whether developers like Olson would make the jump to Windows Phone with its tiny marketshare, but the investment and time is clearly significant for both small student teams and large businesses.

What else is Microsoft doing to attract student developers? It's not just offering promotion and free developer tools to students — for some there's a financial reward. Students Den Delimarsky and Wilson To received an award at the finals of Microsoft's Imagine Cup 2011 competition for their technology prototype designed to diagnose malaria using a Windows Phone app. Microsoft provided them with one of the first \$75,000 [Imagine Cup grants](#) to assist with the

development of their platform. 21-year old Delimarsky revealed to us that he has prior experience with Android development, but praised Windows Phone's streamlined developer tools compared to the "steeper learning curve" of the Android SDK. Although the pair were reluctant to go into detail on the future of their Windows Phone apps, they did reveal they plan to use the money to build a mobile healthcare platform for Windows Phone.

Money, money, money

"Ultimately our goal is to be pushing Windows Phone as our product as a means to create a healthcare platform, rather than a one solution per application approach," says 26-year-old To. The current [Lifelens project](#) uses a tiny lens from a CD player to allow Windows Phone to diagnose malaria from a drop of blood, which lets the team map confirmed cases and transmit data to public health workers. The funds will also assist them in developing a snap-on case with the micro-lens and start field testing newly developed healthcare applications, exclusive to Windows Phone. Microsoft says it will continue to fund students with its Imagine Cup grants for the upcoming 2012 competition.

The funds make developing for Windows Phone an attractive opportunity for typically cash-strapped students, but iOS developer Jeremy Olson says Microsoft's courting of developers "seems a little desperate." He explained, "I know of developers who have been approached" with financial opportunities. While it may seem desperate, Microsoft is clearly playing catch up and has [been targeting the top applications](#) on rival platforms to bridge the app gap. Unless it convinces end users and developers to buy into Windows Phone, it's going to have to keep using its vast cash resources to attract talent.





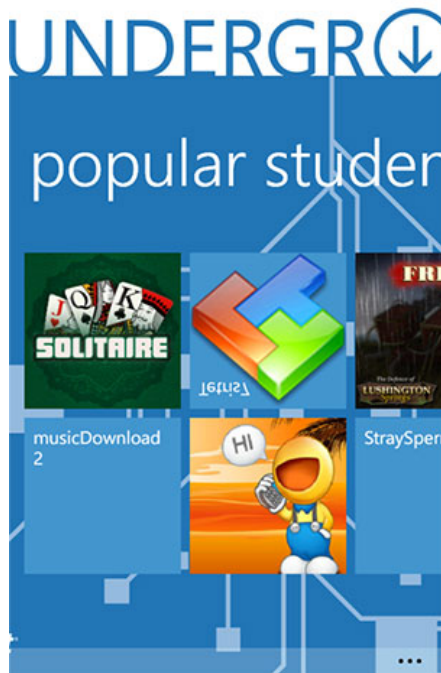
If it's just a fairytale, then it's back to Android or iOS

What does Microsoft get out of these student success stories? Well, apart from promoting them as such, the adage that every little bit helps rings true here. Microsoft has been [notoriously aggressive](#) about hiring talent and preventing existing employees from joining rivals like Google. Getting students' attention early in their careers helps promote Microsoft as a whole, but also lets the company build relationships to grab the best talent from universities across the US. Elliot Soloway, a professor at the University of Michigan teaching app development for iOS, Android, and Windows Phone, said that students there regularly end up working at Microsoft in various roles. "Microsoft has traditionally skimmed off 20 percent of my students," said Soloway in a phone interview with us, resulting in 10 out of 50 students each semester going off to work at Microsoft, despite an internal [Google vs. Microsoft debate](#) at the University in late 2010.

Microsoft also gets some word-of-mouth marketing from universities, where students discussing the latest "cool" gadgets and tech will often turn to friends for advice. Right now they, like many others, primarily use Android and iOS devices — a difficult hurdle for Microsoft to overcome.

Ultimately the student focus helps Microsoft broaden its app list, which currently stands at over 70,000 with around 300 apps and games added each day by over 100,000 registered developers. Whether or not that's resulting in a large influx of quality applications remains to be seen. Awareness and advertising is key for any platform, and Microsoft's [recent promotion](#) (alongside its [device partners](#)) of Windows Phone looks like it's paying off in Europe, where Nokia's Lumia devices have helped push [Windows Phone market share above Symbian](#), according to one market research firm. The company now plans to promote its student work with a new [Underground Windows Phone app](#), highlighting the top student created apps in partnership with Luigi Violin of [WP7AppList](#).

Microsoft clearly hopes that its launch of the Nokia Lumia 900 in the US [during April](#) will be the true test of its work across Windows Phone. With [Windows Phone 8](#) on the horizon, and a push into more [emerging markets](#), there is opportunity for developers to take a risk on Microsoft's ecosystem. Some students have demonstrated this with success stories, but it's certainly not enough to help Windows Phone's mild market share receive a significant boost just yet. Microsoft is betting on the big games and app publishers picking Windows Phone in 2012, something that will only help with the exposure of student indie developers. If the dream comes true then the students who have ditched full-time employment, joined Microsoft, or bet big on its ecosystem for their own startups will reap the rewards of such a risky choice. If it's just a fairytale, then it's back to Android or iOS — an unacceptable reality for Microsoft and its army of students in the mobile market battle.



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