

I'm hooked on Su Doku

No this isn't a confession about some oriental misdemeanor...nor is it a polite way of swearing ...neither is it a commentary on the latest scam off the internet.

Having enjoyed the luxury of a month in the UK earlier this year, I treated myself to a daily copy of The Times. At only 50p per day it's a lot easier to justify than the SR35 we're asked to pay in the shops here. Tucked away at the back of T2 alongside the daily crossword is a new number puzzle (it doesn't involve any arithmetic so put your calculators away).

Easily stated, the object is to fill the grid with the numbers 1-9 so that only one of each appears in every horizontal and vertical row on the grid, as well as every 3 x 3 square.

Puzzles range from quick & easy to downright fiendish. The compiler reckons that you should be able to handle any of them from 10 to 30 minutes but don't bother timing yourself until you get to the really familiar stage. Even without access to The Thunderers pages you can get the latest puzzle on line at www.timesonline.co.uk. Just type in the words Su Doku in the search box and you'll be offered the puzzles and their solutions from the previous few days.

Su Doku began its gentle attack on the nation last year, and versions can now be found in four national newspapers. Addicts are as obsessed as 1980s teenagers fixated on the Rubik's cube. Su Doku experts say that it can be played using logic alone, so maths phobics read on.

To be pure Su Doku each of the unique puzzles - which come in varying levels of difficulty - must have only one solution.

This simple game has spawned a complex industry and according to the man who brought Su Doku to the UK via the Times newspaper, plans are afoot to add the game to mobile phones, and a board game and television show could soon leap on the bandwagon.

Wayne Gould, a retired judge from New Zealand who helped create the worldwide phenomenon, came upon Su Doku in 1997 when he was about to leave his post in Hong Kong. He took a week's leave in Tokyo and happened upon a collection of Su Doku puzzles in a bookstore.

"I don't speak Japanese, but it was possible to figure out the rules by looking in the back at the solutions," he said.

The internet is awash with chat about Su Doku and programmers are tapping away to find the best system for solving the puzzles. Here's a couple to kick you off. (Solutions at the back)

Su Doku No.1 - Easy

		3	1		2	7		
2	6			8			9	1
	8						4	
8			3	7	9			5
9			5	1	6			3
	5						8	
3	4			9			1	2
			6		1	9		

Su Doku No.2 - More difficult

6		2						4
	5					9	3	
	9		7	1				6
			2		3	4		
		8				6		
	4	7	8		6			
3				4	7			6
	8	4						1
7						3		9

Su Doku No.2 - Harder Still

				3	8			
	9	5	6				3	
				1				6
		2	4			1		5
6		4			2	9		
3				9				
	8				3	7	9	
				1	2			