



MINDSNACKS FINDS MOBILE SAAS SUCCESS ON THE RACKSPACE® CLOUD

Startup keeps their popular educational apps lean by using Cloud Servers™

MindSnacks, founded in May 2010, is a platform of language-learning games designed for touch-screen devices. Traditionally, much of language instruction has used old-school methods like flashcards and rote memorization. "We wanted to be the opposite of that," said Jesse Pickard, co-founder and CEO at MindSnacks.

In early 2011, MindSnacks launched iPhone apps for learning Spanish, French and Italian. In the future, MindSnacks plans to offer additional languages and subjects, including SAT prep. The company reports that in March 2011, their French-language app was the top educational app in the App Store.

In February 2011, the San Francisco-based company raised \$1.2 million in funding.¹ They currently have eight employees, and anticipate bringing on several more within the next six months.

SOLVING THE MOBILE APP PROBLEM

"Right now our needs are small, but they're growing," says Jesse Pickard, co-founder

and CEO of MindSnacks. "Our primary needs are for data storage, text, and audio." Because their app includes both text and audio of the vocabulary words, the app's initial download footprint was 50-60 megabytes.

In the iPhone® App Store, there's a 20 MB limit on what's allowed to be downloaded over the 3G network. Any apps bigger than 20 MB have to be downloaded later, over a wireless network—which means that potential customers could be lost.

To overcome this challenge, the team at MindSnacks focused on making their app as small as possible. "We offload a lot of the vocabulary onto a Rackspace server, so that it's accessed only as needed," says Pickard. "A lot of other games just blow past that 20 MB limit, but by staying under it, we get a lot more traction."

So far, MindSnacks needs just one Cloud Server—and they use it to store the app's vocabulary bank, as well as for development and for storing certain data for analytics using a python web application.

AT-A-GLANCE

CUSTOMER'S BUSINESS: A platform of educational games for touch-screen devices

CHALLENGES: Finding a reliable, flexible hosting solution that can grow with the company

RACKSPACE SOLUTION: Cloud Servers, used for test/dev, analytics, rich media, and data storage

BUSINESS OUTCOME: The company can quickly deploy their apps; their games are optimized for App Store success; they can stay focused on their core business.

RUNNING TEST/DEV IN THE CLOUD

Many customers choose to run testing and development in the cloud because of the flexibility it allows, the simplicity of utility pricing, and the cost savings they often find. For MindSnacks, those benefits are great, but the convenience is the best of all.

"We started off using VMware to make a local copy of the server," says Karl Stenerud, co-founder of MindSnacks, "and that works okay, but the convenience of just spinning

"...being able to have somebody else deal with all the backups, all the scalability, all the uptime issues—and all you have to do is just deploy your product? That's just amazing. It's beautiful."

Karl Stenerud, co-founder, MindSnacks

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"It's important to stay scrappy. One of the things that drew us toward Rackspace is being with a company that cares."

Jesse Pickard, co-founder and CEO, MindSnacks

up a new server in the cloud without all the setup hassles makes cloud-based development a more attractive option overall."

For Stenerud, the time saved by spinning up Cloud Servers for test/dev makes the cloud an easy choice. "Our primary concern in this regard is minimizing the time spent on things that are not our core business, and server maintenance is most definitely not our core business," he says.

FINDING THE RIGHT HOSTING SOLUTION

"For us, the biggest issue is we're just getting into the cloud," says Stenerud. "So we were looking for a service that was very accessible and very easy to get into at the startup level. We needed something that would give us the ability to grow when we needed to grow quickly."

"During the summer of 2010, we started looking at hosting solutions," continues Stenerud. "We explored both Rackspace and Amazon. We hit on Rackspace because a fellow entrepreneur was using Rackspace, and he recommended it."

MindSnacks signed up for the Rackspace Cloud, and have been very satisfied with the products and services they've used so far. "We have full control, full root access," explains Stenerud. "It's as if we had our server sitting down in our basement."

They've been pleased with the Rackspace Cloud's features, too. "The replication is very cool," says Stenerud. "We've been able to spin up really quickly."

As a startup, MindSnacks never really considered dedicated servers. "It would be technically possible, but I wouldn't recommend it for startups," says Stenerud. "I would definitely go with the opportunity to use the cloud—for us, the cloud is cheaper."

500 STARTUPS AND THE RACKSPACE STARTUP PROGRAM

MindSnacks has been an active participant in the community of tech incubators. They were in the 2010 class at Philadelphia incubator Dreamit Ventures, after which they moved to Silicon Valley to open an office in downtown San Francisco.

Once they landed on the west coast, they fell in with 500 Startups almost immediately. "We met Dave [McClure] right off the plane, pretty much," explains Pickard. "One of his portfolio companies thought we'd be a good fit." The rest is history: "We went to a café in San Francisco, and he fell in love with the product." Their relationship with Rackspace grew as they became a part of

500 Startups. "It's important to stay scrappy," says Pickard. "One of the things that drew us toward Rackspace is being with a company that cares."

The MindSnacks apps are currently available for iOS devices, with apps for Android coming soon.

As their company grows, so will their Rackspace footprint. "I definitely anticipate more horsepower needs as our user base and markets grow. We're in a major data-crunching phase, looking at the trends and behaviors at work, and the cloud is a good place to store and analyze all that data."

THE GREATEST ASSET IS CUSTOMER SUPPORT

Flexibility and value attracted MindSnacks to the Rackspace Cloud, but they claim Fanatical Support is what makes them satisfied customers. "The greatest asset is customer support," says Stenerud. "Any time we've had any issues, Rackspace has been very responsive for us."

Stenerud explains that hosting was not always this simple. "I've been in the tech industry about 13 years, and it was always the case where you had the dungeon in the basement, with this big iron, and a huge team that needed to maintain this thing."

"Dealing with servers is not really part of your core business," says Stenerud. "You don't want to deal with it, but you have to. So just being able to have somebody else deal with all the backups, all the scalability, all the uptime issues—and all you have to do is just deploy your product? That's just amazing. It's beautiful."

¹<http://techcrunch.com/2011/03/09/mindsnacks-raises-1-2-million-for-mobile-educational-games/>

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