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HOT TOPICS

Tech Leaders Community

Meet 'Crazy Jack'

In-depth profile of Jack Ma, Founder, Alibaba Group

Plus EdTech Special: An hour of code | Codecademy | Decoded | Edmodo | Knewton | Sherry Coutu | Voxy

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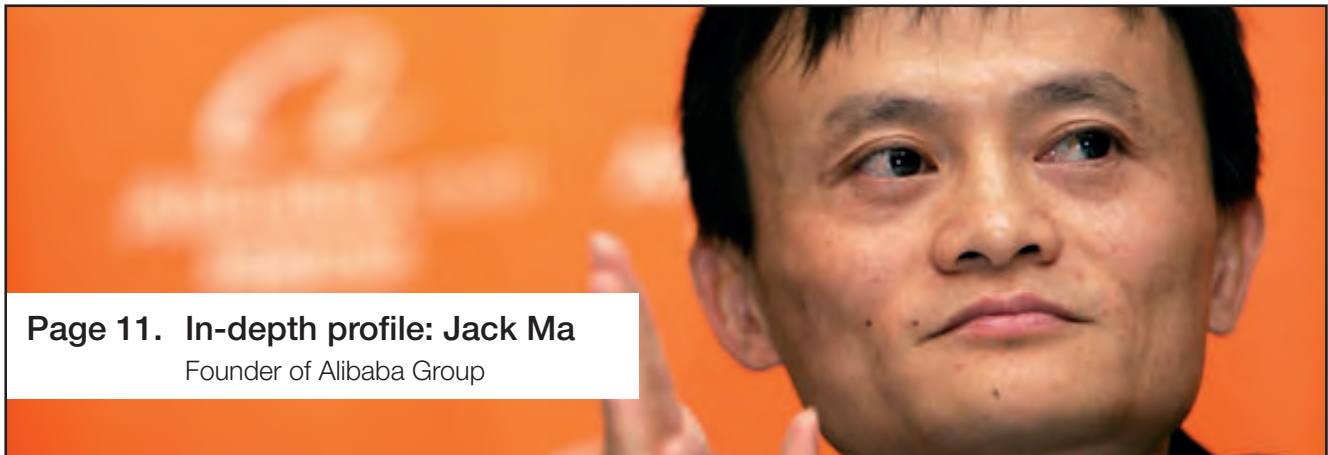


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Gamification

Education's friend or foe?

By Kirsten Campbell-Howes



Gamification is a very hot topic at LEGup (the London Educational Games Meetup). At our monthly events the audience of educational software developers and teachers is often split right down the middle about whether gamification (or the application of popular entertainment games mechanics to other products) is a great way to engage learners or the imposition of an industry obsessed with points and metrics rather than real learning.

Many smart educators are ready to dismiss gamification out of hand – labelling it the ‘pointsification’ of education. Other equally smart commentators think gamification provides educators and edtech developers with an excellent toolkit not only for engaging learners, but for improving knowledge retention. What’s

more, there’s a growing body of research that backs them up.

One such smart cookie is Dr Wayne Holmes, Head of Education at Zondle. Zondle is a fast-growing platform for helping teachers and students with test prep. It uses a gallery of specially developed games which work as wrappers into which user-generated test questions can be plugged. Teachers all over the world are using Zondle to help motivate students to get through exam revision hurdles – so far over 100 million questions have been created. Holmes’ conviction about the positive effects of gamification and games-based learning is based around the research he did at Oxford University while getting his PhD in Education. Zondle’s game mechanics have been iterated through many versions, and

the data crunched and crunched again to show which work best at helping students retain the information they need to get through those all-important tests. Holmes also cites the research of neuroscientist Dr Paul Howard Jones, who has tested Zondle with groups of students, and the work of other academics such as Learning Scientist Sasha Barab.

Despite the heavy academic research which has gone into Zondle, Wayne believes that the product has suffered because of its association with gamification – a term which has acquired a negative connotation in a lot of areas. With many teachers already suspicious of games-based learning (probably due to the negative press around video games in general) it can be an uphill battle for edtech



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entrepreneurs to convince their audience that the gamified approach is the best one.

But Zondle isn't the only gamified education platform gaining currency with teachers and students globally. Kahoot!, a product founded by English entrepreneurs and Norwegian academics, is another question-based system relying heavily on game mechanics. Aimed more at the younger age group

it is designed to work with IWBs in the classroom so that students can vote in answer to questions (some of which they may have written themselves) and see their answers appear in real time. The excitement generated by having to answer quickly and then see who answered differently keeps the whole class engaged and fired up for more questions. Jamie Brooker, one of the founders of Kahoot! is keen to point out the serious research – conducted by Professor Alf Inge-Wang of Norway's NTNU University – which went into designing the platform. Kahoot! is used in different ways in the classroom, for example to help with formative assessment and to reinforce understanding of concepts by repeating the same questions at intervals to check retention. Brooker and his team keep in very close contact with the teachers who use their product, and he stresses that many are seriously committed to gamifying their classroom, and to making the whole lesson a game-

like experience to keep engagement and enthusiasm high.

Eiman Munro of Elemental Publishing is another edtech entrepreneur with an interest in applying entertainment game mechanics to her products. Munro focuses on more traditional card-based games, but takes her inspiration from the toy industry, basing her products on the collectability

of games like Pokemon and the addictive elements of games like Top Trumps. She applies these strategies to science subjects, focusing, for example, on the periodic table. Her Elemons game gives each element of the table an identifiable character with a particular skill. Mix these characters and their skills together and you can make a chemical reaction – it's a simple but highly engaging way of getting kids to tell their nitrogen from

their oxygen. Eiman markets her games through toy and game fairs rather than direct to schools, and doesn't explicitly label them as 'educational games' because she prefers a child-led approach where the child decides to learn, rather than having the game imposed on them.

These are just three examples of edtech entrepreneurs who are bold enough to incorporate the best elements from entertainment games into their products. The education industry is famously conservative and can be slow to follow trends which have been enthusiastically embraced elsewhere. Whatever your feeling about gamification, it's a trend that's growing in education. In the right hands, and with the best research behind it, it has the potential to radically transform the experience that both students and teachers have of educational software.

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