

This interview was made by e-mail with Pál Honti, the CEO of Mimoza Communications and Coedu EducatioNet. Both are Hungarian companies involved with e-learning. The interview was made in January 2006.

Please provide a short description of your company.

In our case we should give the description of two companies since we are involved in the work of both enterprises. Actually two takes one, both company belongs to the same owner but one of them concentrates on the development and maintenance of the tools we are using and deploying while the other (coedu) is taking care of the content production itself and the methodology.

Mimoza Communications Ltd. (<http://www.mimoza.hu/>)

Since its establishment in 1996, Mimoza Communications Ltd. has been developing more and more advanced software in parallel with the increase of Internet penetration and the growth of the company. The firm's greatest success is related to SHAKER, a Flash based presentation-making software that won the first prize in the technical merit category in the world's most important Flash competition Flashforward Festival. Having developed COEDU EducatioNet software and acquired a significant methodology knowledge base during the development process, the owners of the company decided to become actively involved in the Hungarian e-learning market and offer a real alternative to the products of multinational corporations. The company's latest development is a Java based portal-building software (MSS), which can significantly speed up, simplify and reduce the costs of the construction and maintenance of a website or portal. Over a hundred websites have started using our system during the year passed since this development was completed. Beside development we are deeply involved in creating online contests, building virtual communities, event organization and BTL activities. The performance of Mimóza's 23 employees and its subcontractors and the quality of development is guaranteed by the operational ISO 9001:2000 quality control system.

Coedu EducatioNet Ltd. (<http://www.coedu.hu/mss/alpha>)

The company was established in 2002 and it employs at present a staff of 21, project managers, editors, illustrators and operators. All our staff has wide-range of practical experience in methodological and technological support of education and training processes, as well as in the area of using ICT devices. Our three most important activities are the following: electronic learning material development (methodological advice, production of e-learning material scripts, production of e-learning material illustrations and multimedia elements, coding of e-learning material and all-around project management), the sale of the coedu educationet electronic learning system and the technical and methodological support of electronic teaching processes (system supervision and maintenance, administration, tutoring and related training). In the production of our learning materials we use our iteratively developed and continuously checked modified methodology. The staff of leading Hungarian universities, ELTE, BME and Perfekt Plc. contributed to the development of the methodology. We are proud that we have the only accredited teacher training program in this field in Hungary, which is entitled "The methodological issues of e-learning" (OM 175/40/2005).

As far as we know Coedu EducatioNet has one of the largest learning material digitalisation capacities in Hungary. Until the summer of 2005 our staff carried out the digitalisation of about 10 000 source pages (nearly 3 000 contact hours).

1. What is your name and title?

Pal Honti, CEO, Mimoza Communications & Coedu EducatioNet
Kristof Fischer, Key Account Manager, Mimoza Communications
Daniel Molnar, Business Unit Manager, Coedu Ltd

2. What kind of educational and training games do you design?

We design different type of games. We have online community contests with hidden educational content for example. With the cooperation of UPC we launched two games: ProfessorX and Luis de Filmez. ProfessorX was the most successful contest of ours, it was a spy story, all the participants (14-19 years students) became agents and in group of three they had to investigate follow the clues of the Agency and find the potential victims of the evil ProfessorX. After collecting data the teams task was to create the file of the possible victim with using TeamWiki. During the game kids learned the rules and tricks of searching the internet, online publication, they learned to use Wiki and created free content in Hungarian language. They learned without realizing they are learning. They were just agents participating in a mission.

Luis de Filmez Movimagination Contest brought the youngsters into the world of movies, script writing, casting and trailer production. In this complex contest the students learned how to put your movie idea into one sentence (they had to send their ideas in one sms, 160 characters), write a script, how to choose the right stuff to your production and they created a trailer to their movie ideas. The finalists had to present their ideas in front of a professional jury.

ProfessorX 2050 – the second part of the ProfessorX mission kept the basic idea, the spy teams had to follow the clues and find the possible victims but the revolutionary change was they received the clues in cartoons and we gave them a tool - a software designed by Mimoza Communications - Release (www.release.hu) to make it possible for the students to create their own cartoons. The files had to be sent in cartoons.

Release works like Subways restaurants. You enter choose the type of bread, you choose the type of meat, cheese, vegetables, sauce you put it together and you have the perfect sandwich of your own taste. In Release you choose background, characters, type of action, music, add dialogues, choose type of title and your own flash movie is ready.

I use past tense while talking about these games because the time of these contents is over nowadays we are working on a much bigger project about at the very moment I am not authorized to talk. But we guarantee this will be a big hit of this year.

Polbeat

A quiz engine where you can check your knowledge and expertise in many different areas: history, math, books, modern arts or even the latest gossips about celebrities. It is easy since we just have to change the database and fun could begin. Take movies or music where we can add short sequences of moving picture or a few seconds from a Beethoven symphony. Think about it: it is fun while you can gain some knowledge as well.

Kaboca

How many of us wanted to learn a foreign language or just practice the one we learnt at school. Usually our packed time schedule will not help to practise our vocabulary. First you get a fraction of a sentence where a word is missing – you can guess for many points, but if want more help, you will get an other fragment of an other sentence where the same word will be missing. Kaboca is a game which can be played on the net, but on your mobile as well, all you have to do is to find the missing word. We can easily change our database, not just to languages, but more targeted part of our cultural heritage – for instance to have sentences only from the works of Kafka.

3. What is the target group of the games?

Our games are aimed right now at high school kids and adults as well. ProfessorX and Luis de Filmez was designed for students by the age 14-19, Parabola was created for adults just like Polbeat.

4. What kind of educational elements do the games have?

In our community games we have the following learning objectives:

ProfessorX:

- Complete an e-learning course about the rules and ways of searching Internet
- Cooperate online
- Learn to publish on the Internet with TWiki
- Learn history of science

Luis de Filmez:

- Complete an e-learning course about the script writing
- Cooperate online
- Learn to publish on the Internet with TWiki
- Learn to create a complete script from a movie idea
- Learn to make trailers
- Develop presentation skills)

5. What is your approach to designing a game for educational purposes?

Our approach is to create a complete world around each games let's call it Quest Land and we believe it only

works if the participants do not even realize there are in the process of learning. They are just playing a fascinating game and they learn without being conscious.

It doesn't matter you just came for a minute or want to spend hours playing our games. We want you to give you a „full” feeling that you've gained something while you had some fun. Of course we have some objects, tools and methods, let's call them „legos”. With these legos we can build the „user/gamer experience” for different time schedules and our legos can be reused for different purposes as well. One more thing, we're not just puppetmastering or observing, we believe that game management should participate in a game they manage. We try to give emphasis on user generated content as a flourishment of any game we design.

6. What kind of pedagogical theory are your products based on?

Constructivism for sure. Everybody can gain some new knowledge and skills during a game. Therefore we use peering as much as possible since this is one of the best ways to circulate knowledge quickly and efficiently. Learning by doing with the help of a friend is the key! One more thing!. Storytelling is the oldest narrative so we concentrate more resource on that instead of creating some more millions of polygon to present almost real 3D graphics.

7. What kind of reception have your games got?

In 2004-2005 ProfessorX and Luis de Filmez became the most successful online educational games in Hungary. At the first ProfessorX contest more then 1400 students attended from 438 different settlements of the country. What makes us really proud we had more then 100 teams from neighboring countries as well. The half of the registered users were actually active what we believe is a good rate and the quality of their work was high above our imagination. Our mission never stops by the gala of the contest, we design our websites to make the communication between the participants easy and our moderators work on building real community from the participants. Let me give a good example: The first ProfessorX contest was finished in December and in May the students still used the forum of the website for chat. Or I can also mention that during the 6 weeks of Luis de Filmez contest there were more than 6000 comments on the forum of the website. We could manage to build up real communities, and these kids are coming back to our games.

8. What is your solution to the dilemma that the different type of learners and persons of different genders tend to like different kind of games?

I think there is one thing most of the people have in common: we love to play. If we are able to create fascinating, complex and smart games, we will make people play. No matter if it is a boy or a girl a student or a professor you just need to find the right quest for the target group, create a transparent and easy to use interface and they will play. We never shoot for extreme solutions or taboos; in our games there is no aggression or violence, we try to move the creativity of our gamers and the instinctive desire to solve a smart quest. It seems to be working.

9. According to some, players have a tendency to cheat or take the easiest/shortest path possible in

the games. How should an educational game be designed to make it sure that the player doesn't skip important educational parts of the game?

Come on, just as in life, you want to be efficient also in a game and you want to win. Why should you take the long way? A very important distinction I would like to make is between 'education' and 'learning'. 'Education' and 'education games' are imposed upon you from above, you have to go through the 'educational' parts. If the 'educational' part is recognisable, you better be aware that most players will try to avoid to be 'educated' and they are totally right.

If they can skip any part of the game, or if they can cheat the game was designed badly. We design online games and I can tell the first thing a 16 year old student will try on the website of the contest is to cheat, to find the weaknesses of the project. Since we have 5 years experience in designing online games we learned the lesson. The technological part is just one side of the story, the developers of the website should be aware of this issue. But what is more important you need transparent and clear rules and you need to be strict. Here is an example again: in the ProfessorX contest the students were not allowed to share any information about the possible victim until the mission was over. It was a clear rule, was written in the manual everybody should be aware of it. One team broke the rule and shared the name of the victim on the forum and our moderators disqualified the team immediately and announced in a newsletter what had happened with the team. We not just reached the aim not to have any more teams breaking the rules, but participants warned each other on the forum not to make such a mistake because they might be disqualified. You need to settle clear rules before you launch the game you need to monitor the activity of the participants and punish if necessary.

10. What is your opinion on educational and training games in general? What kind of visions do you have on this?

Hopefully more and more adults will remember the time when gaming was the most important activity in our daily life. At the same time we all (as children) were busy (always), but gained a lot of knowledge while we had some fun. After all when we have chosen our professions we believed that we will have some fun while enjoying our life, work (and of course receive a decent, but not insulting amount of money for that). Therefore, it would be bloody inefficient, a waste to get rid of some „methodology” we loved and used successfully.

11. Have you been designing commercial entertainment games? If you have, how does designing an educational or training game differ from that?

Yes, we have. I am not sure that in your questions was any implication about the usual difference between a learning objective and a gaming objective, but if you have then let me underline one thing: it is time to talk about the learner objective instead of the learning objective. Try to make an example: music. We all listen to it. Some of us like to listen to a rock band, while others fall for jazz or other styles. Different styles and different bands, but if they play you a guitar, for example, all of them are using the same stringed guitar – the same instrument –, the same tool and still you can get a totally different experience. It is the same with

games, we are using the same building blocks, but we construct and paint differently.

Of course if we work on a commercial product competition, the winner-takes-it-all approach are important but the story, the interface we build, the clues are pretty much are from the same tree.

12. Have you used any open source software in designing and developing educational games?

Yes, we use different type of Wikis in our games. The participants of the Filmez and ProfessorX contests created their own websites with the help of Twiki. We also use Mediawiki extensively in other projects and talking of blog engines, we prefer Wordpress.

On the other hand we encouraged the participants to construct media with open source tools, like Audacity and Virtuadub.