

# HOSPODÁŘSKÉ NOVINY



Sometimes parents just need to get rid of their children. And recently, the tablet has become an ideal and often used device for this purpose. Many developers and parents alike are thinking that if children are to spend time with a tablet, they should at least get something good out of it. Tens and even hundreds of educational applications are springing up worldwide, teaching the little ones everything from mathematics to Japanese.

## How 100 million can turn learning into play

Czech entrepreneur Tomáš Bárta has taken it one step further. If children are spending time on their tablets anyway, why offer them just one application which develops one specific ability? “We wanted to prepare a complex educational system which would more or less cover the entire basic learning of children up to the age of six,” says Bárta. And so he jumped headfirst into the project bearing the name Lipa Learning – investing in almost 100 million CZK over the last 2,5 years.

Until now, Bárta never did business in the field of education. In the Czech Republic he is rather known as the owner of the company EMTC, which managed to procure over half a million customers for the largest alternative energy supplier Bohemia Energy. Last year he became known to the public primarily because of legal disputes over 10% shares in Bohemia Energy with owners of the company, Jiří a Hana Písařík.

Nevertheless, he has jumped into education with vigor. Although it is based in Prague’s Žižkov, the project found its way into the American start-up incubator RocketSpace in Silicon Valley. Bárta put together an international team of 40 members and continues to visit various international conferences, where he promotes Lipa.

His intentions rest on a simple principle – combining business with pleasure. “Imagine that you give an encyclopedia of biology to a five-year-old and tell him - go and learn it all. I’ll be back in a month to see how much you remember. He won’t learn anything because he isn’t interested in it. If you give him World of Warcraft and the same task, in a month he’ll know it all inside-out,” British Lipa Learning project leader Ian Hook describes education in the form of play.

The entire world is increasingly turning its attention to the education of children. As Microsoft founder Bill Gates states, there are more than 250 million people in the world who do not have basic skills such as

writing, reading and arithmetic. The philanthropic goal for the following years is to ensure that everyone, regardless of which corner of the planet they live in, has learning opportunities.

It is in tablets that Bárta sees the future of this idea. “Tablets freed from pricing margins and used only for playing educational games could solve the problems regarding financing the building of new schools, the cost of hiring teachers or transporting children to school,” says Bárta.

## **Two other competitors**

However, Lipa isn't the only complex educational system there is. As Ian Hook remarks, the biggest competitors are Agnitus and Kidaptive. The project Agnitus was founded in the year 2011 by Haris a Azhar Khan, and apart from developing more than 100 skills in children, one of the applications also offers 23 interactive books available from the tablet and online.

The project Kidaptive dates back to the year 2011 and claims to offer the improvement of 75 dimensions of learning. It is backed by P. J. Gunsagar and Dylan Arena. Both applications also enable parents to see how well their child did in the games.

Unlike the other applications, Lipa concentrates only on the development of four basic skills – mathematics, language, creativity and science – plus it teaches the skills necessary for controlling the tablet. For example writing is developed by Lipa Mole, where children learn the basic shapes of the letters, creativity is taught by Lipa Knight, where children travel across the land and build bridges over obstacles for the knight's horse, using geometric shapes.

The company is trying to avoid the most often cited problem with similar applications. “After finishing the game, children should go and try out the acquired skill in the real world. Take for example the Lipa Mole. In this game children learn to write and then in the real world they can begin to use a pen,” says Hook.

## **I won't let the investors in**

Bárta demonstrates the fact that he believes in this idea also by the way of financing of the project. He invested his own 100 million crowns. “I know, that it's a lot of money. And it is quite unusual in this field to finance the project on your own,” Bárta says.

He has been rejecting all the offers from external investors and also the repeated offers for sale of Lipa. “There are some offers, of course. But right now, I for sure don't want to sell it, and I don't need an investor. I think we can develop the project and become large even without the venture capital,” he adds.

Lipa is offering 13 games in 8 different languages (it's planned to have at least 16 language mutations). For this moment, they are only for iOS and Android, but the owners of the devices with Windows can look forward too.

The final goal is to create 40 games (10 for each skill) a one unifying app, so-called Lipa Gateway. It's kind of gate, which will offer the parents an insight to how does their child fulfil the tasks and brings a space for sharing the advices and experience.

“If everything will go according to the plan, we should have fulfilled it for 80 % this autumn,” Bárta says. Individual games are downloadable right now and the company has already more than 400 thousand downloads from all over the world.

All without some global marketing campaign. According to the authors of the system, Lipa will be utilizable when around 20 games will be done, five for each skill.

The company also tests its games every two weeks in 8 preschools in Prague and edits the game based on the reactions of the children. “The game Lipa Mole, which is recommended for children 3 years+, should be according to our opinion a thriller, but the preschool teachers rejected it, because it was too difficult for children in this age. The distance between the frames was too big,” Hook says.

Lipa is not only testing the games in preschools, Bárta has bought one in Prague – Strašnice last year in November. The pentamorous school staff uses the applications as tool in everyday classwork. As Hook says, the preschool works on the principle of “Lipa style”, where around 30 children are playing in two classrooms. Children can enjoy around 200 square meters garden, trampoline, playground and of course a lime tree (in Czech Lípa).