They started with an escape game and now they’re educating students. The Hack the Crisis hackathon helped Hunter Games with new projects

Hunter Games won a special prize of CZK 700,000 in the Hack the Crisis Czech Republic hackathon organised by CzechInvest and the Ministry of Industry and Trade. Jan Amos Komenský would probably give a nod of approval, as the purpose of the project that Hunter Games brought to the hackathon is to make school more fun and interesting. At the same time, the project is a wonderful example that even in the digital age, we don’t have to be merely passive consumers.

Hack the virus – we’re playing on

Since 2017, Hunter Games has been developing interactive, geolocational and experiential games with a story in which players resolve various tasks and break codes similarly as in an outdoor escape game. Even though the company succeeded in gaining an important investor in its first year, the question remains as to how Hunter Games’ business has been affected by the coronavirus crisis, which is not conducive to group entertainment.

Hunter Games founders Luboš Němeček (left) and Štěpán Gregor (right)
Photo: Martin Stranka
“The coronavirus crisis has affected our business in many aspects and paradoxically helped us, as it prompted us to take a look at previously neglected segments, such as education. Our platform proved to be an ideal tool for formulating educational projects that can help with teaching during quarantine and with distance learning. Educational projects pass the curriculum on to students in a fun way and, thanks to our mobile application, the student maintain social contact with their classmates,” says Štěpán Gregor, co-founder and CFO of Hunter Games.

A tremendous benefit of the application is the fact that a truly large number of users can get involved in a single project. For example, all students in the Czech Republic can take part in a project focused on geography. “We launched such a project in Liberec. The game is localised to the centre of Liberec, so it is necessary to really be in the field. The game guides children through the city centre and gives them interesting and lesser-known information about the historical monuments that they are seeing at the given moment. They can thus put information in context with the place where they are,” Gregor says, explaining how the educational games work.

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– Štěpán Gregor, founder of Hunter Games
Soon after winning the Hack the Crisis hackathon, Hunter Games established cooperation with the Academy of Sciences, specifically with the Institute for Czech Literature (ICL). Last year, we commemorated the 120th anniversary of the birth of Vítězslav Nezval, a famous Czech writer and poet. And Nezval himself accompanies players, secondary-school students, not only with his life and work, but also with ICL's public resources (electronic library, dictionaries, handbooks, databases), which the students can use for their education. The game's co-creator, ICL science worker Robert Kolár, describes it further: “The game is not based on knowledge, as answers can be ascertained with a moment of thinking. Though the spotlight was on Nezval, we wanted to give the players a bit of the broader context. For example, we have tasks focused on travel, modern technology and café life.” The project was distributed free of charge to schools and is also available on the Věda na doma (Science at Home) portal operated by the Academy of Sciences, as well as on the Hunter Games website. The game was downloaded more than 430 times in January 2021.

“Together with the European Space Agency (ESA), we set up a project for the general public focused on the topic of space mining. The project is ready, but because it takes place in a particular area that is currently closed, we are holding off with its official launch until government measures restricting the movement of people are eased. We also established cooperation with students of the Charles University Faculty of Arts, where a wonderful tourist/audio-visual guide to Prague mapping Franz Kafka's life in the city and his work was created,” says Gregor, describing Hunter Games' current activities.

“The game guides children through the city centre and gives them interesting and lesser-known information about the historical monuments that they are seeing at the given moment.” Photo: Hunter Games

It’s about more than money

Hunter Games got more than just a prize out of the hackathon. As the company's representatives say themselves, it primarily gave them personal experience with such contests. The competition is intense, everyone wants to win and strives to be the best. After all, more than 200 projects
were entered in Hack the Crisis Czech Republic and only the top fifteen advanced to the final in June 2020. “Although everyone is competing with each other, boisterous networking takes place during the competition itself, so we also came away from the event with a lot of valuable contacts. Of no less importance, the mentors that CzechInvest made available to us free of charge were very supportive and helpful. We stayed in touch with them even after the whole event ended and together we have discovered a full range of good business opportunities,” Štěpán Gregor says, detailing the benefits of participation in the hackathon. Hunter Games used its prize money primarily for development. According to Gregor and Kolár, the company has to keep pace with the rapid development of technology and with customers’ various desires and comments. Due to the fact that most of the escape games developed at Hunter Games are played outdoors, the coronavirus restrictions have not had an overly dramatic impact on the company’s business. On the contrary, a number of entrepreneurs and companies are looking for ways to diversify their risk. For example, brick-and-mortar escape-game operators have begun creating their own outdoor games on the Hunter Games platform.

From stolen codes to hackathon awards

Hunter Games was established more or less by accident. It began with a standard escape game, which turned out to be successful. During the second time the game was played, however, someone stole a code written on paper and disrupted the whole game, leading to great disappointment on the part of the players and the organisers. And then came the proverbial eureka moment.

“Today everyone has a smartphone and mobile internet access, and with a mobile application we could completely eliminate the problem of lost messages. Over time, it occurred to us that the application could be used not only for outdoor urban games, but also for corporate teambuilding, as a digital tourist guide or as a particular form of distance learning,” says Gregor, recalling the company’s origins.

So, they set to work and you already know the rest – an award in the hackathon organised by CzechInvest and the Ministry of Industry and Trade, as well as CZK 700,000 for the company’s further development. Hunter Games’ portfolio currently contains more than 40 projects in five European countries, and the company is simultaneously working on several projects in Prague, Liberec, Písek and Kladno, as well as in Copenhagen, London and Dubrovnik. These projects are primarily focused on leisure, tourism, corporate teambuilding and distance learning.

So, what can cooperation with CzechInvest bring to this successful start-up?

“In addition to the monetary prize, I would mention mainly contacts, networking with mentors and valuable experience with presenting our company. A large proportion of successful startups will sooner or later find themselves in the situation where they are looking for an investor for their further growth. The experience gained from participating in a hackathon will help them a lot with that.”

– Štěpán Gregor, founder of Hunter Games
About the Hack the Crisis Czech Republic hackathon

Hack the Crisis Czech Republic is a two-month virtual hackathon that was launched in spring 2020 during the first wave of the global coronavirus pandemic. Its purpose was to coordinate the needs of the state with the energy and volunteering found in the IT community and the business environment, thus supporting the implementation of relevant projects that can provide assistance in the crisis situation or mitigate its impacts. The hackathon was organised by CzechInvest and the Ministry of Industry and Trade. A total of 206 projects were entered in the hackathon in the course of its duration. Over fifty partners from the public and private sectors also took part in the event. Free mentoring was provided by more than 130 experts in various fields. More information on the hackathon is available here.

Soon after winning the Hack the Crisis hackathon, Hunter Games established cooperation with the Academy of Sciences, with which it jointly developed the game “I, Vítězslav Nezval” for secondary-school students. The game is played using a smartphone application. Source: Hunter Games