

A mumpreneur creates the world's first immersive learning platform

Xplorealm is the world's first fun, educational gaming platform which provides 7-14 year-olds with inclusive and diverse subjects from the National Curriculum through mini games, AI and immersive technologies. Maddyness wanted to know more about the founder, Reedah El-Saie, her journey and the motivations behind this concept.

In Winter 2018, I had the idea to create Xplorealm when I was trying to encourage my son to revise for entrance exams whilst fostering a love of learning. We struck a deal where he would study for 45 minutes and was then allowed to play for 15 minutes. He was super focused and I was curious to see what he was doing in his break. This was the first time I was exposed to Fortnite - I was blown away with how creative and immersive it was.

My immediate response was "wouldn't it be amazing if you were taught all the subjects from the National Curriculum through a similar immersive game?". Faaris loved the idea, we had this magical moment of brainstorming and that's how Xplorealm was conceived.

Did you have the expertise and experience in the field you chose?

As a mother of three children at separate schools, I have an understanding of the pain that children and parents experience with non-stop testing and exams. I have worked in culture, sport, tech, education and skills-led regeneration working with local government for the last 7 years and have a deep insight into the challenges faced by local authorities, PRUs, youth centres, schools, parents and children particularly vulnerable communities. I was also a voluntary Board Member at The Curve, part of the Grenfell community response.

All the evidence suggests that if children are inspired to learn and acquire skills from a young age they are more likely to be successful and economically independent as adults. I feel strongly that we need to revolutionise the education system as it is antiquated having been originally designed post-industrial revolution to prepare children for factory work.

I am also completing a Masters in Education Technology, Curriculum Design & Policy to explore how the cultural imbalances and bias can be redressed to foster greater understanding and enhance self esteem.

Did you start on your own or with any associates?

I am a sole Founder but consider my three children co-founders! I have adopted an iterative approach to the project involving three core phases; curriculum innovation working with excellent teachers and subject matter specialists, leading independent and state schools and world class universities from across the world; visualisation working with a team of creative artists and designers to reinterpret the curriculum for 3D immersive experiences; and finally technical development working with a great team of mobile games developers experimenting with AI and Augmented Reality technology.

How did people around you react when you told them about your project?

When you see the curriculum come to life through Augmented Reality or fun crazy games, kids and parents alike are awe inspired! It's an amazing feeling to see such excitement on people of all ages at home, office or in the park! The product speaks for itself, especially since it is FREE for children across the

world!

We passionately believe that all children should have access to high quality, immersive education – mobile technology enables us to have that impact. The fact that our product coincided with COVID-19 and 1.6 billion children having to attend online learning, has heightened the demand and interest in the app.

As a BAME woman, with three children of mixed heritage, I felt frustrated with the way that the National Curriculum was being taught and how key facts were overlooked. We have been redressing this imbalance, developing more culturally nuanced curriculum content to reflect diverse heritage, whilst ensuring that we are fully aligned with the British National Curriculum learning outcomes, 11+ and 13+ entrance exams fused with 21st-century skills gaming strategies. This has attracted significant interest from different regions and coincided with #BLM movement.

How long did you spend building your business plan?

I have spent approximately 3 months very part-time working on the business plan which has been a dynamic and evolving document. I really believe in the importance of researching and developing a high-level business plan as it ensures that all the various elements are carefully thought through in advance thus enabling acceleration at the right time. However, I do believe this has to remain a live document as the business is constantly evolving.

How did you manage the financial part? Have you benefited from any accelerator/incubator and can you share your experiences, good and bad?

I have seed-funded the early startup phase through personal savings and my salary. This avoided the need to approach 'friends & family' too early and allowed me to focus on developing the best product we could, in the time and budget available.

I have benefitted enormously from a wide range of accelerators, each of which taught me something different and enabled us to grow. I would highly recommend anyone with an idea to just apply and see where it takes them.

Some of the really excellent accelerators have included Y Combinator Startup School which is entirely online, London Mayors 'London & Partners Business Growth Programme' which has introduced a wide network of specialists in the startup ecosystem, EDUCATE which is Europe's largest EdTech Accelerator and a partnership with UCL/Institute of Education, Google for Startups, Natwest Bank Pre-Accelerator and JP Morgan Hatch Female Founders Accelerator are just a few I would highly recommend for different stages of growth. Taylor Wessing and Mishcon de Reya's also provide startup programmes providing legal support.

Do you know how many times you have pitched your business?

I haven't actively pitched the concept as such as I have not been looking for investment until now. I wanted to ensure we had a proof of concept and a working app first. However, I have been informally speaking to potential investors for the last 10 months and keep them abreast of progress.

I am now actively seeking to increase our revenue generation as well as securing investment in the region of approx. £1M for 2021. We are exploring whether to opt for crowdfunding or 3-5 investors who are the right fit for our concept and long-term ambition.

Have you had to pivot at some point?

We had to pivot after undertaking games research for 3 months. Initially, the app was designed just for children to enjoy our subject realms and to foster a love of learning. However, after undertaking in-depth market research audience interviews we realised that teachers were desperate for a creative, immersive way to teach the National Curriculum.

Based on this feedback, we are building a platform that would allow them to cover the subject modules fully aligned with the National Curriculum whilst enabling them to become 'creators of innovative content' by setting their own lesson plans, homework and multiplayer projects in the game and thus make knowledge acquisition and retention much more fun. Fun revision strategies are built into the game.

On a personal level, do you think you had all the support needed to help you in these times?

I received incredible support from my children who have encouraged and inspired me when I felt like I wasn't progressing as fast as I hoped or had the inevitable periods of self-doubt. I was fortunate enough to seek out mentors such as Professor Jeremy Utley and Perry Klebhan from Stanford Launchpad who have been really encouraging and provided lots of guidance at the early stages. YC Startup School is an amazing resource for coaching and top tips a free resource offered through their curriculum library.

I think all founders need to be resilient and determined if they believe in their concept. It's a difficult but incredibly rewarding journey so you have to make the best of any situation and create a 'win win' scenario for everyone!.

Where are you today?

We've seed-funded the prototype through salary, personal savings and secured a government-backed 'Bounce Back' loan with Lloyds Bank, taken an office in North Kensington, recruited 4 full-time and 4 part-time team members, developed a proof of concept Augmented Reality App featuring *History Realm: Tudor's Module*, partnered with 3 schools, developed our 'BBB' Board of Brilliant Brains consisting of an advisory board of children from across the world giving us feedback on the curriculum, exams and mobile games. We are now working towards launching our MVP by Christmas 2020.

What advice would you give to other founders or future founders?

If you have an idea, test it, speak to end-users, attend accelerators and open your mind to learning and exchanging thoughts. Then don't be afraid to go for it!

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What led you to create Xplorealm?

I conceived the idea for Xplorealm in Summer 2018 when I was trying to encourage my son to revise for entrance exams whilst fostering a love of learning – any parent will tell you how difficult a challenge this can sometimes be! When all he wanted to do was play mobile games.

We struck a deal where he would learn for 45 minutes and was then allowed to game for 15 minutes. He was super focused and I was curious to see what he was doing in his 15 min break. This was the first time I was exposed to Fortnite – I was blown away with how creative and immersive it was. My immediate response was “wouldn’t it be amazing if you were taught all the subjects from the National Curriculum through a similar immersive game?”. Faaris loved the idea and immediately we had this magical moment of brainstorming. And that’s how Xplorealm was founded.

Did you have the expertise and experience in the field you chose?

As a mother of three children at separate schools, I have a deep understanding of the pain that children and parents experience with non stop testing and exams. I have worked in culture, sport, tech, education and skills led regeneration working with local government for the last 7 years and have experience of the challenges faced by local authorities, PRUs, youth centres, schools, parents and children particularly vulnerable communities. All the evidence suggests that if children are inspired to learn and acquire skills from a young age they are probably more likely to be redirected from a life of crime and unemployment.

I feel strongly that we need to revolutionise the education system as it is antiquated and rooted in the industrial revolution where school was designed to prepare children for factory work.

I am also completing a Masters in Education Technology at University College London.

Did you start on your own or with any associates?

I am a sole Founder but consider my three children cofounders!

I have worked with experts in their field on a freelance part time basis over the last 18 months, whilst balancing my full time day job.

How were the people around you reacting when you were telling them about your idea/project?

People find our App awe inspiring! When they see the curriculum come to life, through Augmented Reality and AI, on their mobile phone they are blown

away! The product speaks for itself and since it is FREE for all children across the world its really a no brainer! We passionately believe that all children should have access to a high quality, immersive education and mobile technology enables us to have that impact. In addition the fact that our product coincided with Covid19 has heightened the demand and interest for online learning as we are not only disrupting gaming and education technology but also the curriculum content. As a BAME woman, with three children of mixed heritage, I felt frustrated with the way that the National Curriculum was being taught and how key facts were overlooked. We have been redressing this balance in our diverse and inclusive curriculum content, for the last 18 months whilst still ensuring that we are fully aligned with the British National Curriculum learning outcomes, 11+ and 13+ entrance exams fused with 21st century skills gaming strategies.

How long have you spent on building your business plan?

I have spent approximately 2 months very part time working on the business plan which has been a dynamic and evolving document. I really believe in the importance of researching and developing a high level business plan as it ensures that all the various elements are carefully thought through in advance thus enabling acceleration at the right time. However I do believe this has to remain a live document as the business is constantly evolving.

How did you manage the financial part? Have you benefited from any accelerator/incubator and can you share your experiences, good and bad?

I have seed funded the early startup phase through personal savings and the salary of my day job. This avoided the need to approach 'friends & family' too early and allowed me to focus on developing the best product we could, in the time and budget available.

I have benefitted enormously from a wide range of accelerators, each of which taught me something different which enabled our startup to grow. I would highly recommend anyone with a an idea to just apply and see where it takes them. Some of the really excellent accelerators have included; Y Combinator Startup School which is entirely online, London Mayors 'London & Partners Business Growth Programme', EDUCATE which is Europe's largest EdTech Accelerator and a partnership with UCL and the Institute of Education, Google for Startups, Natwest Bank Pre-Accelerator and JP Morgan Hatch Female Founders Accelerator are just a few of the ones I have participated in.

Do you know how many times you have pitched your business (if applicable)?

I haven't actively pitched the concept as such as I have not been looking for investment as I wanted to seed fund the early startup phase and ensure I had a product that was worth investing in. However, I have been informally speaking

to potential investors for the last year and keep them abreast of progress and nurturing relationships with approximately 6-8 potential investors. I am now actively seeking to increase our revenue generation as well as secure investment for 2021. I will probably only take investment from 2-4 investors for series A who are the right fit for our concept and long term ambition.

Have you had to pivot at some point?

We had to pivot after undertaking games research for 3 months. Initially the app was designed just for children to enjoy our subject realms and to foster a love of learning. However after undertaking in depth market research audience interviews we realised that teachers were desperate for a creative, immersive way to teach the National Curriculum. A platform that would allow them to cover the subject modules fully aligned with the National Curriculum whilst enabling them to become 'creators of innovative content' by setting their own lesson plans, homework and multi player projects in the game' and thus make knowledge acquisition and retention much more fun.

On a personal level, do you think you had all the support needed to help you in these times?

I received all the support that I needed from my children who have encouraged me and inspired me when I felt like I wasn't make the desire progress or had the inevitable periods of self doubt. I think all founders need to be resilient and determined if they believe in their concept. It's a difficult but incredibly rewarding journey so you have to make the best of any situation

Where are you at today?

- seed funded the prototype through salary, erosional savings and secured government backed 'Bounce Back' loan with Lloyds Bank.
- taken an office in North Kensington
- recruited 4 full time team members and 4 part time team members
- soft launch of interim website
- developed proof of concept Augmented Reality App featuring our History Realm: Tudors module
- working towards launch our MVP by Christmas 2020

- partner with 3 schools

- developed our 'BBB' Board of Brilliant Brains consisting of an advisory board of children giving us feedback on the curriculum, exams, mobile games

What advice would you give to other founders or future founders?

- If you have an idea test it, speak to people/ end users, attend accelerators as inevitably the concept will evolve

Article by REEDAH EL-SAIE