

PJ Belcher is a freewheeling games specialist who wants to bring Hocus Pocus, a drug-free training game for ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), to your attention. Mike Scialom reports



Focus Pocus changes hocus locus



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STENSIBLY, I was due to meet PJ Belcher to discuss a neat bit of software combined with a headset which helps alleviate the symptoms of ADHD – you know, hyper-activity and the sort of concentration difficulties that have meant too many youngsters grow up with the attention span of a gnat in a nightclub.

But this being Cambridge other ideas emerge and these other topics turned out to be highly intriguing – and a very instructive lesson in how to turn adversity into opportunity.

So, to business: PJ Belcher is a 24-year-old bloke making his way in the 21st century's technological Wild West who's had the good fortune to rock up on some very interesting shores. That good fortune, of course, didn't occur without the requisite hard work. PJ, who hails from Bury St Edmunds, got himself a degree in creative music technology from ARU. "Midway through I decided to aim for a job, but then came the recession and I realised I would have to conjure one up, so I contacted all the computer games firms in Cambridge, and two got back to me."

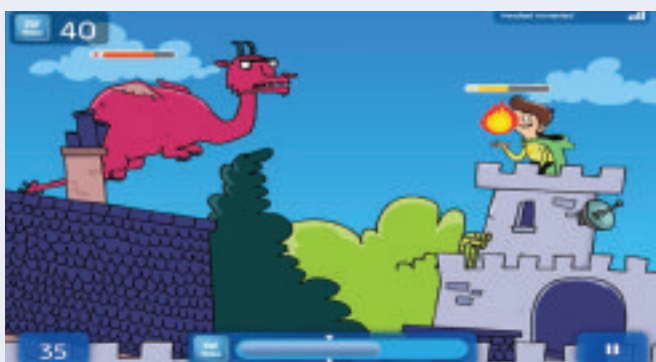
PJ started off with the first, Zoonami, as an intern and set about working the industry from the inside. The second was Cambridge-based Gameware,

run by the legendary Jeremy Cooke, who also chairs industry body Games EDEN. "I'd contacted Gameware and Jeremy said he'd be at a networking event so I went to every one under the sun, and I met him a few times >

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Ahead of the games: PJ Belcher and Jeremy Cooke

Main picture: David Johnson



“There are hundreds of other applications for this headset”

>> and eventually I got involved as project manager for *James Pond*.”

While this process was happening PJ was freelancing as an audio designer and did all sorts of things. “I’d take things on such as TV adverts, feature films, radio adverts, animation, composing music for dressage...”

Um, did you say ‘dressage’?

“Yup. There’s two forms of dressage, normal and kurs. Kurs is done to music and I would compose music for the

horse’s movements. It looks like the horses move to music but actually the music moves to the horse...”

Okaaaaay. Anything else? “I spent quite a lot of time writing press releases – the story really is I’m a 24-year-old guy trying to do things and like many people with degrees I take on as many things as possible short of stacking shelves.”

Those “things” included *Focus Pocus*, which was what grabbed my attention in the first place. *Focus Pocus* is a



“With dressage it looks like the horses move to music, but actually the music moves to the horse”



truly innovative approach to ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder).

ADHD symptoms include inattentiveness, hyperactivity and impulsiveness. By providing them with a headset and some games-type software which incorporates design fundamentals of computer games such as progression incentives, reward/punishment and immersion, *Focus Pocus* becomes an effective re-training option for ADHD. It's

actually quite a powerful piece of kit. “There are hundreds of other applications for this headset,” PJ explains. “It measures two types of brainwave frequency – one associated with the level of relaxation and the other with the level of concentration – and the headset transmits the data to a PC or smartphone and the software interprets the data.”

The interpretation interacts with the gameplay on one of *Focus Pocus*' 12 mini-games (one is pictured left), so for instance in one game “you use your mind to metamorphosize an ostrich into a broomstick” and you have to concentrate on this task and you can see your level of concentration on-screen and your progress depends on keeping the bar high enough. So it's fun and educational. “The basic idea of getting feedback and being rewarded if you do well has myriad applications.”

Focus Pocus is aimed at kids from the age of five up and has proved effective for a wide variety of behavioural issues including Asbergers and autism. It's available from Games For Life, a Hertfordshire-based firm run by one Ian Glasscock. You can buy *Focus Pocus* at gamesforlife.co.uk, priced at £299.

PJ then considers how technological solutions fits into the existing treatment models. While advocating *Focus Pocus* as an aid to assisting individuals in taking those vital first steps towards addressing behavioural issues in a positive fashion, he questions why drugs which by and large just conk out sufferers have become the norm, to the point that 3.5 million children in the US are prescribed with the drug or equivalents.

“The whole anti-drugs angle has only emerged in the last few months,” he says of the pharmaceutical treatment of ADHD, “and the view now is that pumping kids full of Ritalin isn't necessarily the best way to go. UK sales of Ritalin are up 50 per cent and it's a \$5bn industry in the US and now they're rebranding because of the negative associations. Parents are hungry for an alternative that isn't going to just drug their kids up and the technologies that is emerging are disruptive. The bottom line is that directors of companies that have shareholders have a legal obligation to make profits and if they have a cure for an ailment they then won't make a profit so they are only looking for products that alleviate symptoms rather than resolve them.

“You do a 40-minute *Focus Pocus* session every day, for five sessions a week, and it's a 12-month programme and studies have shown reduced requirement in drug usage in a large number of kids – and you will start to see improvements after two or three months.”

Ian Glasscock has another company, BioDigital Health, who attended the Future of Wireless Conference a couple of years back. “They're doing things like repairing brain functions after a stroke, there are broader applications and the technology is moving very quickly and reading the data more accurately and faster, it's exploding.”

While PJ is keeping an eye on Games For Life, he's also had to move on and he's now working on the latest incarnation of *James Pond*, which is doing very well for itself by adopting the paid Alpha route. “It's a new game,” is all he'll say of this work in progress. “It'll be out later this year.”

Can't wait. Though doubtless by then PJ will be multi-tasking a new portfolio of roles as he navigates his way in a highly impressive fashion through the rapids of Silicon Fen. Oh and by the way – he does music lessons too. pjbletcher.com ■