

## Louis Von Ahn (Duolingo) and Eric Stano (Pearson Education)

### Interviewer 00:13

We'll start with a very easy one and, if you could just introduce yourself.

### Louis 00:20

Hey uh, I am Louis Stano. I am professor of computer science at Carnegie Mellon University and I'm also the CEO and co-founder of Duolingo.

### Eric 00:30

And I am Eric Stano, I am the vice president portfolio management for Pearson, overseeing world languages, English, and humanities.

*Instructions for not looking at camera, do it again*

### Eric 00:54

So I'm Eric Stano, I'm the vice president portfolio management overseeing world languages, English, and the humanities for Pearson.

### Interviewer 1:02

Great, so one thing I wanted to do, before we talk about partnerships, is kind of introducing both the companies, so we'll start with Duolingo. What inspired you to create Duolingo, tell me about it.

### Louis 1:15

So I, a few years ago, four or five years ago, I was in a very fortunate position in my life. I had sold my second company to Google and what I wanted to do was to work on something related to education. Now, my views on education are very related to the fact that I'm from Guatemala, which is a very poor country. If you don't know where Guatemala is, its below Mexico—that's a public service announcement.

1:43

Now it's a very poor country and a lot of people talk about education as something that brings equality to different social classes. But I always saw it as a complete opposite. I always saw it as something that brings inequality because what happens in practices that the people who have a lot of money buy themselves the best education in the world and because of that they continue having a lot of money whereas people who don't have very much money barely learn how to read and write, especially in developing countries. So they continue not having a lot of money.

2:08

So I wanted to do something that would give equal access to education for everybody. Now, education's very general so I decided that, to concentrate on one aspect of education which is huge everywhere in the world which is learning foreign languages. There's, it's a huge market and it's something that has immediate use whereas, you know for example, learning math. You usually learn math not for the sake of it but you learn math in order to become an engineer or you learn math to learn something else, to learn something else. Whereas with languages, you learn them and immediately they can be particularly useful. In particular, worldwide, learning english is something that can, in some countries, literally double your earning potential.

2:50

So that was the reason why I decided to start duolingo and we launched it about four years ago and by now we've become the most popular app to learn languages. And not just learn languages, the most popular education app in the

world. We have over a hundred million users and there's a lot of interesting stats. For example, we teach a lot of different languages. We teach the standard, you know English, German, French, Spanish, but we also teach some smaller languages like Irish. There are 94,000 native speakers of Irish, whereas there are over a million people learning Irish on Duolingo. So that's the type of thing that makes me really proud.

**Interviewer 3:34**

Amazing. Do you want to just kind of, in a sentence, walk me through what it does in kind of the style of education Duolingo has?

**Louis 3:45**

Sure, so Duolingo is an app, there's also a website, but it's basically something that you're always using. You're always, you always have it with you. Whenever you're waiting in line for something you can always use Duolingo to learn a language. And the style of education is something that is very gamified, we've tried very hard to make Duolingo as engaging as possible and also as active as possible. Whereas I think the standard modality with a book is to sit there and read it, which sense. But if you're in front of your phone, you want to usually do something more than just reading.

4:23

So we try to make it feel like you're playing a game. You're usually very engaged and very active and that's the idea. You learn a language, you learn by doing on Duolingo.

**Interviewer 4:30**

Awesome, and also just in a sentence tell us about your demographics. Who uses the app? And you've already mentioned this a little bit, but what are the big surprises and the big kind of like numbers?

**Louis 4:43**

Well, people use the app all over the world. We have over a hundred million users. 20 percent of the users are in the U.S. and 80 percent are everywhere else. More often than not, they are females, so about 60 percent of our users are female. The age range is huge, so we have from, they need to know how to read and write to use Duolingo. So it's from ages about six or seven to you know, we get some, we get some comments from users that are 95 years old are learning French for some reason or another. So we have a whole range of users. And we also have users in many school districts in developing countries. For example, every single school that is connected to the internet in Costa Rica and Colombia uses Duolingo to teach English.

5:33

And to me, that's what makes me the proudest. The fact that public schools in developing countries use Duolingo to teach English. And on the other side of the spectrum, Bill Gates uses Duolingo learn French. And this fact, that the richest man in the world, uses the same system as children in public schools in developing countries tells you that, at least for this particular thing, more money cannot buy you a better system, which is what we wanted.

**Interviewer**

Amazing. Thanks well we'll move on to...Tell us...introduce Pearson to us and just, if you want to tell us about what your endeavors are for the future.

**Eric 6:18**

So Pearson is the largest educational publisher in the world and our mission is all around helping people better their lives through learning, whether that learning is at the K through 12 level, the higher ed level, post high ed. So our mission is to increasingly globalize that particular conceit so I think that the partnership with Duolingo really aligns so nicely with what we're trying to do in that we're trying to better people's lives. And Duolingo has made a footprint with

a 120 million and some odd users, bringing, you know, language learning to them for free. And what we're trying to do is usher that conceit into a higher education space.

**Interviewer 7:16**

What does it mean about Pearson that you would turn to a partner like Duolingo?

**Eric 7:21**

Well I think that, you know, Pearson was a very traditional higher ed publisher, at least in my space of it. And we had spun up our own technology, we called a recurrent gen technology, tech stack. And what Duolingo brings to us is a few different things. One, we're able to be increasingly mobile, so in able to reach students, to reach users, to reach language learners, wherever they happen to be at whatever moment, they happen to be studying or trying to acquire a language. They also bring to us the engagement factor in the higher ed space where we publish language learning is not something that people popularly pursue because they haven't wanted to learn a language. Sometimes they do sometimes, oftentimes, they don't. They're taking language as a requirement. So the engagement factor that Duolingo brings to that space is critical to helping students who are being asked to learn a language for a material good.

8:30

It engages them in the out-of-class practice that is necessary to efficiently acquire that language. And also just it helps us make that pivot towards a next generation step. We've had a very strong imprint on higher education language learning for the better part of 15-20 years, but it's clear that there are things we need to do newly and differently and in a more engaging fashion that will appeal to students, millennials, as well as you know more advanced learners.

**Interviewer 9:11**

Great, and can you give us your perspective as Duolingo for partnering with Pearson and moving forward within the education world, so to speak.

**Louis 9:24**

Yeah, so we, we've never. We've never been very much sorry I'll start over. Let's see so, we've, how do I put this? I mean, we've never tried, no that's not right .....

9:45

You know, the reason we like partnering, the idea of partnering with Pearson, is because well, first of all we respect what they do a lot. And second, it's a good way for us to get adoption in different markets. Most of our adoptions is through, for the end consumer, not through educational institutions. Whereas we do have some, you know, K through 12 schools using us, we're not really, we don't have as much of a footprint in there as Pearson does. So that's what's interesting to us.

10:25

We also feel that the offerings are very complimentary. I mean, what we have, we have a really good way of getting people engaged in practicing the language, but our app does not teach you a lot of the theory for the language, we also don't spend a lot of effort teaching you about the different cultures, etcetera. And I think the different offerings that Pearson has do that and they do that very well.

**Eric 10:47**

And if I could actually jump on that, again it's the engagement factor, what Duolingo has so brilliantly done is appeal to people and bring learning to people who are seeking that. In the higher education space there are some course areas that are a material good for that student, that's why the institution legislates that they should take that. But the student themselves, they're not inherently interested or engaged in the process and what Duolingo brings to that, you know I

almost feel sort of paternal about it. But what Duolingo brings to that is that learning in a way that is engaging, is enjoyable, is appealing to generation of students who really should, if we're gonna live in a globalized society and we're going to be mobile and be able to work in a variety of hemispheres, we should be able to do that.

11:44

So Duolingo brings that to the table for us and what we bring to the table, I think, is the ability to get into those departments, those spaces, and ask those instructors in the way that they are used to being asked, you know, to use this product and assign it to their students.

#### **Interviewer**

Great. And kind of going back to what you were saying about your inspiration for this app was always education, is it something that now makes even more sense to partner with such a big institution as Pearson?

**Louis 12:18**

Yeah, we're, as I said, we're most of our users have been outside of educational institutions. They're usually kinda more lifelong learners that are doing so after, they've graduated 15 years ago and now they're just doing it on their free time. And I think Pearson understands educational institutions much better than anyone else, certainly much better than us. And, part of our mission is to be teaching languages to everybody, and a significant fraction of people learning a language are doing so inside of schools. So I think makes a lot of sense for us to create something that is better than what we would do ourselves or better than what Pearson would do themselves. And together we can do something, an offering for higher ed or different educational institutions.

**Eric 13:04**

And what Duolingo does also so brilliantly is they seem to iterate on the quality of what people are using. And what we're always focused on in higher ed are the outcomes that we're promising students and instructors that we'll produce. And the fact that Duolingo is constantly in a state, it seems, of iterating, analyzing, using data to provide the greatest possible efficacy and the most effective outcomes relative to any person who's using their app. That's in complete alignment, it's like we're separated at birth in that fashion relative to our two missions.

#### **Interviewer 13:48**

Great. And what do you see, I guess in a short sentence. But like, what's your best hope, from Mike (?) to take out of this partnership?

**Eric**

I don't produce short sentences so you go first.

**Louis 14:00**

I think my best hope for what to produce out of this partnership is basically reaching more people that we weren't reaching before, and higher efficacy for those people. I mean there's something that we are not, haven't quite spent time doing, which is all the theory, and all the diving deep into culture and different aspects of the language. And --I think that together with Pearson, we will be able to reach more people and reach them better.

**Eric 14:35**

And I think for us we are signalling a new, to the marketplace, that we are 100 percent committed to language acquisition and the higher ed space we are 100 percent committed to evolving as a digital learning publisher and getting to students wherever they happen to be a providing the best language acquisitions programs that we have. And you know we have the my lapse for 30 years, they're what put us in a position of prominence in the higher ed marketplace, but Duolingo has developed in the last 4 years, amazingly just 4 years, is essentially an analog to what our my lapse have

done but it's more nimble, it's more intuitive, it's more engaging, it's appealing, people choose to use it rather than use a game. They're engaging in language acquisition and so I think that just furthers our mission.

**Interviewer 15:42**

Okay. And final question. I guess for Duolingo, like coming that far and it's a pretty young company. What makes you the proudest?

**Louis 15:52**

Ah, what makes me the proudest? *Jokes with Eric...*

15:58

Let's see, to me probably what makes me the proudest is all the emails or communications that we get from our users, we literally get thousands everyday, of emails from people, basically saying thank you. That they weren't able to afford learning a language before or they weren't able to stick with it. That's one of the huge things, I mean people have said "Oh I've tried ten different other things and this is the first thing that I'm able to stick to." That I think is what makes me the proudest.

**Interviewer 16:28**

Have you guys both acquired languages from Duolingo? Have you?

**Louis 16:32**

Portuguese. I am, I would say I...I have a funny story with Portuguese. I went to, I started using Duolingo to learn Portuguese and after about 3 months of it I had to take a trip to Brazil, and to give a talk. Now the talk was in English and at the end they asked me what language I had learned with Duolingo and I made the mistake of saying Portuguese. And so they started, they said "Oh okay well then maybe we can ask you all the questions in Portuguese and you have to respond in Portuguese. So the first time I ever talked Portuguese outside of Duolingo was in front of an audience with a thousand people. I understood a hundred percent of the questions and then I very brokenly answered them. And they understood, although I really I was very nervous. But I'm happy that at this point I think I can understand the majority of it, if not all, and speak brokenly.

**Eric 17:26**

Como se dice "not quite yet"...I'm working on my spanish.

**Interviewer 17:34**

Is there anything that you guys wanted to mention that I didn't ask you?

**Louis**

I think this is pretty good.

**Eric 17:42**

I think it's pretty good too. I'm just, I'll just blabber now...I'm just really excited about the opportunity I think Duolingo has a clearly earned footprint in the language acquisition space. I think what they have done is brilliant and I'm just happy to be hopefully affiliated with it for a good long time.