

Podcast Title: *ACM Bytecast*

Episode Title: Luis Von Ahn

Welcome to the *ACM Bytecast* podcast, where researchers, practitioners, and innovators share about their experiences, lessons, and future visions in the field of computing research. In this episode, host Rashmi Mohan welcomes Luis Von Ahn—founder of Duolingo, the most popular foreign language learning app.

The conversation starts off with a quick look at Luis's background, what he does, and what drew him into this field as a whole. Luis's mother began his interest in computers at 8 years old and he's never looked back since. While he started off his training in the field of computer science, he has now started 3 businesses, one of which is Duolingo. Rashmi taps into the history on Luis's first two businesses before jumping into Duolingo. Learn about the creation of CAPTCHA and re-CAPTCHA. While one of these is a challenge-response test to help computers determine whether the user on websites was human or not, the other protects website from spam. The crucial foundation for Luis's businesses were simply real world problems that he sought to help fix. Luis integrated these real issues in the industry and worked on them from the academic world. Being used across countless websites today, Luis's work proved pivotal. Rashmi asks Luis about his perspective on integrating academia and business more—don't miss out on his thoughts!

Rashmi shifts the conversation to learning the details involved in the transition from academia to actually running a business and the learning curve associated with this. Luis shares about his unique journey with this and how his pursuit of increasing the effectiveness of CAPTCHA's data forced him into entrepreneurship. Learn about his project in digitizing books from the seemingly "wasted seconds" that CAPTCHA's required. His partnership with the New York Times proved to have a far-reaching impact.

The conversation turns to focusing on Duolingo and the spark that started this idea. With Luis's desire to pursue something in the realm of education, coupled with his being from Guatemala, borne Duolingo. He shares about how computing problems played into this project and what his role in this space is. Luis shares that the hardest thing about learning a language is motivation, so they've worked tirelessly to utilize "gamification" tricks to keep interest. Using the data from Duolingo, they've learned how to alter their product over time and best teach people different languages. Luis says the app is as good as a classroom, but not quite as good as a human tutor. With this being said, the major competitor for them is actually Instagram and other easy distractions. Learn about the equation they've mastered to keep learning challenging, but easy enough to keep people going.

Rashmi asks Luis about his thoughts on other topics such as data privacy concerns, the pandemic, measuring success, and their location. Luis shares that while the data they collect is valuable for their product, it is not sensitive information that would violate people's privacy in a concerning manner. Find out how the pandemic has increased demand and their app was able to help increase productivity during the lockdown. Rashmi discusses how English is the gateway to many

jobs and Luis affirms that English speakers certainly have an advantage in the technology space, but Duolingo is working to bridge the gap. Luis measures success by impact, despite financial differences. This same tool is being used by both refugee camps and Bill Gates—this makes him proud. They discuss the foundation in Pittsburg and how this has been advantageous in the little competition that allows them to hire people out of their league, but also the disadvantages to the lack of local network that de-values certain roles.

The conversation draws to a close as Luis shares advice for those listeners who are sparked to start their own company. His single biggest advice is to just do it! He says to get started and let your idea change over time, start with other people to keep you motivated and in-check, make sure it's in your area of expertise, and be very picky on who your first hires—the diversity and quality will be seed for rest of company. Luis leaves the listeners with his excitement for the future of computer learning and virtual reality.

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Links:

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