

US, UK teams share \$10M XPRIZE award for child literacy

May 15 2019, by John Rogers



In this undated photo provided by XPRIZE, children in a village in the Tanga region of Tanzania gather to learn from tablets using open-sourced software that would easily be downloaded by illiterate children to teach themselves to read. That's what nearly 200 teams from around the world have spent more than a year in impoverished villages in Tanzania trying to do. The winner of this latest competition for a \$10 million XPRIZE for global innovation is being announced Wednesday, May 15, 2019, in Los Angeles. (Courtesy XPRIZE via AP)

A California company founded by game-developer parents who wanted to help their special-needs son is sharing a \$10 million XPRIZE award with a London-based educational nonprofit for programs created to teach illiterate children how to teach themselves to read.

The Berkeley-based Kitkit School and London's onebillion educational nonprofit were declared co-winners of the XPRIZE For Global Learning at a presentation Wednesday night.

Nearly 200 teams from 40 countries entered the competition, jumping at the chance to become the latest winner of an XPRIZE, a coveted international award funded by future-looking entrepreneurs, billionaires and philanthropists who have banded together with the goal of making the world a better place through technology.

Elon Musk announced the winners at Wednesday's event honoring all five of the finalists. The total XPRIZE For Global Learning, funded by Musk, was worth \$15 million, with each finalist getting \$1 million just for making the final round. The winners additionally receive \$5 million each.

The goal was to develop open-sourced software, put it on tablets donated by Google and have thousands of children in 170 remote villages in Tanzania test it. The five finalists, which also included teams from New York, Pittsburgh and Bangalore, India, spent 15 months refining the software.



onebillion CEO Andrew Ashe, third from right, and CTO Jamie Stuart, third from left, receive the XPRIZE Children's Literacy award from XPRIZE Founder and Executive Chairman, Peter Diamandis, far left, Tesla CEO Elon Musk, second from left, XPRIZE CEO Anousheh Ansari, second from right, and Executive Director Emily Church, far right, Wednesday, May 15, 2019, in Los Angeles. The Berkeley-based Kitkit School and London's onebillion educational nonprofit were declared co-winners of the XPRIZE For Global Learning at a presentation Wednesday night and will share a \$10 million award. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

They had to develop programs filled with games that could grab children's attention and then, like teachers do, use drawings, letters, numbers and sounds to teach them to teach themselves to read, write and do arithmetic.

The games would show children letters and pictures, allow them to trace letters themselves as they learned to write, and even read books to them.

When testing began, XPRIZE officials said only 2% of the children could read as much as a sentence in their native Swahili. Three-quarters had never attended school and many had to be shown how to swipe their finger across a tablet's screen just to power it up. But 15 months later, 30% of the children had acquired basic reading skills.

Representatives of both winning teams said the hardest part was developing software at their home bases, putting it on tablets and hoping the children would take to it and figure out how to use it.



Members of Kitkit School embrace after winning the XPRIZE for Children's

Literacy, Wednesday, May 15, 2019, in Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

"We had to learn fast and work closely with partners who were in East Africa," said Sooinn Lee, who co-founded Enuma Inc., the operator of Team Kitkit School, with her husband in 2012 and whose company produces the popular children's app Todo Math.

"It often felt like driving in the dark," she said.

Despite that, all five finalists developed functional, open-sourced software that will be put on the web so everybody can use it. Judges determined that the two winners simply did the best when it came to producing results.

That any of them succeeded likely came as a surprise to critics who didn't think it could be done when the XPRIZE Foundation announced plans for the Global Learning prize five years ago.



Representatives from onebillion, Jamie Stuart, third from left, and Andrew Ashe, fourth from left, and representatives from KitKit School, Sooinn Lee, third from right, and Gunho Lee, second from right, receive the XPRIZE Children's Literacy award from XPRIZE Executive Director Emily Church, far left, founder and Executive Chairman, Peter Diamandis, second from left, Telsa CEO Elon Musk, fourth from right, and XPRIZE CEO Anousheh Ansari, far right, Wednesday, May 15, 2019, in Los Angeles. The Berkeley-based Kitkit School and London's onebillion educational nonprofit were declared co-winners of the XPRIZE For Global Learning and will share a \$10 million award. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)



Tesla CEO Elon Musk, left, shakes hands with XPRIZE founder and Executive Chairman, Peter Diamandis, during the presentation of the XPRIZE for Children's Literacy Wednesday, May 15, 2019, in Los Angeles. A California company founded by game-developer parents who wanted to help their special-needs son is sharing a \$10 million XPRIZE award with a London-based educational nonprofit for programs created to teach illiterate children how to teach themselves to read. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)



XPRIZE Executive Director Emily Church speaks during the presentation of the XPRIZE for Children's Literacy Wednesday, May 15, 2019, in Los Angeles. The Berkeley-based Kitkit School and London's onebillion educational nonprofit were declared co-winners of the XPRIZE For Global Learning at a presentation Wednesday night. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)



Tesla CEO Elon Musk, center, joins XPRIZE founder Peter Diamandis, left, and CEO Anousheh Ansari during the presentation of the XPRIZE for Children's Literacy Wednesday, May 15, 2019, in Los Angeles. The Berkeley-based Kitkit School and London's onebillion educational nonprofit were declared co-winners of the XPRIZE For Global Learning at a presentation Wednesday night. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)



Actor LeVar Burton speaks during the presentation of the XPRIZE for Children's Literacy, Wednesday, May 15, 2019, in Los Angeles. The Berkeley-based Kitkit School and London's onebillion educational nonprofit were declared co-winners of the XPRIZE For Global Learning at a presentation Wednesday night. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)



Kitkit School CEO Sooinn Lee, third from right, and Chief Engineer, Gunho Lee, second from left, receive the XPRIZE for Children's Literacy from XPRIZE Founder and Executive Chairman, Peter Diamandis, far left, Tesla CEO Elon Musk, third from left, XPRIZE CEO Anousheh Ansari, second from right, and Executive Director Emily Church, far right, Wednesday, May 15, 2019, in Los Angeles. The Berkeley-based Kitkit School and London's onebillion educational nonprofit were declared co-winners of the XPRIZE For Global Learning at a presentation Wednesday night. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

"All our experts said, 'Are you sure about this?'" recalled Emily Musil Church, XPRIZE's executive director of prize operations.

"Our specialty is making sure we frame the problem in a way that is audacious but at the same time achievable and really advances the field,"

said XPRIZE Foundation CEO Anousheh Ansari, who funded the first prize, for \$10 million, in 1996 for private space flight.

The winning team of Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen and aviation pioneer Burt Rutan needed nearly a decade to accomplish that goal, but they created a new industry by sending their privately piloted SpaceShipOne into space in 2004.

Since then the XPRIZE Foundation has funded more than a dozen other prizes for those pursuing such innovations as making water for drought-stricken areas by heating air in shipping containers, creating sensors that allow people to track their health in real time and developing advanced ways to study ocean contamination.



In this Sept. 29, 2006 file photo, U.S. space tourist Anousheh Ansari waves shortly after landing near the town of Arkalyk, northern Kazakhstan. CEO of the XPRIZE Foundation, Ansari, funded the first prize for \$10 million for private space flight. The 2019 XPRIZE, also for \$10 million, funded by entrepreneur Elon Musk, presented a challenge: Come up with open-sourced software that could easily be downloaded onto tablets used by illiterate children to teach themselves to read. The winner of this latest competition for global innovation is being announced Wednesday, May 15, 2019, in Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Misha Japaridze, File)

The winners of the latest prize will now get to work putting their software into the hands of as many people as possible.

Lee said Kitkit's efforts will include adapting its software for smartphones, adding they are widely used in developing countries.

Onebillion wants to quickly begin distributing in multiple languages to reach as large a global audience as possible. More than 250 million children worldwide cannot read or write, according to the XPRIZE Foundation.

"This will be transformational for them, their communities and their countries," said onebillion's Judith Hermetter.

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