



Minimonos

JOHN BESSANT
Managing Innovation

Transcript of video: Minimonos – Melissa Clark-Reynolds

I: Well, we are very fortunate today to have with us Melissa Clark-Reynolds, who is the founder, chief executive officer and, dare I say, the ‘alpha monkey’ of Minimonos.

MCR: Yes.

I: Melissa, thank you very much for talking with us. MCR: Pleasure.

I: Could you tell us a little bit about Minimonos?

MCR: Sure. Minimonos is a virtual world primarily aimed at boys, 6-12. It’s for people who might be familiar with Moshi Monsters. We kind of call it a green Moshi Monsters for boys. I used to joke in the US and call it Club Penguin meets the inconvenient truth. So, it has a very strong sustainability, ethical basis to it, but we lead with fun and it’s a virtual world for boys and girls who like boys’ stuff, first up. We’ve got just over half a million members, we’re growing very fast and our biggest market is in the UK.

I: And when were you founded?

MCR: Well, I founded it in early 2009 and I’m a serial entrepreneur – I have a team of guys, actually, who mostly work for me over various projects and I pulled them back together once we started. We went up, initially, just with a blog and we knew we were building a virtual world. None of us had built one before and we literally released, released, released. So, we are very action-oriented: we release and then test. So, we put something up, see if the kids like it; if they do we leave it up, if they don’t we are quite brutal at taking it out again. And we now release every week and every week we really test to see whether it’s working or not.

I: I notice you have some sort of links into the ‘real world’, things like your thing with Sainsbury’s at the moment, which looks very exciting.

MCR: Yes. So, we’ve just recently, in the UK, launched a prepaid card. It looks like this, like an iTunes card.

I: OK, lovely.

MCR: And that has been launched in Sainsbury’s. It has gone really well. The other thing that we have done is we launched a project this year with 50 kids to encourage them to become what we call ‘eco-monkeys’. So, in our world kids make a monkey avatar of themselves and then they can play and hang out with their friends and talk and we have a lot of parties. That is probably our most popular thing.

So 57 kids have now done eco projects in the real world and we give them rewards in the virtual world. So, a lovely kid from the UK went and waded into a semi-frozen pond while his friend videoed him on his iPhone, and he cleaned up all of the litter in this pond.

I: Wow.

MCR: Then we give him rewards in the virtual world for what he has done in the real world.

I: Fantastic.

MCR: So later this year we are launching with the National Geographic Kids and that project will go out to UK schools and the winning school will get a trip to the Eden Project. So, it is very exciting for us to link those real world activities with the virtual world. But, at the same time, we want to make sure it is not preachy, that kids don't feel like they are now learning a lesson about something. We just normalise sustainability throughout everything we do.

I: It is absolutely fabulous. Can you tell us a little about why? How did you come to start this wonderful thing?

MCR: I have children and my youngest child is now 11, but when she was three she woke me up to tell me the wireless was down, and she certainly didn't mean the radio! So I realised that, for her, she has grown up in a world that is completely wired – she has her iPod Touch. Were there cars when you were little? Was there the internet? Those things happened long before she was born.

So, when I started to look at what was available for children on the internet and also what was happening on children's television, I really just saw how much content were marketing solutions for big companies trying to sell more, what I call 'plastic crap' for kids. So, they are selling, even in the UK, Moshi Monsters has now sold 20 million plastic figurines called Moshlings to UK children. Now, who is asking where did they come from? Where will they go? I was really concerned about what is the production process. So, for a plastic toy that is a petroleum project, that is being made somewhere, I don't know where, is it being made with Fair Trade practices? Is a child working in a sweatshop to make a plastic toy that my child might buy? I didn't want that. I wanted to know that there was a safe place for kids to go where they were not going to be bombarded with marketing messages and where they started to ask some questions about what is the connection? Where does that go when I've finished with it? When I take that petroleum plastic toy and I put it in a landfill, is it really going away or is it just going to sit in Somerset somewhere for the next thousand years? What is happening to it? Children want those questions; they want to know. So, I wanted there to be somewhere where that could all be debated.

Long term we will launch ethical toys. It is an interesting thing, thinking about every toy that can, perhaps, be re-purposed into something else. My Sainsbury's cards, my goal for them is to have them in forestry steward council's certified card but with seeds in them, so that children can plant the card otherwise, not that it goes into a recycling bin or something, and starting to think differently about cradle-to-cradle design all the way through. So, even though we are a web business, we can really think about cradle-to-cradle online and offline.

I: Fantastic. It really sounds exciting. MCR: Thanks.

I: As an entrepreneur, somebody who has built this up and is still building wonderful things, can you talk a little about some of the things that have helped you on the way?

MCR: I think having a great team. My CTO and I have worked together for 10 years and I trust him with my life. So, I think that ability to know that we can pull together when things are tough, and they do get tough. I have been blessed by the angels that I have who have invested in the business and that the same. I see them as being on my team. I think a mistake entrepreneurs often make is they take money, because they have been told to raise money and they get whatever money they can. What you should look for is look for an angel who can actually help you; an angel who will be with you when it is tough and support you when it is tough, emotionally as much as the financial. Make sure they believe in your vision, because I have seen that fall apart. So, I think that has been good for us.

We have a very strong learning culture on our team, so if you make mistakes we just figure out how to fix them. So, we know that we are going so fast, we are making a lot of mistakes. I think the only people who don't make mistakes are the people who don't do anything.

I: Yes.

MCR: So, as an entrepreneur you just have to accept that you are going to make mistakes every day, every hour, every minute and just get on with solving them. So, I think that has been really good for us.

I: It is fascinating, lovely. And I guess the reverse of that question: some of the challenges in terms of lessons you have learnt on the way?

MCR: From an operational point of view, we have put a lot of effort into social media, thinking, gosh, we are aiming at a young generation, they are online. Kids under 12 don't have email addresses. It is pretty hard to do some of that viral activity with kids who don't have email addresses. So, we probably wasted quite a lot of money on that.

Kids on Twitter, and we have like 2,500 kids follow us on Twitter, but they all have about three friends each, so they are not going to be a big viral market. So, some stuff like that was really useful to learn. I think sales are never done until the money is in, so we were raising capital and then, at the very last minute, it fell over. We have recovered, but we were left quite high and dry for a little while and I realised that, until the money is in your bank account, the deal is never done and you can't count on a deal until it is done. That doesn't matter whether it is raising capital or doing a sale with someone. So, get the cash and then celebrate. Don't stop until you've got that cash.

I: That makes a lot of sense.

MCR: Yes. I think the other one too is don't spend too long working on your product; get it out to the customer as fast as you can. People are often afraid to do it, but your customer will co-create with you. If you have real respect for your customer, and I love our customers, they will help you build the

product. I don't mean that they do the colouring-in or anything like that, but they really show us the way and they encourage us and they send us the most amazing fan art. They help us build the product. I think we have done much better doing it that way than trying to go 'ta da, here we are, we have finished, what do you think?'

I: Fantastic, yes.

MCR: So, that has made it.

I: One last question: as somebody who described herself as a serial entrepreneur, if I had to ask you to give the one-minute words of advice for would-be entrepreneurs, anything?

MCR: I have two! One of them is, if you can imagine doing anything else, get on with that, because this is the hardest road possible. It is like people who decide they want to be dancers or artists, I think it is a vocation. The worst thing I can imagine is that I go broke and have to get a job. When I lie in bed at night, worried about paying the wages, that is my fear, is that I am going to have to get a job. So, I think it isn't for the fainthearted and if you can imagine doing something else, get on with it. On the other hand, if you decide you are going to be an entrepreneur then hone that skill; see it as an apprenticeship that will never be finished. I just learn every day. Every single day is a school day and it is probably one of the things I love about being an entrepreneur is that there is no day that isn't challenging, interesting, stimulating, learning. If you are that kind of person, I think being an entrepreneur is perfect.

I: Fantastic. Melissa, thank you so much. MCR: It's a pleasure.

I: It's been really interesting.

MCR: I look forward to seeing some more. I: One tiny query.

MCR: Yes.

I: I presume adults are allowed to play at being monkeys as well?

MCR: Well, very interestingly, we moderate hard, so we would really prefer it that it is children. We have lots of systems that keep adults out.

I: I understand. At least adults could take a look at the website.

MCR: Oh, they should and, if there are any parents who want to know what the children are up to, absolutely. But our focus is children.

I: Great. Melissa, thank you so much for talking to us. MCR: You're really welcome.

I: Thank you.