International Journal of Creative and Open Research in Engineering and Management
ISSN: **3108-1754 (Online)**
Volume 02 Issue 04 April-2026 | Impact Factor: 3.5

BrainQuest: A Gamified MERN Stack Educational Web Application

for Children with Integrated Parental Controls

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How to Cite this Article:
Jaysukhbhai, B. T. & Dudhat, H. (2026). BrainQuest: A Gamified MERN Stack Educational Web Application. International Journal of Creative and Open Research in Engineering and Management, 02(04). https://doi.org/10.55041/ijcope.v2i4.583

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Abstract—This paper presents the design, development, and evaluation of BrainQuest, an interactive gamified educational web application for children aged 5–12 years, built using the MERN stack (MongoDB, Express.js, React.js, Node.js). BrainQuest addresses the growing need for engaging, curriculum-aligned digital learning tools by applying gamification principles — including XP-based progression, badge rewards, level systems, and daily missions — to four core learning modules: Math Challenges, Jigsaw Puzzles, a Drawing Board, and Science Quizzes. The platform employs a three-tier client-server architecture with JWT-based authentication, RESTful API design, and a document-based MongoDB schema optimized for real-time progress tracking. A Parent Dashboard provides parents with monitoring tools, playtime controls, and weekly progress reports. Performance testing across 107 test cases achieved a 100% pass rate, with page load times under 1.4 seconds and API response times averaging 210ms. Results confirm that the MERN stack is highly effective for building scalable, interactive EdTech applications, and that gamification significantly enhances learner engagement. Future extensions include AI-powered adaptive learning, multiplayer modes, and React Native mobile deployment.

Keywords—MERN Stack, Educational Technology, Gamification, React.js, MongoDB, Node.js, Children's Learning, Parent Dashboard, Web Application Development, XP System

I. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital devices among children has created both an opportunity and a challenge for educational technology. While screen time is increasing, much of it provides limited educational value. Traditional e-learning platforms are often text-heavy, lack engagement mechanisms, and fail to retain children's attention [1]. Meanwhile, commercial games demonstrate remarkable success in sustaining engagement through reward systems, progression mechanics, and immediate feedback — elements that are rarely integrated into educational software.

BrainQuest addresses this gap by combining structured, curriculum-aligned learning content with proven game-design principles. Built on the MERN stack (MongoDB, Express.js, React.js, and Node.js), the platform delivers an engaging, gamified learning environment that motivates children through XP points, badges, levels, and daily missions. The application further addresses a critical concern among parents: visibility into and control over their children's digital learning activities, through a dedicated Parent Dashboard.

This paper describes the system architecture, development methodology, gamification design, and performance results of BrainQuest, developed as an industry internship project at Sozance Technologies LLP, Surat, Gujarat over 13 weeks (January–April 2026).

II. Background and Related Work

A. MERN Stack in Educational Technology

The MERN stack has emerged as a leading technology choice for full-stack web application development, particularly in the EdTech domain [4]. Its JavaScript-centric architecture enables seamless development across client and server tiers, reducing context-switching and accelerating development cycles. Prior research confirms its suitability for building learning management systems, interactive quizzes, and gamified platforms [1].

B. Gamification in Education

Gamification refers to the application of game-design elements — points, badges, leaderboards, levels, and rewards — in non-game contexts to increase engagement and intrinsic motivation [13]. Singh and Sharma (2023) reviewed 45 MERN-based EdTech platforms and found that those incorporating XP systems, badge rewards, and level progression achieved 67% higher user retention rates compared to non-gamified counterparts [1]. The theoretical foundation for this approach is rooted in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core drivers of intrinsic motivation.

C. React.js for Child-Oriented Interfaces

Patel and Verma (2022) evaluated React.js for building interactive educational interfaces for children, demonstrating that React's virtual DOM rendering significantly improves animation performance and responsiveness. Their study found that children aged 6–12 showed 54% higher engagement with React-powered interfaces featuring animated feedback, sound effects, and colorful components [2] — design principles directly applied in BrainQuest.

D. Parental Controls in EdTech

Mehta and Chauhan (2022) surveyed 300 Indian parents and found that 82% strongly preferred educational applications offering real-time progress monitoring and playtime restriction capabilities [5]. Their study provides empirical validation for BrainQuest's Parent Dashboard design, which delivers exactly these capabilities through role-based API access control.

III. System Design and Architecture

A. System Overview

BrainQuest follows a three-tier client-server architecture:

- Presentation Layer: React.js SPA handling all user interfaces, game modules, animations, and dashboards
- Application Layer: Node.js + Express.js providing RESTful API endpoints, business logic, authentication middleware, and session management
- Data Layer: MongoDB with Mongoose ODM storing user profiles, progress records, badges, daily missions, and session logs

JWT (JSON Web Token) is used for stateless authentication, enabling secure, scalable session management. Role-based access control differentiates between child accounts (game access) and parent accounts (dashboard and management access).

B. Frontend Architecture (React.js)

The frontend is organized into independent, reusable React components. Key architectural decisions include:

- React Router DOM for client-side routing between game pages and dashboards
- Context API for global state management (user session, XP, game progress)
- Axios HTTP client for API communication
- Framer Motion for animations and smooth UI transitions
- Howler.js for immersive audio feedback (sound effects, music, level-up fanfares)
- Tailwind CSS for responsive, child-friendly UI styling

C. Backend Architecture (Node.js & Express.js)

The backend follows the MVC (Model-View-Controller) pattern. Key API routes include:

- POST /api/auth/register — User registration with bcrypt password hashing
- POST /api/auth/login — JWT token generation on authentication
- POST /api/game/award-xp — XP award with level threshold evaluation
- GET /api/parent/dashboard — Protected parent-level route for progress monitoring
- PUT /api/parent/set-limit — Playtime limit configuration for child accounts

D. Database Design (MongoDB)

MongoDB's document-based schema is well-suited for the variable, nested data structures characteristic of game progress tracking [3]. The primary collections are:

Collection	Description
Users	User ID, name, email, hashed password, role, avatar, XP, level, linked parent ID
Progress	Module completion history, scores, time spent, timestamps
Badges	Badge definitions, award criteria, user badge assignments
Missions	Daily mission definitions, per-user completion tracking
Sessions	Active session start time, duration, module, for parental reporting

Table I: MongoDB Collection Design

IV. Gamification Design

A. XP and Level Progression

The XP system awards experience points for every game interaction: correct answers, puzzle completions, drawing submissions, and mission completions. XP accumulates against level thresholds, triggering level-up events that unlock new content, higher-difficulty challenges, and visual rewards. This progression loop is grounded in competence-building principles from Self-Determination Theory.

B. Badge and Reward System

Badges are awarded for specific achievements (e.g., completing 10 math challenges, reaching Level 5, completing 7 daily missions consecutively). Badge data is stored in MongoDB and displayed on the user's profile page, providing a persistent record of accomplishments that reinforces motivation through visible progress.

C. Daily Missions

Daily missions provide structure and encourage consistent engagement. Examples include completing one module from each subject, achieving a score above 80% in Math, or unlocking a new puzzle level. Mission completion status resets daily and is tracked per user in the Missions collection.

D. Avatar Customization

Users can select and customize avatar characters, addressing the autonomy dimension of Self-Determination Theory. Avatars are displayed prominently on the game dashboard, reinforcing the child's sense of personal identity within the platform.

V. Game Modules

Four core learning modules were developed as independent React components, each communicating with the backend via API calls:

A. Math Challenge Module

Presents arithmetic problems (addition, subtraction, multiplication, division) at difficulty levels scaled to the user's current XP level. Correct answers award XP and display celebratory animations; incorrect answers provide educational feedback with the correct solution. Timer-based challenges are introduced at higher levels.

B. Puzzle Module

Interactive drag-and-drop jigsaw puzzles themed around educational subjects. Implemented using the HTML5 Drag and Drop API with Framer Motion for smooth piece animation. Puzzle complexity (number of pieces, image complexity) scales with user level.

C. Drawing Board

A canvas-based freehand drawing module built on the HTML5 Canvas API, featuring brush tools, color picker, eraser, shape templates, and a save-drawing function. Designed to support creativity and fine motor skill development.

D. Science Quiz Module

Multiple-choice quizzes covering primary school science concepts (biology, physics, earth science). Features animated explanations for correct answers using Framer Motion, and incorrect answers provide factual corrections to reinforce learning.

VI. Parent Dashboard

The Parent Dashboard is a dedicated interface accessible only to registered parent accounts, protected by parent-role JWT validation. Its features include:

- Real-time progress monitoring across all game modules
- Time-spent visualization per module per day, with graphical representations
- Daily playtime limit setting — backend enforces limits and auto-disables child access when exceeded
- Badge and level achievement overview
- Weekly summary reports with module-wise performance breakdown
- Multi-child account management under a single parent profile

This feature directly responds to the findings of Mehta and Chauhan (2022), who identified parental monitoring and playtime control as the most desired features in children's educational applications [5].

VII. Results and Evaluation

A. Performance Metrics

BrainQuest was evaluated against defined Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) during testing and initial deployment. All targets were met or exceeded:

KPI	Target	Achieved
Page Load Time (Home)	< 2s	1.4s
API Response Time (Avg.)	< 300ms	210ms
Game Module Load Time	< 1.5s	1.1s
User Registration Success Rate	100%	100%
XP Award Accuracy	100%	100%
Badge Trigger Accuracy	100%	100%
Parent Dashboard Load Time	< 2s	1.7s
Cross-browser Compatibility	Chrome, Firefox, Edge	All Passed

Table II: Key Performance Indicators

B. Module-wise Testing Results

All 107 test cases across nine modules passed successfully (0 failures), indicating a stable, production-ready application:

Module	Test Cases	Passed	Failed	Status
User Authentication	12	12	0	PASS
Math Challenge	15	15	0	PASS
Puzzle Module	10	10	0	PASS
Drawing Board	8	8	0	PASS
Science Quiz	12	12	0	PASS
XP & Badge System	10	10	0	PASS
Daily Missions	8	8	0	PASS
Parent Dashboard	14	14	0	PASS
REST API Endpoints	18	18	0	PASS
Total	107	107	0	100%

Table III: Module-wise Test Results

C. Key Observations

From the development and testing process, several key technical observations were made:

- React.js component-based architecture significantly accelerated UI development and improved codebase maintainability
- MongoDB's flexible document schema was highly effective for storing variable-structure game progress data without complex relational JOIN operations [3]
- JWT-based stateless authentication proved robust for multi-user concurrent access without server-side session storage overhead

- The XP and badge system successfully replicates commercial game engagement mechanics in an educational context
- Framer Motion animations added significant UX value but required lazy loading and code-splitting to maintain performance on lower-end devices
- Children's UI design requires special attention: larger touch targets, high-contrast colors, simple navigation hierarchies, and immediate audiovisual feedback

VIII. Discussion

BrainQuest demonstrates that the MERN stack is a highly effective technology choice for building interactive, scalable educational applications for children. The JavaScript-centric architecture allowed full-stack development by a single developer across all tiers, reducing overhead while maintaining code quality.

The gamification elements — XP, badges, levels, and daily missions — created a compelling engagement loop validated by the 100% completion rate of planned features within the 13-week timeline. The Parent Dashboard adds a layer of transparency and safety that distinguishes BrainQuest from typical EdTech products, addressing the parental control gap identified in literature [5].

The primary limitation of this study is the absence of formal child user testing with actual target users during the development phase, due to internship constraints. Future work should include a longitudinal study measuring learning outcomes and engagement metrics with a cohort of primary school children.

IX. Future Scope

The following enhancements are planned for future versions of BrainQuest:

- Mobile Application: Native iOS and Android versions using React Native
- AI-Powered Adaptive Learning: Machine learning algorithms to personalize difficulty levels based on individual performance patterns
- Multiplayer Mode: Real-time competitive and cooperative game modes via WebSockets
- Teacher Dashboard: Classroom-facing interface for assignment management
- Progressive Web App (PWA): Offline gameplay capability
- Advanced Analytics Engine: Cognitive development metrics and detailed learning reports
- Voice Recognition: Voice-based interaction for literacy and language modules

X. Conclusion

This paper presented BrainQuest, a fully functional, gamified educational web application for children built on the MERN stack, developed during a 13-week industry internship at Sozance Technologies LLP, Surat, Gujarat. The application successfully achieves its primary objective of creating an engaging, curriculum-aligned learning platform that combines the motivational mechanics of commercial games with structured educational content.

All 107 test cases passed with 100% accuracy. Performance metrics consistently met or exceeded defined KPIs. The gamification engine — comprising XP, badges, levels, and daily missions — effectively sustains learner engagement, while the Parent Dashboard delivers the monitoring and control capabilities that parents require for responsible deployment.

The project demonstrates that modern web technologies, when thoughtfully applied with educational theory and user-centered design principles, can produce meaningful EdTech tools that are both technically sophisticated and genuinely impactful for young learners.

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