HACKING



How The Napster of Smartphones Just Won Two Hackers $100k

By **Nick Cowen** on 19 Nov 2014 at 8:00PM

Shai and Pavel are dog tired.

The pair of them flew into San Jose, California, from Tel Aviv a day and a half ago. They grabbed a few hours of sleep at a hotel before being ferried to the PayPal Town Hall about 10 minutes' drive away. They've been battling jet lag, mainlining caffeine and catching the odd nap while working on an app that had to be produced, presented and demoed in just 24 hours.

But rather than at the end of their tether, Shai Mishali and Pavel Kaminsky are abuzz with energy as the pair has just emerged as top of the world's hacking tree. And as Team Tel Aviv in the annual PayPal Braintree Battlehack Hackathon, they're now $100,000 richer, too – that's more than £30,000 a piece.

"We were surprised, shocked!" says Pavel. "We'd had a rough day and we were surrounded by really smart, sharp people. There's no one here who wasn't good. Everyone here is spectacular."

Pavel isn't kidding. Team Tel Aviv are surrounded by some of the best hackers on the planet, the coders who saw off all comers in the opening, local-level rounds. The cavernous PayPal Town Hall on eBay's campus buzzed for two days this past weekend with programming creativity, with 14 international teams crunching code on apps offering abilities to do everything from screwing with interactive billboards to breaking the ice on campus to garbling social-network posts. Competition is tough.



The rules are simple: the teams that have made it to the finals have to pitch their idea for a PayPal-integrated app to the judges – and it can't be the same one that was victorious in the previous round. It's like *Masterchef* but with code. Unlike *Masterchef*, the app has to have some social relevance and be broadly altruistic. Once the pitch is in place, hackers then have 24 hours to produce a working app and present it to a panel of judges, who ultimately decide who bags the cash.

Working methods and the software used varied immensely, the most uniform sight the piles of falafel and Red Bull littering the coding stations, but there were some undeniably eye-opening apps this year. Team Toronto turned the activity of putting your smartphone away into a game. Team Miami created one that not only found the best fast-food deals in your vicinity, but also kept count of your calories and exercise regime alongside it. Vicious.

Then there was good old Team London, who birthed an app that allowed peer-to-peer education between students, so children from all over the world could tutor one another on subjects they were struggling with. It's the sort of initiative British education has been crying out for and also one the government is unlikely to come up with in a month of Sundays.



Team Tel Aviv conquered all, though, by creating Airhop, an app that allows users without a SIM card or internet access to make and send calls and texts with their smartphones by accessing the connectivity of a friend's phone… in exchange for a PayPal payment, of course. In other words, you can jack the Wi-Fi of a mate's phone without having to sign up to a network contract. Perhaps the biggest surprise of the day was that the mobile phone industry didn't fly in a drone to take notes.

"We want to move forward with the app, but once we get back to our regular lives, things might get a bit weird," reckons Pavel. "There has to be a reason why people would embrace it. In the West, it's not so much of an issue, but we think there are more use-case scenarios in developing countries."

In just 24 hours, two guys came up with the phone industry's Napster moment. Imagine what the two could do with three months and some venture-capital funding. So what's next for the pair of them?

"Sleep," says Shai. "I just want to sleep."



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