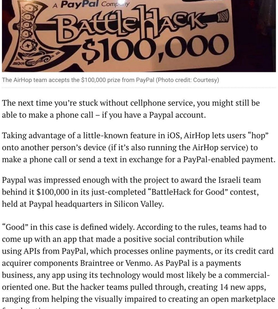
AirHop app lets you make calls without a cellphone plan

PayPal awards an Israeli team $100,000 prize for 'absolutely disruptive' technology

By DAVID SHAMAH
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The AirHop team accepts the $100,000 prize from PayPal (Photo credit: Courtesy)

The next time you're stuck without cellphone service, you might still be able to make a phone call – if you have a Paypal account.

Taking advantage of a little-known feature in iOS, AirHop lets users "hop" onto another person's device (if it's also running the AirHop service) to make a phone call or send a text in exchange for a PayPal-enabled payment.

Paypal was impressed enough with the project to award the Israeli team behind it $100,000 in its just-completed "BattleHack for Good" contest, held at Paypal headquarters in Silicon Valley.

"Good" in this case is defined widely. According to the rules, teams had to come up with an app that made a positive social contribution while using APIs from PayPal, which processes online payments, or its credit card acquirer components Braintree or Venmo. As PayPal is a payments business, any app using its technology would most likely be a commercial-oriented one. But the hacker teams pulled through, creating 14 new apps, ranging from helping the visually impaired to creating an open marketplace for education.

But it was AirHop, created by Tel Aviv hackers Shai Mishali and Pavel Kaminsky, that was good enough to score the $100,000 PayPal prize. Calling AirHop "extraordinary," John Lunn, a top PayPal executive and Battlehack judge, said that it was "absolutely disruptive. What [the team from] Tel Aviv built from a technology standpoint was incredible. I've never seen it before."

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The app takes advantage of an obscure feature of Apple's operating system for iPhones and iPads called the Multipeer Connectivity Framework, which lets apps cobble together a peer-to-peer network using WiFi, Bluetooth, and any other connection protocol in the area in order to utilize another user's cellphone features. Basically, it allows users to create a "mesh network" in which user devices are chained to one another, extending services far beyond their range.

The technology could, for example, extend cellphone or Internet connectivity to users located out of range. One user in a service area could connect to others beyond the area where cellphone service or WiFi extend, with each device acting as a sort of mother's station to pass service capability onto the next device.

AirHop uses this to extend phone service to devices that have no cellphone connection. It would allow users who travel abroad, for example, to take advantage of a local user's cellphone service plan without having to buy one themselves. In the AirHop model, users could offer their services to such travelers ad hoc, with payments for airtime made via PayPal.

"Everyone has faced a situation without connectivity, and it often happens at the worst time, like personal emergencies or disasters," said Mishali and Kaminsky. "AirHop creates an opt-in community that solves the no connectivity issue and possibly even saves lives in the most extreme situations. Without BattleHack we would have never had the chance to do something so bold. It was an incredible experience."

The app will be available in the App Store in the coming weeks.

To win the prize, AirHop was pitted against 13 other apps from around the world, and had to pass muster with Lunn and his fellow judges, Bill Ready, CEO of Braintree; Alex Sirota, co-founder and CTO of Loop Commerce; Owen Thomas, editor in chief of ReadWrite; and Danny Zhang, co-founder and CTO of Wish.

"After a weekend of stiff competition and incredible food — falafel, sushi towers, crème brûlée, lobster rolls, crepes and more — we are thrilled to award $100,000 to the team from Tel Aviv to recognize their amazing technology and innovation," wrote Lunn in a blog post.

"The goal of our BattleHack program is to find the best and brightest developers around the world and share with them the tools to effect change," Lunn added. "I've been inspired by the success of the BattleHack series in just two short years — it's extremely encouraging to see what the future holds."

Matan Parnes, head of PayPal Israel, said that the local office was thrilled for the team. "It's fantastic to see Pavel and Shai win the first prize and receive the recognition and respect they deserve for their app. Israeli developers are very highly regarded in PayPal, and always do very well in contests and hackathons sponsored by the company. It is not by chance that PayPal has set up its worldwide security research and development center in Israel, which is tasked with battling online fraud. PayPal has and will continue to expand its presence in Israel."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYcg1wC8Du8

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