

START-UP

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Changing the World

Otsimo, the mobile game platform helping children with Autism learn while entertaining them, has reached 13,000 members in merely one and a half year and received its first investment from TÜSİAD (Turkish Industry and Business Association) and Galata Business Angels. It also became one of the first initiatives supported by Hamdi Ulukaya.

BELCE ÖRÜ

This interview would probably not be possible two years ago," says the co-founder of Otsimo, Hasan Zafer Elcik, "It was tough speaking about my little brother Alper." He is quite content now that his brother has shown serious development and Otsimo, the game platform he built with his partner Sercan Değirmenci, has grown.

The story of Otsimo began when Elcik noticed his brother, who couldn't focus on anything more than five minutes, had shown interest in smart devices and he got him a tablet computer. He bought the tablet, but struggled to find any reliable and beneficial applications online for his brother's education. It's safe to say he couldn't find anything of substance. "I contemplated about doing something on my own," he thought to himself. But the idea was ignited when Sercan Değirmenci and Elcik participated in a hackathon (competitions that generally last 24 to 48 hours where each team develops software) organized by Arçelik in July 2015. Elcik says that Emrah Yalaz, one of the co-founders of String Ventures, asked them, "Is there an issue in your life that you would like to resolve?" Elcik smiles, remembering that day, "The topic of the

competition was the Internet of Things. Eventually someone who developed a software about ovens won the game."

However, the question Yalaz asked stuck with him for a very long time. It provided the much-needed motivation to realize his idea when he couldn't dare to do it. He rolled up his sleeve with his close friend Değirmenci, whom he speaks of as "a great coder who dearly loves computers". Değirmenci quit his post at Panteon, a game and education technology company, where he worked as product manager. Elcik also quit his job at Gamelooper, a software firm. In October 2015, they got accepted into ATOM (Animation Technologies Game Center) at Teknokent in METU campus, with their idea to develop a game platform for children with autism. Seven months later, they received the grand prize of TRY 75,000 at TÜSİAD'S "Bu Gençlikte İş Var" contest. Emphasizing that there are no other studies done in this field, TÜSİAD President Erol Bilecik says, "This team dreams of a world where no children with autism become outcast and all receive education on the same conditions with other children," and adds, "They turned this dream into reality through technology and artificial intelligence."

Otsimo was incorporated in August 2016 and reached 13,000 members within



a year and a half, 10,000 of which from Turkey and 3,000 from the USA. As of July 4, 2017, they are charging TRY 9.90 a month for users in Turkey and USD 9.90 a month for users abroad for subscription. The number of premium users using the platform is 71. Their aim is to increase this figure to a thousand by the end of 2018, especially with the influx of users they expect from abroad. Elcik states that they generated USD 2,219 in October from the premium users.

What makes Otsimo truly special is their potential. They were selected as the "Best social venture in Europe" at the Global Social Venture Competition (GSVC) and "World's best social venture" at Entrepreneurs' Organization (EO), where over 8,000 business people from 40 countries compete. In addition, Otsimo was one of the global finalists at the social venture competition

organized Berkeley University in August. "I have known this application since its infancy," said Sina Afra, adding that the investments and awards the team has received to this date are an indication of 'their road to a beautiful future'. Afra also says, "Zafer already provided to so many people by turning his own story into a social venture. But I believe Otsimo will also become very successful financially."

Investors also seem to think that way. Otsimo received its first investment in December 2016 from Galata Business Angels (GBA). The angel network became a partner with 10% share over an appraisal of TRY 5 million. Birol Yücel, one of GBA investors, says, "Zafer's presentation moved us all to the core," and adds, "Being a part of such venture was very important for all of us." However, there are

Otsimo is the third venture by Zafer Elcik. He developed a location-based software, similar to "Pokemon Go". Another one is an application where people can share their food online and socialize.

TRY 100,000

is the amount they reached by the end of the second month of their crowd-sourcing initiated this February in order to be on Android.



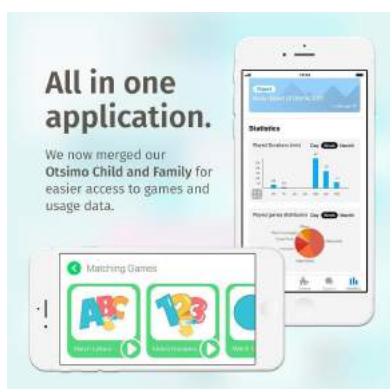
other concrete reasons for this investment, namely Otsimo being the first application of its segment and the fact that its founders actually have technology backgrounds. Yücel says that Otsimo has the opportunity to compete abroad and adds, "Their real success will come through actual globalization of the app."

They have subscribers from the USA and the platform has already been designed considering the needs of children with autism from all around the world. Elcik's 14-year-old brother Alper has 95% autism. Therefore, the platform is prepared by taking into account children that are on the higher spectrum of autism. Games can be unlocked based on the age and education level of the children. Elcik says they developed all of the games based on Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and mostly aim children between the ages of 2 and 7. Otsimo offers educational games for identifying and distinguishing objects, language games for alternative communication and drawing games for fine motor skills. Through artificial intelligence used in the application, it offers parents statistics and recommendations by analyzing the children's progress.

352,000 CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

Autism, which negatively impacts social interaction and communication skills of individuals and cause limited attention and repeated behavior, has many types ranging from Asperger syndrome to severe neurodevelopmental disorder. However, through intense and one-on-one education programs starting from early ages, it is possible to achieve great progress developmentally for individuals with autism. Individuals with autism can be successful in many forms of art and sports.

Alper Elcik can skate, ride bicycles and participates in table tennis tournaments every year. However, it is of utmost importance that many children with autism first gain basic habits such as eating and going to the bathroom before that stage. And this can be achieved through intensive one-on-one education provided at early ages.



Betül Selcen, General Manager of Tohum Autism Foundation, says that children with autism need more education compared to their peers. Unfortunately, the number of children with autism to receive education is around 21,000 in Turkey, where there are 352,000 individuals with autism between the ages of 0-18. Zafer Elcik says, "Out of 5,523 children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder that continue their education at official public schools, 54.6% receive education in private schools. The number of public school is insufficient. There is mostly one teacher per three to four students in these schools."

Thanks to safe color scheme, children are not subject to excessive light, sound or image. Zafer Elcik states that 50% of children with autism spend a long stretch of their lives without being able to speak, and 30% never speak at all. Therefore, the application contains a vocalization program in order to make it easier for children to communicate verbally. For instance, they can tap on a picture of a glass of water and ask for some water. Since the games are developed considering the children with autism, there is no warning received when an answer is incorrect. The incorrect answer is just automatically eliminated. This process continues until the child provides the correct answer or there is only one option left.

Zafer Elcik and Sercan Değirmenci remark that while developing the games, their biggest inspiration and guide has been Tohum Foundation. Binyamin Birkan, Director of Education Programs, has been training Alper Elcik since he was three years old. They learned about ABA and other education methods from Tohum Foundation through Birkan. Elcik says he also received online education on this matter from the Maine University and UC Davis Institute in the USA. During their visits to the USA, they were able to research the education methods used in the schools.

Their latest visit to the United States may open up the door to many opportunities in the country. In fact, they were accepted to Hamdi Ulukaya Initiative (HUI), founded by the CEO of Chobani, Hamdi Ulukaya, to support entrepreneurs in Turkey. With his USD 1.7 billion, Hamdi Ulukaya is in the FORBES billionaires list. Elcik and Değirmenci flew out to New York in July for the three-week program. They got to meet John Ellis "Jeb" Bush, the son of former USA President George H. W. Bush. They excitedly talk about how they were able to meet many executives from institutions such as Google, Healthcare and UNICEF, just with a phone call from Hamdi Ulukaya. Discussions are now ongoing through this new network in the USA about utilization of Otsimo in New York schools. Elcik excitedly mentions a new development, "It is highly likely that we will benefit from UNICEF's fund for development of children and develop a new project."