



///Three. simple. words.

London-based start-up what3words has grand plans to revolutionise mapping, writes **Rita Lobo**

Most of us have experienced the frustration of arriving at an address that had been carefully noted down, only to find that the front door is nowhere to be found. The map on your mobile is no help, as it can only send you to a location; it has no information about access points or the building. A frantic walk around the block reveals the hidden doorway – around the corner. While for most of us this misdirection is no more than an inconvenience, it can have a significant financial and logistical impact on businesses. But a new app is endeavouring to simplify locations and directions and make them specific to a front door, delivery access, street corner, or spot on a crowded beach by creating addresses for where you are, wherever you may be.

While working in the music business, Chris Sheldrick found that a lot of time was being wasted by professional musicians turning up to venues and struggling to find entrances or sites. “You’re always trying to find the back entrance of the stadium or some kind of hidden entrance to an Italian villa up a hillside, and the address never worked for us,” he explains. “So I tried getting people to just input the latitude and longitude into their GPS device or their car or their phone, and found that people were very resistant to using an eight-digit longitude and an eight-digit latitude, and also were prone to making errors.”

That’s when Sheldrick came up with the idea for what3words, a technology system that enables people to identify and share any precise location using only three words. Sheldrick sought the help of Mohan Ganesalingam, a mathematician and childhood friend, to develop a simple mechanism that would employ dictionary words to pinpoint precise locations on a ▶

three-metres-by-three-metres grid. Using this system, they were able to produce an astonishing 57 trillion combinations, and therefore give directions that are accurate to three square metres, all over the world.

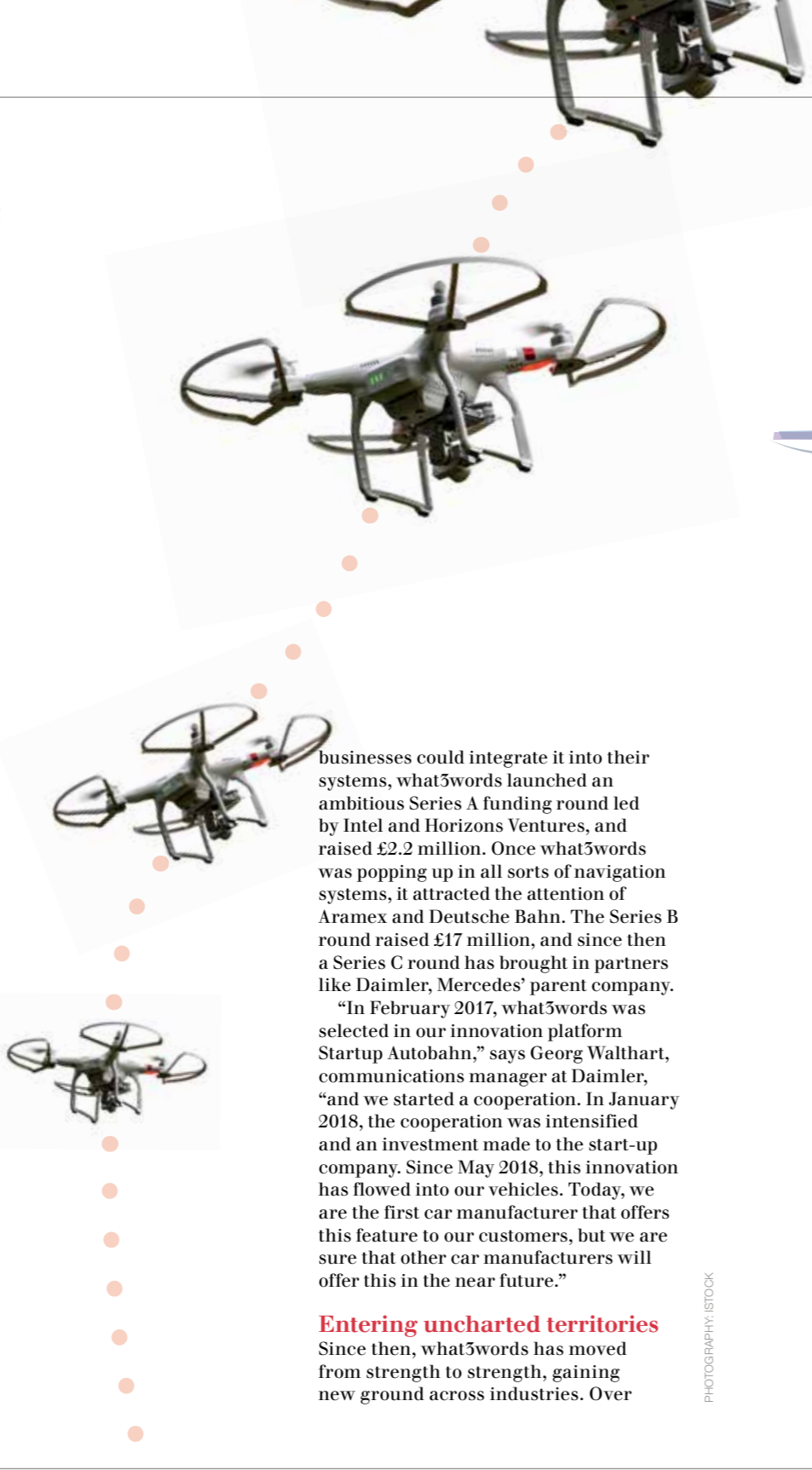
Starting the journey

Together with Jack Waley-Cohen, the pair founded what5words in 2013. It soon became abundantly clear that its appeal is broader than just musicians looking for stage doors. According to research commissioned by what5words, 70% of global addresses will not take you to the front door, with 74% of people saying guests, services and deliveries struggle to find them.

Delivery and logistics companies like Aramex were early adopters because of what5words' obvious potential for efficiency. "The big problem was that people still used descriptive addresses," explains Sheldrick. "They'll say, 'past the lamppost on the left, second door', and that ends up on the label on the package and the driver then has this very inefficient process of driving up and down the road trying to decode that. What Aramex is really advocating is the provision of three-word addresses throughout the Middle East and those countries they operate in, so that when users get a three-word address, they convert it to the latitude and longitude and then can make the delivery accurate to three metres."

The taxi and ride hailing industries have also been enthusiastic early adopters, with companies like Cabify investing in the potential to reduce waiting times between drivers and passengers. "You can now put a three word address straight into Cabify and it'll take you to your destination within three metres, when you a ride through the app," says Sheldrick.

This interest from industries from around the world has piqued the attention of investors. A seed round of financing guaranteed a launch and some funding for development. With a better product and a programming interface so that



businesses could integrate it into their systems, what5words launched an ambitious Series A funding round led by Intel and Horizons Ventures, and raised £2.2 million. Once what5words was popping up in all sorts of navigation systems, it attracted the attention of Aramex and Deutsche Bahn. The Series B round raised £17 million, and since then a Series C round has brought in partners like Daimler, Mercedes' parent company.

"In February 2017, what5words was selected in our innovation platform Startup Autobahn," says Georg Walthart, communications manager at Daimler, "and we started a cooperation. In January 2018, the cooperation was intensified and an investment made to the start-up company. Since May 2018, this innovation has flowed into our vehicles. Today, we are the first car manufacturer that offers this feature to our customers, but we are sure that other car manufacturers will offer this in the near future."

Entering uncharted territories

Since then, what5words has moved from strength to strength, gaining new ground across industries. Over

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1,000 businesses, government agencies and NGOs across 170 countries are using three-word addresses in sectors including automotive, e-commerce, logistics, mobility, travel, post and emergency services, in 26 languages. "Lonely Planet has just printed a guide for Mongolia and put three-word addresses into every single location in the book," says Sheldrick. "In the next 12 months we're really scaling into more markets across the world. It's about getting more user adoption but also, importantly, increasing our number of services. We want to be in all of the main ride hailing services across the world. We want to be in all the major logistics and e-commerce platforms. We want drone companies to be using us. We want to be an Alexa skill that people develop."

According to Sheldrick, 50% of searches will be done by voice, rather than typing, by 2020. "what5words really is the first address solution to be designed for voice," he adds. And indeed, it seems to be this human focus that investors and users find so appealing about the app.

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about it," says Daimler's Walthart. "what5words is optimised for voice input, in contrast to conventional street addresses, which are often ambiguous, even within one city. For example, there are 14 different Church Streets in London. Multilingualism is also a great benefit in that respect, so you can address every 3x3 metres in the world in every available language."

Sheldrick has ambitious plans for the future. Simply put, he wants to change the way everyone in the world talks about their location. "At the same time, we are showing how better addressing can reduce businesses' environmental impact, ease pressure on crowded cities, fuel economic growth in developing nations and save lives." ■