

TinyHippos tackles giant development problem



MELISSA TAIT, RECORD STAFF

TinyHippos founders (from left) Brent Lintner, Dan Silvestru and Pj Lowe have developed software that makes it easier to develop mobile applications.

By Livia Fama, Special to The Record

The modest, brick house in a quiet cul-de-sac in a Waterloo suburb is an unassuming location for the offices of TinyHippos, a company whose product is being used around the world, from South Korea and Germany to the United Kingdom and the United States.

The firm produces a testing tool called Ripple, which aims to make mobile widget and web development a more seamless enterprise for developers. “If you hit your head against the wall enough times you should stop and ask yourself if there’s a door you can go through, and that’s the driving force behind our product, which came from an actual pain we felt as developers, not being able to get from point A to point B,” says Dan Silvestru, the company’s chief technology officer.

Silvestru, a developer with 13 years of experience, founded TinyHippos with his wife, Pj Lowe, a University of Guelph grad who serves as the firm’s chief marketing and operations officer, and chief software engineer Brent Lintner.

The idea for Ripple came when Lintner, a Wilfrid Laurier University

computer science grad, had an assignment in his final year of school to find a real world problem and solve it with code.

Lintner and Silvestru had already been doing contract work on mobile widgets when TinyHippos was incorporated in October of 2009 with only \$7,500 in funding. A month later, the three founders decided to devote six months to further develop Ripple while they consulted on the side to pay the bills. Since then, the startup has hired two more full-time employees.

It was during an oft-occurring Thai takeout meal following the company’s launch that Silvestru and Lowe’s children came up with the idea of TinyHippos, the name the company adopted. The name suits the business perfectly, says Silvestru, as the company is a small group that addresses a very large market in the mobile widget ecosystem.

Mobile widgets are websites that are packaged, delivered and loaded onto a phone. They are similar to an application on an iPhone, though they have an added advantage. “Through a common java script interface they can have access to the internals of the phone so you can access your calendar and personal

contacts, camera, audio and video,” says Silvestru.

But when a malfunction arises, the application fails to reveal what’s inside of it, causing a headache for developers. “You would have to look at your two thousand lines of code and try to figure out where in there caused the problem,” says Silvestru.

Ripple is a testing tool for developers that “helps you rip off the covers of your mobile application and see what’s going on in the inside,” he says. By debugging, the team can enter code line by line as it’s executing to locate the problem as well as conduct an investigation to tell the client what went wrong. “Developers are great at fixing bugs as long as they can pinpoint where the bug happened. Today’s tools don’t tell you, but Ripple does,” Silvestru says.

Ripple allows developers to quickly switch between platforms such as JIL, Opera, and PhoneGap. During testing and debugging cycles, it helps developers ensure a consistent behaviour and look across all platforms, says Silvestru.

Developing a product of this magnitude doesn’t come easily, but it’s clear that passion has driven TinyHippos’ success to this point.

“The inherent need behind (our

product) is you need that passion to get that true value, and then the value speaks for itself,” says Lintner.

Lowe adds that putting in 60- to 80-hour work weeks isn’t easy, but the team members do it because they want to, not because they have to.

Their dedication and diligence has paid off as the company has gained traction through word of mouth. TinyHippos has been invited by Vodafone to join the telecommunications company on its developer-based tour in Europe and do presentations for its developer community.

“Developers don’t tolerate anything that isn’t the best, so to get them as an audience using your product and saying ‘This is what I’m using and it’s good’ is a high endorsement,” says Gord Tanner, a senior developer who recently joined to the TinyHippos team.

The company is checking out possible office sites as it gets ready to move out of the house. It also is looking for funding as it prepares to release Ripple commercially. “We’re in beta right now, so we’re hoping to launch and have a full release . . . so we can actually charge for Ripple and begin to make money,” Silvestru says.