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Headline: Tech start-up set to make waves in the local food scene

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Munch Technologies co-founders (from left) Loh Fuxing, Keith Wong and Earnest Lim. PHOTO: EARNEST LIM

To launch his foodie app, Mr Earnest Lim, 23, ate economical mixed rice for lunch and dinner, four weeks straight.

“It got to the point that I’d memorised what each of the three stalls near my office was selling,” he says.

Mr Lim and his long-time friends, Mr Keith Wong, 24, and Mr Loh Fuxing, 23, are the co-founders of Munch Technologies.

The trio is set to release their food discovery app, Munch, which uses artificial intelligence to recommend good eats to diners. It aims to help users satisfy their cravings, even before they know what they’re hungry for. It will only be available for iOS devices for now.

While Mr Lim focuses mainly on the business side of things and Mr Wong on product design and management, Mr Loh, who picked up most of his skills through self-learning, is the technical lead. Spoilt for choice

According to Mr Lim, Munch does away with trawling blog posts for the latest it-places, using artificial intelligence to parse information from numerous different sources and make bespoke suggestions for each user.

As one uses the app, it learns your likes and dislikes. Mr Lim says that the founders are hoping that in the next few months, “the moment you open the app, you will find something you like within the first seven listings”.

What sets Munch apart from its rivals, he adds, is the sheer amount of data it holds. Rather than rely on user-generated content or reviewers, the founders access data already available online.

Mr Lim says: “We amalgamate everything, so when we throw up suggestions for food places for our users, quantitatively, there is already a lot of content pegged to those suggestions and the content is of a high quality.”

Asset acquisition is fairly cheap. By banking on artificial intelligence to collate the data they need, instead of sending out teams of people out to gather the information, the team is able to pump more resources into the front-end, such as promoting their growth through ad campaigns.

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It also lets them set their sights on launching Munch beyond Singapore, starting with countries around the region.

Mr Lim says: "We have already built our main system here, so when we decide to expand elsewhere, for example Thailand, we will only need to build localised engines. That will take less time because we can just tap on what's already at the HQ, and just build up language localisation and local data sources."

Money matters

Mr Lim, Mr Wong and Mr Loh started their company in August 2016 with an initial investment of \$40,000 from family and friends — and they have made it last until now.

The funds have mainly covered office rental and server costs. Mr Lim and Mr Wong, who are working in the company full time, draw small allowances; Mr Loh, who is currently juggling work and his studies at Singapore Management University's School of Information Systems, gets monetary support from his parents.

Now, with just a quarter of the original amount remaining, Mr Lim acknowledges that they are in a "strange period".

"We need to launch the app, get the user numbers and go back to potential investors. However, at this point, I might also run out of money, so the question remains if we can get a monetary boost before it eventually does," he says.

But the Munch founders do not intend to jump at the first sign of interest shown by anyone. They are looking for investors who will mentor them, while allowing them autonomy to do what they are best at.

"If they are going to invest in us, they are going to have to trust in our vision and our ability to do what we set out to do," he says.

"If we have trouble along the way, then we can sit down and discuss it, but the last thing any of us wants is for someone to give us funds and then just start telling us what to do."

One of the issues Mr Lim had to grapple with at the start of his start-up journey was whether or not to go to university.

Both he and Mr Wong, who completed their business studies at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, decided eventually to put off further education for now because "this is a huge opportunity with a realistic chance of success, and university will always be on the table."

Mr Lim considers himself lucky, as his parents are very supportive of him.

"I have real conversations with my parents about what's going on and they trust that I know what I'm doing, so there's no pressure, just lots of support. Also, my parents are doing okay financially so I don't have to worry very much about helping them that way," he says.

The fear remains, of course, that Munch will not take off. The trio - who acknowledge that they have been at it for awhile now - give themselves another year to have a fair go at the business.

Mr Lim says: "There's that stigma of failing, of wasting your time. I wake up in cold sweat many times, thinking 'Do I really believe I can do this?'"

"But then, there are also days where you know you can do it and that you have things under control."

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After all, if things go south, he is already used to the idea of eating mixed rice for days on end.