

LIFE

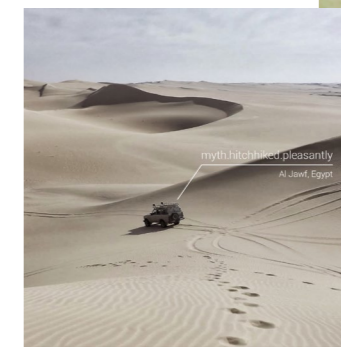
STORIES TO INSPIRE



THREE LITTLE WORDS

Meet a London START-UP that has remapped THE WORLD from scratch; creating a simple, three-word address for WHERE YOU ARE, where you want to go and EVERYWHERE in between.

WORDS MIRIAM RAPHAEL



IMAGES COURTESY OF WHAT3WORDS

In a favela in Rio de Janeiro, a package arrives at its destination. In Lake Tahoe, a back-country skier calls for help. In Monrovia, a woman opens her first bank account, while in Glastonbury, an exhausted festival-goer finds her tent. The common denominator? What3words, a radical new approach to the global addressing system that is ensuring everyone and everything in the world has a precise location.

According to the United Nations, more than 4 billion people in over 135 countries live in places that have no street names, no house numbers or anything that constitutes a proper address. They're really, truly off the map. They can't get a bank loan, they can't run a business, they have no voting rights or even the ability to report a crime. Conversely, this scenario makes getting aid or emergency services to the right people very difficult.

But it's not just in far-flung Mongolia or Liberia that inadequate addressing causes problems. Even in global cities that have street names, suburbs and postal codes, most of us have struggled at one point or another to explain exactly where we are.

"In big, well-developed countries there are still challenges talking about location," says Giles Rhys Jones, What3words' marketing director. "Say you wanted to meet friends in a park, or the building you work at has multiple entrances, or a fire hydrant was broken, then all of a sudden you start reverting into very descriptive, long-winded ways of talking about it – that's when errors



creep in and it becomes frustrating and potentially dangerous."

So in 2013, this London-based start-up developed a revolutionary solution. What3words has divided the entire globe into a grid of 57 trillion (yes, trillion) plots of land, each associated with a sequence of three unique words. Their powerful algorithm means every three-by-three metre square across the entire globe has a fixed address. So you'll find the Empire State Building at veal.notion.loses, or the Eiffel Tower at daunting.

evolves.nappy, while this article was written at stops.rise.camps.

"Businesses can start using it immediately to deliver goods, or rescue people, or meet people, or whatever it is they need to do with locations,"

says Giles. The What3words mobile and desktop app overlays Google Maps with the three-word addresses, converting coordinates into words. All users do is place a pin where they are on a map and it will deliver a three-word code that can be used to locate them precisely.

So why words, and three of them? Well, says Giles, words are much easier to use, remember and share than the 18-digit longitude and latitude coordinates used by sat-nav technology.

"Tanzania has something like 80,000 water points and 40 per cent of them, they don't actually know where they are, because they took down the latitude and longitude wrong," says Giles. Meanwhile peoples' ability to recall three words is apparently near perfect.

What3words is powered by a curated list of 40,000 dictionary entries, which take into account word length, distinctiveness, frequency, and ease of spelling and pronunciation. Potentially offensive words and homophones (like hear and here) have been removed, as have words that are spelled differently in the US and the UK. Simple words are allocated to major cities, and the longest, most obscure words are found in sparsely inhabited areas like African deserts.

And while What3words launched in English, the team has begun translating the app into different languages (currently 10 and counting) with the idea

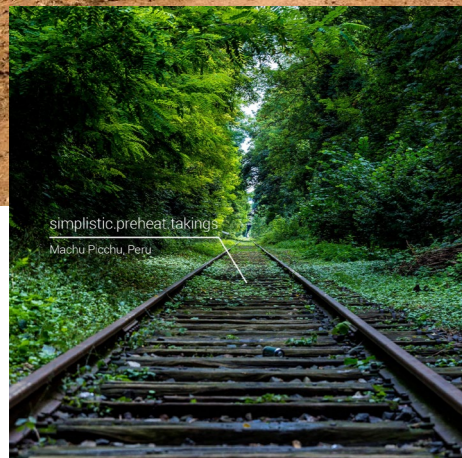
that anyone, regardless of native language, should be able to use it. And because it's run by an algorithm, rather than a massive database, the app is very lightweight – less than 27.1 megabytes – so

once it's downloaded, you're good to go.

"The beauty of the system is it's offline," says Giles. "It will work in Africa, Asia and even rural UK. If you are in the middle of nowhere, with no data connection, then it still works."

The idea was conceived by the CEO of What3words, 35-year-old Chris Sheldrick, who spent years in the music business organising live events. His stories are full of geographic misadventures, waiting hours for Lionel Ritchie's lost roadies, bands doing their sound-check at the wrong wedding, and gear that just never turned up. One day he sat down with a mathematician friend and a dictionary, and came up with a much better way to get bands to their gigs on time. >

Businesses can start using it IMMEDIATELY to deliver goods, or RESCUE people, or meet people, or whatever it is they need to do with LOCATIONS.



simplistic.preheat.takings
Machu Picchu, Peru

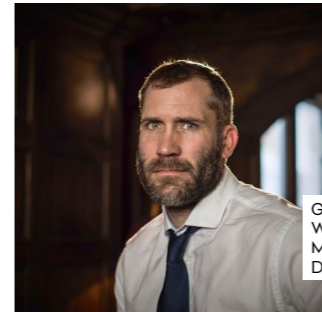
“Then they thought, ‘Hang on a sec, there’s quite a few other applications for this,’” laughs Giles. “So the company grew from there, immediately. They jacked in what they were doing and decided to form a company.”

Investors were quick to jump on board. The start-up has raised £4 million in backing from Intel’s investment arm and Horizons Ventures, owned by Hong Kong’s richest person, Li Ka-shing.

we charge a portion. If you’re a small business who isn’t using it a lot, it’s free,” says Giles. “We want to make the world a better place, but we also want to do business. We’re trying to balance them both. We feel that the big guys who are saving money can help the guys who are saving lives.”

And there are people saving lives with What3words. The US Agency for International Development is using the system to collect data for its various health and development missions in Rwanda, while a team led by the Red Cross used the technology to mark contaminated water locations during a cholera outbreak in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. What3words is also being trialed by first-responder services like BlueLight, the emergency location finder used on US ski slopes and college campuses. And if you found yourself in strife at Glastonbury in 2015, you could have messaged Festival Medical Services with your exact location (as opposed to, “the third tree on the left of the stage, if you are facing it, right behind the man with the black backpack and green mohawk”).

And it’s not just for humanitarian uses. According to Giles, if UPS drivers



GILES RHYNS JONES,
WHAT3WORDS’
MARKETING
DIRECTOR

got a little “less lost” each day, that company alone could save US\$50 million a year. In South America and parts of Africa, small businesses are also making significant savings by signing on to the platform. What3words is being used to map Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, home to over 11.5 million people who lack a clear address system. In the Rocinha favela (where approximately 70,000 people live), Google Maps displays 15 streets, when in reality there are more than 3000. Carteiro Amigo, the local mail delivery co-op, is now using the app to run a profitable postal service in the favela. Customers can put a sticker with their three-word address on their wall and staff use the app to deliver post directly to their door. Meanwhile in the township of Khayelitsha, Cape Town, Sizwe Medical Fund uses What3words to courier medication to hundreds of patients, all of whom live without official street addresses.

The platform’s capabilities are also incredibly innovative. The British Museum has tagged more than 1 million artefacts with the three-word addresses of where they were originally found, while a British poet has started generating poetry (“It’s not the best poetry, but it’s quite fun,” admits Giles) inspired by the name of the 3x3 squares he’s walking through. For travellers, it makes it even easier for them to get around and share locations they discover. Geoflyer, a tracking app for hikers and climbers, allows users to mark routes and points of interest with their three word locations, while Wild Swim has tagged over 2000 secret swimming spots.

“We remove an amount of uncertainty when people are travelling and looking to find things,” says Giles.

Admittedly, What3words will only start to replace the current addressing system if it’s adopted by governments,



above.beyond.rover
Boxby Downs, Australia



advising.lakes.craftsman
Big Delta, Alaska

individuals, and businesses alike. But having recently secured a deal with the government of Mongolia – a large country nearly the size of the European Union – to use What3words to set up an official postcode system, their dream of global adoption is becoming a reality.

And it seems like the tech and business worlds are watching. What3words has picked up a swag of awards, including the prestigious Innovation Grand Prix at the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity.

“Because we’re quite a disruptive and different technology, one of our strategies is getting to those blue sky thinkers, and what better place than Cannes,” says Giles. “We’ve also started to win business awards, and aid and development awards, social-good awards. We’ve gone from, ‘This is a really interesting, quirky piece of tech,’ to, ‘This could fundamentally change business, save lives and help the social and economic development of entire countries.’”

THIS COULD fundamentally change business, SAVE LIVES and help the social and economic development of ENTIRE countries.



We want to MAKE the world a better place, but we also want to do BUSINESS. We’re trying to BALANCE them both.

What3words is also about to close a Series B fundraising round, which will allow the company to further refine and market its offering.

The system is free for individuals, and there’s a discounted, fixed-fee option for not-for-profits based on economic data published by the World Bank. Cost for businesses depends on volume of usage.

“If you’re a very large business who’s saving themselves millions of pounds, or making themselves millions of pounds,

IMAGES COURTESY OF WHAT3WORDS