

# STARTUPS

A Business Times industry report

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Shoonya founder Rashi Bahri Chitnis demonstrates the interactive educational content her company produces.

## Creating global citizens

### Shoonya app helps kids learn languages and culture

By Annabelle Blair  
Staff Writer

Rashi Bahri Chitnis saw her young son glued to the TV, watching cartoons and learning his ABCs, and she wanted to find a more productive way for him to consume technology.

A native of India, she also wanted a way for him to learn her native language Hindi and communicate with two sets of grandparents who spoke two different languages.

As she began looking for ways to merge learning and technology, the gamified learning concept Shoonya was born.

The Santa Barbara startup creates interactive educational content that helps young kids learn other sounds and languages, and

it strives for global diversity and cultural inclusion with its stories and characters.

The company launched its first app in 2015. Currently, it has three apps on the market with 40,000 organic downloads, nine languages and 3.5 million views on its YouTube channel in the last 90 days.

The concept behind Shoonya is based on science, Chitnis said. There are about 800 sounds in the world, and each language has about 30-40 sounds.

"A child at birth has an ability to distinguish between all of the sounds," Chitnis said. "So when a child is born, a child is actually a global citizen. When there is so much science behind it, I assumed there would be a solution for my kids."

But when she went to find products for

her two children to learn another language, Chitnis said she encountered outdated tools. While products like Duolingo and Rosetta Stone are geared toward older kids and adults.

Shoonya, which is an Indian mathematical concept meaning zero, isn't just a solution for teaching kids how to learn languages. It's also a social impact company with content aimed at breaking down barriers between cultures and races and teaching kids to understand cultures emotionally, Chitnis said.

The startup has attracted the attention of both regional and national investors and seeks to grow its investor pool.

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## SHOONYA

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Santa Barbara angel impact investor Tom Washing met Chitnis a year ago and heard her pitch. He has since become the company's lead investor and sits on its board of directors.

"I was sold on the idea that children growing up in today's global economy really need to have at least two languages or more if they are going to be successful long-term and work with international companies and different cultures," he said. "She provided a game-based solution for very young children to start learning a second language."

Market research revealed that children consume media for about 2.5 hours daily, which makes parents feel guilty and prompts them to look for electronic educational material, Chitnis said.

The team also found that parents wanted their kids to learn languages for various reasons: strengthening a second language, being able to communicate with family members in another country and wanting their kids to be better prepared for a global economy.

"This is our mission — to create the next generation of global citizens," Chitnis said. The company has been bootstrapped so far, and before moving into coworking space Impact Hub last year, it operated out of a garage.

Shoonya has already raised more than half of its current capital round of \$400,000, which is slated to close within a year. The next goal is to hit a cash flow break-even point, Chitnis said.

Edtech is becoming a "fairly hot space" right now as much of education is moving into online learning tools and capabilities, Washing said. Shoonya "fits right in that sweet spot," and could grow into a sizeable company be-

fore potentially becoming acquired, he added.

"It's another one of these stories where an entrepreneur from personal experience realizes there is an unsolved problem and looks to fix it," Washing said.

Shoonya's next steps come in two rounds. Phase one consists of rolling out 500 prerequisite words that children need to learn regardless of a specific language they are trying to learn. The company's unique software code that was developed over the past few years will allow it to scale quickly into new languages at a low cost, Chitnis said.

A second phase will take Shoonya's current copyrighted characters and focus on developing cultural emotional content.

"We love the science behind it. We saw the market demand for it," said investor Kevin Custer, a founding partner at Arc Capital Development.

He added that the ad-free model, which

will eventually move to a subscription-based model, has strong economic potential with the target market for future users estimated at half a million to a million.

"The big thing we saw that was unique, the secret sauce, is that it was culturally relevant," Custer said. Depictions of diverse characters and groups add value to the language learning concept. "From a social impact side, we see role models."

Global growth for game-based learning products and services is anticipated at more than 37 percent with revenues anticipated to reach more than \$17 billion by 2023, according to a 2018 study by market research firm Metaari.

"The highest growth is happening in early childhood game companies across the planet, so today this market is in a boom phase," Chitnis said. Since Shoonya has a viable product, she added, "Now, it's about scalability."

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