

SoftKinetic

A rising star in gesture control

The way we interact with our television, our car and perhaps even our refrigerator is about to change dramatically, in part because of the creative minds at work inside SoftKinetic. This Belgian start-up is a world leader in technology that allows us to communicate with computers through the movement of our hands and bodies, and it's about to become mainstream. We asked CEO Michel Tombroff how the company was shaping our future.

Michel Tombroff: We recently announced a partnership with Intel, who is embedding our technology in their new Perceptual Computing products. We're working with a leading German automotive company on integrating gesture control with in-car navigation. A golf training company already use our products to perform 3D analysis of a player's swing, to help improve technique.

Communicating with computers through movements of our hands and bodies and changes in facial expressions requires two components: a sensor to capture actions and the software to analyse this, in real time, and respond appropriately. SoftKinetic makes both. We began with just the software development and, in 2007, merged with another Belgian firm, Optrima, who made sensors. We're very proud to be a Belgian business and we're acknowledged as one of the top two companies in this field worldwide.

A classic technology start-up

It began with three partners in a small office in 2007, says Michel Tombroff. They believed 3D cameras could add a new perspective to digital marketing. I joined in 2008 and we now have 92 staff. Early capital came from those of us there at the start, from Hunza Ventures, Belgacom and some the SRIW regional fund. Almost everyone in the business is an engineer and we're all geeks. We love technology, video games and television. There's lots of collaboration between the hardware and software developers. We're an international team, about half from Belgium and the rest from across the world.

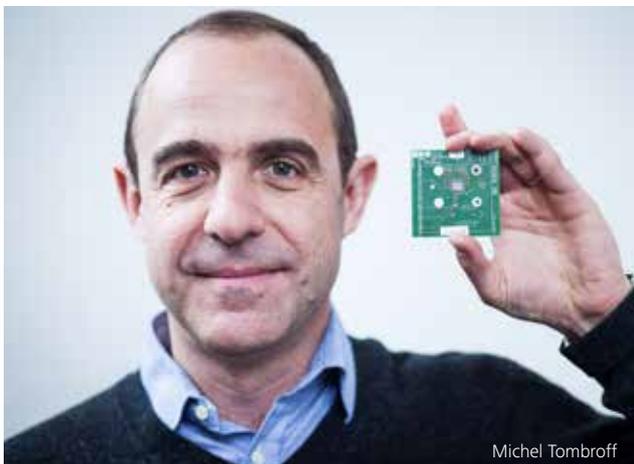
How did a Belgian company win global recognition?

We're very active in sales and marketing. I spend a lot of time in the US and we go to major trade shows, including CES in Las Vegas. We opened an office in Silicon Valley, California, right at the start, and our PR company is based in San Francisco. SoftKinetic also has an office in China and important manufacturing partners elsewhere in Asia, where the cameras are made.

Being a Benelux Fast50 Rising Star is helping to raise the firm's profile even higher. We're getting lots of indirect exposure and access to more potential investors, says Michel Tombroff. Deloitte does a good job through the programme. It's valuable to meet and learn from the other participating companies.

There are challenges ahead

We're moving from early adopter to the production stage. That means managing high volume manufacturing and customer support. Innovation remains very important, to keep up with the competition. The next few years will be exciting. You'll first see gesture control in computers and televisions, where it will transform our experience. As 3D cameras get smaller, it will appear in phones and other devices, including robots. We'll be able to do things that are impossible today.



Michel Tombroff