



Fraternal twins Marcus (left) and Joe Wee, two gamers who started Aftershock, a pioneer of custom-built laptops and computers, in 2012. Their first office was an old shophouse in Serangoon Road, but today, Aftershock employs about 150 people in Singapore, Malaysia and Australia. Aftershock and its two offshoot businesses are expected to rake in \$100 million in revenue this year. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

ItChangedMyLife

# 'We are competitive, we play to win'

Gaming twins channel their passion to set up Singapore's biggest boutique PC builder



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It's a warm, sultry afternoon and Moonfang is strolling languidly down the third-floor corridor of a light industrial building in Bencoolen. Fraternal twins Joe and Marcus Wee, 36, stop to pat the mixed breed tortoiseshell cat.

"She's our mascot and our CEO, cat executive officer. She's been with our company since its founding in 2012," says Marcus, co-founder and managing director of Aftershock, Singapore's biggest boutique PC builder.

He follows her line of sight, and looks at workers beavering away outside the company's operations office.

"We moved here five years ago into a 3,300 sq ft unit, wondering how we were going to fill up the space. Today, we occupy nine units in this building," he says with a grin.

And in a Covid-battered climate when many business owners are forced to embark on the unsavoury exercises of cutting wages and retrenching workers, the twins have just added more than 20 people to their payroll, taking their staff strength to about 150 in three countries: Singapore, Malaysia and Australia.

"Our computer sales have gone up by 30 per cent because more people are working from home and gaming during the pandemic," says Marcus.

If projections are on track, Aftershock and its two offshoot businesses will rake in \$100 million in revenue this year.

Hardcore gamers, the twins would probably have snorted and

chortled if one had suggested to them 10 years ago that they'd be running a successful business.

"It's still a bit surreal actually," says Marcus who is younger than Joe by seven minutes.

The brothers have no siblings: their father was an insurance manager and their mother, a dentist.

"We are opposites but we complement each other," says Joe, Aftershock's creative director. "He gets very obsessed about the most random things. At one point when we were growing up, he was really into rubber trees, so he found out everything about them.

"Me? I didn't realise I was allergic to rice until recently, so I slept a lot growing up, even during exams," he says with a grin.

His brother agrees that he's the greater nerd.

"My hobby as a kid was buying circuit boards and soldering iron to make toys. Joe was more artistic, he was always drawing."

Their common passion was gaming; they were crazy about Super Nintendo.

When they were 14, their parents sent the former students of Anglo-Chinese School to Geelong Grammar School, a boarding school near Melbourne.

Marcus says: "It was probably the best decision they made. Those were our formative years; we learnt independence, how to deal with different people and environments. Some of the kids had very interesting backgrounds. One of their fathers owned a football team."

Geelong expanded their minds but did not repress their mischievous personalities.

Joe learnt to unlock the computer room with a clothes hanger so that he could play computer games there at night. His brother did the same by clambering in through the window instead.

"I'm really obsessive. If I do something, I do it to the max. I was competitive and always wanted to get ranked in leagues and tables," Marcus says, adding that he took part in many competitions.

Joe also enjoyed getting high scores but tournaments and ranking boards were not important to him.

Marcus says: "If something came with a bounty, I'd definitely do it. Joe is not motivated by such things."

Upon completing their national service in 2005, the twins went to Singapore Management University (SMU) - Joe to study communications and psychology and Marcus, information systems.

With a laugh, Marcus says his passion for gaming got more intense. During vacations, he could spend up to 16 hours shooting or strategis-



Marcus (right) and Joe (second from left, back) at one of their first IT shows. Aftershock gaming laptops have won a slew of awards from publications and websites, including The Straits Times and Hardware Zone. PHOTO: AFTERSHOCK

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<https://str.sg/aftershock>

ing in front of a computer screen. It affected his studies; he had to repeat one semester.

"I was a really irresponsible kid. I skipped too many classes to play games."

There was an upside, though. Because of his passion, Marcus - who had been tinkering with computer systems since his early teens - was more than conversant with laptops.

"I love gaming laptops. They follow you everywhere, from school to home and back. But in those days, your only choice, if you wanted one, was a branded one from an MNC. And they were expensive. The mark-up was crazy. In the US, there were a lot of PC builders and their stuff was amazing. I got my laptop there for half the price of what it would cost me here," he says.

In Singapore, custom options were complicated and, if available, came with no after-sales service. "One or two companies were buying from the US and then reselling

here. But if you had problems and needed repairs, you'd run into a lot of difficulties."

He felt there was room for disruption by offering customised PCs and laptops using quality components - with complete after-sales support - at lower prices.

True to his obsessive nature, he opened up computers and tinkered with them, went into forums and extensively researched components and suppliers. He even presented his business idea in an entrepreneurship class at SMU.

But any plans he had about starting the business upon graduation in 2009 had to wait. He had no money and his folks expected him to start working and earn his own keep.

His first job was with an employee benefits company as project manager. He worked hard but felt frustrated that he could not influence company decisions because of the corporate structure. "I just felt like a cog in a machine," says Marcus, who resigned after a year.

His next gig was being the "computer guy" with TUM Asia, an academic venture abroad by Technical University of Munich (TUM), which was doing research in, among other things, electric cars.

Not long after an expatriate colleague, with whom he got along famously, left, Marcus quit too.

Meanwhile, Joe did public relations in a small agency before taking a communications job at a Japanese multinational.

He did not feel challenged, so he left after 1½ years to work and travel through New Zealand with a former girlfriend.

By then, Marcus felt he was ready to execute his business idea.

He cashed in his insurance policy and emptied his bank account to raise \$60,000 and borrowed another \$80,000 from his aunt and parents to start Aftershock in 2012. He also got a business partner who exited after a year.

Understandably, there was scepticism.

"I didn't exactly have a track record; I'd been gaming all my life. Some people asked how I was going to compete with the big brands and why I didn't just get a job."

But he was convinced he was doing the right thing.

"I knew it would work. I've been a data person all my life. I had a solid business plan. I knew my numbers and my products and that I'd be delivering good stuff. It was just a matter of executing the idea well," says Marcus, who travelled to Taiwan to get suppliers of components on board.

Come hell or high water, he was also determined to make it work.

"Because if not, that would be a blight on my record... Even in gaming, I don't play to lose."

That was when he roped his brother - then plucking fruit and travelling through New Zealand - in.

"I came back because I didn't want him to lose my aunt's money. But when I saw the product, I knew we were on to a good thing," quips Joe, who oversees the company's branding and marketing.

Marcus assembled the first Aftershock gaming laptop - the X15 - they sold in his brother's bedroom.

It was modular, he says, "had a high-end graphics card almost unseen in Singapore, and a slew of other features no one else had".

More importantly, it was at least \$2,000 cheaper than a branded equivalent.

It took Marcus - who personally assembled and tested almost every computer during the first year - three or four two-hour sessions to convince his first buyer to part with his money.

"He was happy with the product and shared the experience..." he says, adding that they sold four computers in the first month. "Then it was one a day, and then four or five a day. At our first PC show a year later, we sold 150 units over four days," says Marcus, whose products have won dozens of awards - from Best Gaming Notebook to Best Compact PC - from leading media including Hardware Zone, The Straits Times and Geek Culture.

In a good month, the company can now sell up to 3,000 computers in its three markets. Priced from \$399 for a pocket PC that fits in the palm of the hand to more than \$10,000 for a powerful machine, they are now used not just by gamers and students but also by data scientists.

Their first office was an old shophouse in the middle of a red-light district in Serangoon Road and their first hire was Marcus' World of Warcraft gaming friend.

"He didn't ask me. He just turned up and said, 'I want to work for your company. You don't have to pay me.' He was in the logistics and shipping industry and he became our first systems builder. Today, he is a partner in our Malaysian operations," says Marcus.

A couple of years ago, the company branched out into two affiliate businesses, one of which is the design of ergonomic desks.

The guiding principle for the business, say the brothers, is simple.

"We focus on the product, the marketing strategy, being at the forefront of trends and technology. It's a simple rule of thumb: keep evolving, keep looking for the next big thing and keep influencing trends," says Marcus, who is married to a regional team coordinator working in an MNC.

Joe, who is attached, chips in: "And offer the best customer and after-sales service. Even when the most hardcore gamers come to our showroom, we have people who can tell them all they want to know about the computers."

The twins don't have much time to game any more but they reckon running a business is just as intriguing and challenging.

Marcus, for instance, has ideas percolating in his head for other impactful businesses.

"The world is so big, there are so many things to do. Why should I copy others?"

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This is the second of a four-part Audemars Piguet series on rule breakers who thrive on challenges and boldly forge their own paths.



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