

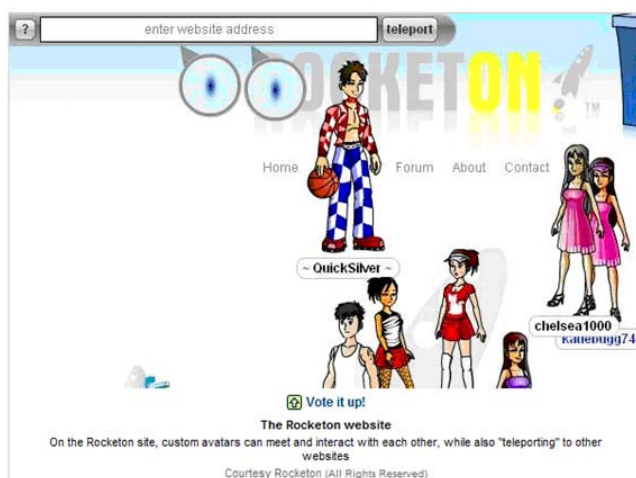
Inside the Virtual World of Rocketon, Where Avatars Surf the Web With You

Aug 6, 2008 – David Silverberg

Rocketon is a San Francisco startup hoping to cash in on an immersive gaming world where you can use a custom avatar to visit any website. Layering a virtual network on the Web could mean money in the bank for founders Steve Hoffman and Eric Hayashi.

Digital Journal — I'm surfing the Web as an avatar named DigitalDave. My hipster-esque character is strolling through YouTube.com, Google.com, ESPN.com, a cartoon pedestrian on any Web byway I choose. Sometimes I see

other avatars and I command my guy to wave, sometimes strike up a conversation. This new level of online interaction is made possible because of technology courtesy of [Rocketon](#), a San Francisco start-up hoping to add a new layer of virtual gaming on the Web.



[DigitalJournal.com](#) introduced you to [Rocketon](#) in February when it was just getting its bearing. Now the company comprised of gaming industry veterans is set to launch an immersive world where you create an avatar that follows you on the Web as you visit different sites. With a browser plug-in and a Flash browser emulator, Rocketon creators allows users to superimpose their avatars over sites they visit, offering them the ability to invite other Rocketon users to join them on sites such as YouTube or [Consumerist](#).

What's the appeal? You can surf through sites with friends or strangers, depending on your interests. You can check out YouTube videos together, for instance, while instant messaging each other.

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“So how is it better than an instant message program?” asks the skeptic in all of us. First, Rocketon users can stylize their avatar with any physical tweaks, from beards to clothes to accessories. Second, Rocketon is big on games — at any point you can play Treasure Hunt or word puzzles or random-chance games such as Gnome Toss. You can also buy “items” such as emeralds (to give to someone, for instance) or toys such as fireworks. Dragging the item into the main space of a site activates its “power,” so a fireworks toy would explode and shower the site with sparkles for several seconds.

“We see Rocketon starting off as an appealing world for teens,” says Steve Hoffman, CEO of Rocketon, in an interview with DigitalJournal.com. “Then we think it’ll grow and users will segment their interests by certain sites.”

He’s right about the tween factor: when it comes to virtual worlds or sites such as Club Penguin, it’s the younger set gravitating to the technology. And with a site catering to youth comes the inevitable F-word.

“We wanted to create an engaging fun product,” says Eric Hayashi, co-founder of Rocketon. He notes the site, set to launch in the fall, offers a “social experience” that should enjoy some viral attention and win points in the buzz factor.

In fact, that seems to be the only way a game like Rocketon could get noticed. Because my friends aren’t on Rocketon — the site is still in beta mode, with 400 testers currently trying it out — the site has limited appeal to me. I can chat with strangers, but it just feels like a meat market...so far. Hoffman wants Rocketon to grow into other applications.

“Imagine it being used by educators to teach entire classrooms, perhaps remotely,” he hints.

The potential for Rocketon to rake in serious ad dollars can’t be under-estimated. Sponsorship and ad dollars could roll in — say a site like ESPN.com partnered with Rocketon. Avatar visitors to ESPN.com could enjoy interactive tools like a batting cage game or a basketball drill. Avatars can be lured into playing branded games, giving advertisers an engaged and young audience. And because users can dress their avatars, a clothing company like Holt Renfrew could sponsor that customizable widget.

Hayashi is tight-lipped about how many deals have already been struck but he says finding sponsorship partners will be a core focus of the company’s marketing efforts. But it’s not like they haven’t accumulated capital — they have raked in more than \$5.8 million in venture capital, spending a good portion of the money on salaries for 15 full-time employees.

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Hoffman offers DigitalJournal.com a peek into Rocketon's future. In an exclusive announcement, Hoffman says they are planning to create custom "rooms" inside various site. So if DigitalDave visited RollingStone.com, I could use this new feature to create an independent area on the site complete with a turntable and couches, for instance.

Rocketon is also working on implementing "quests", Hoffman says. "Users can get missions to look for various objects, tied in to a brand," he says. Rocketon could launch a *Lost*-related mission where members need to uncover clues on other sites in order to solve a puzzle tied to the TV series. Scouring the Web for clues to accomplish a certain objective will likely appeal to the gaming fan who wants more out of his virtual world than chat and playing dress-up.

Rocketon not only represents the future of immersive gaming but also the future of instant messaging. What was once a faceless emoticon-heavy experience can now feature avatar gestures, games, site tours and buying items with "points." And the potential for media buyers to clamour to a popular platform of a layered virtual community is enormous.

But DigitalDave is still getting bombarded with requests for a "virtual date." On YouTube.com. I guess that's a pleasant benefit – if the kids weren't young enough to be my nieces. Here's hoping Rocketon finds its legs when it launches out of private beta, and showcases its goodies to an older crowd.

