

internet evolution

Parallel Virtual Worlds: Avatars, Everywhere

July 7, 2008 — by Nicole Ferraro of Internet Evolution

Despite its always-on-ness and potential for interactivity, the Internet is fairly compartmentalized. We've seen attempts at collaboration on certain platforms -- with third-party game applications and mashups of IM with social networking and email. But when it comes to plain old Web surfing, we're still operating in reclusive quarters -- poking away at unsuspecting strangers while wholly unaware of their immediate cyberspacious dwellings.

[RocketOn](#), a San Francisco-based startup, is seeking to change all of that by creating the first parallel virtual world. Different from a virtual world like [Second Life](#) or [Gaia Online](#), RocketOn lets Web users teleport their avatars to virtually (literally, virtually) any Website, and invite their friends' avatars to join them. Together they can play games (e.g., "Gnome Toss"), watch videos, and chat. "Gaia is like every other virtual world out there. It's like a walled garden," says Steve Hoffman, CEO of RocketOn. "We've broken down that paradigm. Ours is all about traversing the Web. Instead of one virtual world you go to, it's about millions of virtual worlds you discover as you're browsing the Internet."

Hoffman expects that different age groups will use RocketOn across different sites and isn't targeting a particular demographic. "Google will be an 'everyone place.' If it's a teeny bopper band [it will attract] mostly teeny boppers. A rock band... probably an older audience," he says. It may eventually serve a business function as well, according to Hoffman, who says universities have expressed interest in using RocketOn to take new students on virtual tours. (*That* will revolutionize Academia.)

There's also potential for (wait for it...) *ad dollars* here. The goal for RocketOn users is to advance their avatars' status by accumulating items and points (earning them the unique ability to purchase items from the RocketOn store and, *better*, get into [fancy nightclubs](#)). To make some ad money, RocketOn has items hidden on several partner sites across the Web. "For the consumer, it doesn't feel like advertising, it feels like fun. For partners, it's driving traffic and building their brand."

The idea, were this to catch on, that we could physically see all the other trolls traipsing around on sites we visit, dressed in their best avatar garb, is a bit unnerving. It may be fun to watch a favorite [Golden Girls YouTube clip](#) with a close avatar friend, but some things -- like *buying* Golden Girls paraphernalia on Amazon -- should remain private.

RocketOn has taken measures to ensure privacy and safety. "Whenever someone invites you to a site, we show you the URL in advance. We warn you 'Don't go to this site unless you trust the person'," says Hoffman. The site also deploys a "Safe Sites" filter and doesn't allow children younger than 13 to surf unsupervised.

internet evolution

Parallel Virtual Worlds: Avatars, Everywhere

July 7, 2008 — by Nicole Ferraro of Internet Evolution

Hoffman believes there are positive and negative implications of his product and virtual worlds in general. "There are positive elements to it in that you get a wider variety of exposure to people... but if people do this to the exclusion of going out then it could be problematic. This is just the way reality is right now. Virtual reality is real and this is the way kids grow up. Self-identity is as much being formed by online interaction as how they act in real world."

Give it a whirl, and perhaps we'll meet for a good-natured game of gnome toss on the Internet Evolution home page.

— Nicole Ferraro, Site Editor, [Internet Evolution](#)