

Q&A: Eric Hayashi And Steve Hoffman Talk *ROCKETON*

July 7, 2008 — by Mathew Kumar of Worlds In Motion



ROCKETON is a new online avatar service currently in closed alpha, which intends to allow users the ability to treat the web as "a parallel virtual world" with each site an interactive destination on which users can meet, socialize and play.

Founded by Steve Hoffman (CEO) Eric Hayashi (VP Marketing & Business Development), and Naomi Kokubo (COO), ROCKETON is based in San Francisco with 15 employees and a studio in the Ukraine, and we talked to Hayashi and Hoffman about the service, how it works, and its place in the market.

So what's the point of Rocketon?

Eric Hayashi: *ROCKETON* transforms browsing into a social experience -- individual sites can be lively virtual destinations that players can explore and interact with. Imagine every single website as its own virtual world that is interconnected with other virtual worlds, where people can jump from one to another with the click of a button. ESPN.com will become a sports-themed virtual world, MTV.com a youth-oriented virtual space and GAP.com a virtual clothing store.

How is that going to work technically?

Steve Hoffman: The stylized 2d world overlays in the browser right on top of the page. Rooms are created based on the URL. If you're watching a particular video on a video site and invite your friend to meet you, they will come to the exact same page you're on and you'll be able to watch the video together. The same goes for shopping. You can surf the web and shop together for both virtual and real goods.

Users can either install a tiny plug-in in their browser, or they can simply come to our website and use the web version.

Are you coding locations designed around the purpose of the original sites?

SH: Yes, we're building out objects and other things on a variety of sites. As our users go to these sites, they will see and be able to interact with the objects we've placed there. Right now, for example, we have a vending machine on coke.com, and we have a

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roach motel on blackflag.com. We'll be adding virtual casinos on sites like LasVegas.com and private nightclubs on popular music sites.

So what kind additional functionality does this add to these sites?

SH: We're creating entertainment -- pure and simple. For example, we have placed a DJ on certain music sites, and he'll give you a free boom box that plays music. Now, obtaining a boom box might be part of a larger puzzle you need to solve -- a treasure hunt or quest. If you are less concerned about those activities, you can simply "play with" the boom box -- drop it on a page and see what happens, give it to your virtual pet, give it to another user. It is an open world and one object may have many uses or purposes. We can also place games on a site that might have a relationship to the site itself -- for example, a sports trivia game on a sports-related site, a virtual dating game on a teen site.

Will there be ways to manage your socialization, like a friends list?

SH: Yes, you can easily add people to your friends list; you can also easily block users. The friends list is quite handy ---as mentioned, you can see if your friend is online and invite them to meet you on a page. You can also ask them if you can meet up on the page that they are on. You can also initiate a private chat with your friend from the friends list, whether or not they are on the same page as you are on.

But why would users really want to use this rather than just browse the web?

EH: Several reasons -- self-expression, social browsing and casual entertainment.

People use social networks and virtual worlds as a form of self-expression. It's their online persona; their identity, that drives people to spend hours tweaking their MySpace or Facebook page. With *ROCKETON*, users create an identity that is part of their entire web browsing experience. It is a free-roaming, live experience -- there is no walled-garden.

Social browsing is happening now. How many people have their web page up and their IM client up? Lots! Currently, if you find a video that you like, you email the URL to your friend and maybe they will see it. We give people a way to have a socially engaging experience as they are browsing the web -- so to continue the video example, in *ROCKETON* you can watch the video together.

Casual gaming is huge -- not many people have the time to go deep into a virtual world or MMO and stay there for hours per day. We have very casual games and we have some larger meta-games that are played across the web. As a user, you do not have to play games to enjoy our world but if you do start to "level up" in our world you may discover some unlocked secret virtual locations that we have created!



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The web is a vast landscape of content - when you see yourself and your friends pop up on a website, you feel a sense of place, of real-time interaction and experience.

What demographic is *ROCKETON* aimed at?

SH: Some sites like *Second Life* have an average age of 33, while others like *Habbo* cater to tweens. We feel *ROCKETON* is targeted at everyone, since our users will segment themselves by the sites that they visit. If they are teenagers, they'll hang out on teenage sites and engage in those parallel virtual worlds. If our audience is 30-year-olds, they'll hang out on a completely different set of sites – from politics to cooking.

How do you plan on monetizing *ROCKETON*?

EH: We will monetize through the sale of virtual goods. We also see additional revenue streams related to brand involvement. For example, if you go to Nike.com, you might be able to pick up Nike branded clothing for your avatar. This clothing is paid for by Nike and acts as a virtual advertisement for the brand. Another example is going to Coke.com and picking up a virtual soda, or going to HarryPotter.com and getting a magic wand.

How will you deal with the issues of privacy? Will you keep any metrics or details on people's surfing habits?

EH: Yes, we'll keep individual data private. The only thing we may store is aggregate data that doesn't point back to any individual user.

Who are you competing with? Virtual worlds, or services like Weblin?

EH: One could argue that we are playing in the same sandbox as many of the existing virtual worlds and, to some extent, social networks and casual online multiplayer games. That said, we feel our experience is unique. That's not saying others won't get there, but we feel we're playing in our own sandbox for the time being.

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