

San Fran Startup Wants to Bring Social Gaming into Virtual World

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What do you get when you mix a virtual world, a social network, and a multiplayer game? Either an unholy mess or the Next Big Thing on the Web. San Francisco start-up ROCKETON is hoping to avoid the chaos and win acclaim with their top-secret technology.

Digital Journal — Gaming is growing up. No longer solely for the first-person shooter fanatics or the *Grand Theft Auto* addicts, video games are being geared to adults who crave a universe that is truly immersive. Just look at how popular Second Life has become.

Attempting to build on that momentum is [ROCKETON](#), a start-up from San Francisco that is planning to launch a different flavour of social gaming in April.



A game called ROCKETON is bringing a unique twist to Web-based gaming, as the company hopes to develop a virtual world that can be embedded on any website using a widget. This means a gamer can play the game on whatever website they're surfing through.

In ROCKETON, players will be able to travel around a virtual world, play games and socialize. Your avatar engages with your friends in real-time social activities, much like you would in your living room with board games. But this time, the online games are designed around Web content and locations. You can do things like chat live, gain friends, develop a profile and collect items.

Steve Hoffman, CEO and co-founder of ROCKETON, told *DigitalJournal.com* in an interview: "What we're doing is creating a virtual spaces for them and fun activities for them to engage in. This is not a *Second Life* type virtual world with 3D cities. It's more of a web-centric experience, where people chat and interact in easily accessible 2D spaces."

The idea has attracted enough interest to also win venture capital: they just culled \$5 million from the D. E. Shaw group's venture capital unit, bringing total investment up to \$5.8 million.

And what's the big attraction? As users traverse and unlock various worlds in

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ROCKETON, they can uncover more features. Each world contains a character or object to interact with, whether it's a small monster or arcade games.

In light of Facebook allowing third-party developers to create applications for their massive universe, will ROCKETON do the same?

"We're more focused on building out a platform for real-time social gaming than any single game," Hoffman says. "The first batch of games will be developed in-house, but as we grow, we'll open the system up to third-party developers."

Hoffman is tight-lipped about any more details concerning ROCKETON, saying he'd like to keep "our core system confidential." He added that the Rocketon team is working diligently around the clock to make sure the April launch runs smoothly. Hoffman isn't alone in the venture; his team consists of past employees at Vivendi Universal Games, Electronic Arts and Pipeworks (Prince of Persia: Revelations).

Like many Web entrepreneurs, Hoffman has set his sights high for ROCKETON'S future. Asked what the startup would become in the coming years, he replied: "A hub for real-time social interaction that spans the entire Internet and becomes part of people's daily online activities."

Ambitious, yes, but if ROCKETON succeeds in creating a "sticky" platform where social gaming becomes its cornerstone, Hoffman and company can be on top of the Web 2.0 world.