

## Online Chat, as Inspired by Real Chat

*Brad Stone*

Compared with other forms of human interaction, online social networking is really not all that social.

People visit each other's MySpace pages and Facebook profiles at various hours of the day, posting messages and sending e-mail back and forth across the digital void. It's like an endless party where everybody shows up at a different time and slaps a yellow Post-it note on the refrigerator.

Now a new wave of Silicon Valley companies is bringing live socializing back into a medium that has, in the parlance of the technologists, grown overly asynchronous.

Vivaty, a start-up based in Menlo Park, Calif., is creating 3-D virtual chat rooms that people can add to the Web pages and social networking profiles on the sites where they spend most of their Internet time.

The company has been quietly working on its technology for three years and will begin a private test period on Facebook this week in advance of a wider introduction this summer. It is backed by the blue-chip venture capital firms Kleiner, Perkins Caufield & Byers and Mohr Davidow Ventures.

Vivaty turns a flat profile page into a three-dimensional live chat room. Users choose characters to represent themselves from a list of preternaturally handsome avatars — a requirement for any such service — and proceed to one of a dozen environments, like a gothic urban warehouse or seaside villa.

With videogame-like precision, they can then navigate that virtual space, which may feature their Facebook photos hanging from the walls and a YouTube video playing on a widescreen TV. Up to 15 others can choose avatars and enter the same room at the same time for text-based live socializing.

"We want to take all your content on the Web and move it to a more visually immersive, immediate experience," said Keith McCurdy, chief executive at Vivaty and a former vice president at the big game maker Electronic Arts.

Similar online services like Second Life and games like World of Warcraft have existed for years. But they are not accessible through a Web browser. Instead they require users to install large and cumbersome programs and have plenty of Internet bandwidth for a satisfyingly immediate experience.

Vivaty chat rooms, on the other hand, will be scattered across the Web. A user can stick an existing Vivaty virtual environment, or create a unique one, wherever HTML code can be imbedded. The company plans to make money partly by allowing companies to start their own virtual rooms on their own Web sites, where they can control the décor and their marketing messages.

Vivaty's technology and business plan may be unique, but its overall goal is not. The entrepreneurs and investors behind other "live Web" companies say that the intermittent socializing on most Web sites ignores the primal human instinct that once drove people to the town square and now brings them into real-world social groups to watch the Super Bowl or the latest episode of "Battlestar Galactica."

"A lot of basic human communication needs have been lost in this age of siloed, one-to-one communications," said Roelof Botha, a partner at the venture capital firm Sequoia Capital. "At the end of the day, we are a social species."

Mr. Botha, one of the original backers of YouTube, is behind live Web companies like TokBox, a year-old start-up that lets people conduct face-to-face video chats on the Web, and Meebo, a

two-year-old Web messaging company that introduced a new generation of networked chat rooms to the Web last year.

Chat rooms were an integral part of the online experience for users of early services like CompuServe and America Online. Characterized by names like "Single and Looking," they often devolved into noisy chaos.

The first wave of Web technology helped drive these unruly conversations close to extinction. The Web's static pages made it poorly suited for rapid-fire, live communication. Live chat was relegated to separate software tools like instant messenger programs.

Newer Web programming tools provide flexibility for updates inside Web pages. But now there is a new problem: Internet users are spread thinly across millions of Web sites and blogs and various social networks.

Last year, Meebo's chief executive, Seth Sternberg — who as a teenager was a chat-room moderator for America Online — introduced Meebo Rooms, a kind of 2-D version of Vivaty's cartoonscape.

Meebo Rooms can play host to the same crowd on more than one Web site. For instance, there are around 100 people at any given time talking in the Meebo Room for the Showtime program "Big Brother After Dark." Half of those might enter on Showtime's site, while the other half might join from fan's pages on MySpace. But they all conduct one live conversation.

Mr. Sternberg asserts that the dialogue is cleaner in his new live chats than on the old AOL chats he used to patrol. "Whenever chat rooms are embedded on a site with context, and everyone is there because they are interested in the topic, the conversation is good," he said.

Other new live services are popping up quickly. This month, Facebook said it would introduce a live chat feature. Live video streaming services, from Yahoo and start-ups like Kyte, Ustream.TV and Justin.TV, are also proliferating. Those companies include live chat features as well, so users can discuss what they are watching in real time.

Mr. McCurdy from Vivaty said he did not expect these live services to travel far across the generational divide. The younger video-game generation "has more craving for contact," he said. "They are using their computers for emotional experiences, and a video-game experience is more emotional than looking at a blue and white Facebook page."

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