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Soaring to the Next Level: Upping the 'Wow' Factor

By Eric Billingsley - 3/1/2010

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For more than 20 years, Sherry Gunther has been in the business of creating engaging entertainment. She's a two-time Emmy Award winner who has produced animated hits such as "The Simpsons," "Family Guy," "Rugrats," and "Johnny Bravo."

But her passion for television waned a bit in 2004-2005. "TV had stagnated," said Gunther. "I watched as my kids' eyeballs shifted away from television over to the computer." And online giants like Google and Yahoo were doing little to cater to the kids market, she added.

So Gunther co-founded ZooKazoo.com, a virtual world for youngsters ages six to 12. The site garnered rave reviews from parenting magazines, but she parted ways with the company for personal reasons. Last year, Gunther jumped back in the online entertainment game by launching Calabasas-based Masher Media.

The firm is developing MyMiniPeeps.com, a virtual world/MMOG for kids ages six to 13. The site includes three-dimensional graphics, an extensive social networking component, and multi-player competitive games for kids. Tech Coast Angels, a network of individual investors which funds early stage tech companies, has invested \$637,500 in the start-up.

"This isn't a technology play, although there's a lot of innovative technology involved," said Gunther. "It's about who can best engage kids on the Internet and provide them with the most entertaining and immersive environment."

Disney's Club Penguin is one of the forerunners of kid's virtual worlds. The free website allows kids to create their own penguin, travel to different locales on the site, earn money by playing games, own an igloo and purchase unique outfits. Paying a monthly subscription gives children more options.

Webkinz stuffed animals have an online component, and a lot of Club Penguin copycats have appeared over the years, said Gunther. These sites attract million of users and prove there's demand for virtual worlds for kids. But at younger ages kids are looking for deeper social networking, deeper social interaction, and more competitive gaming.

"The 'Wow' factor is gone and now kids want more," she said. "Many kids are leaving these sites to go to YouTube, Facebook and World of Warcraft. The question is how to take it to the next level of 'Wow.'" Gunther said her two daughters, ages 12 and 15, have always been a great "cool meter" for online content.

On MyMiniPeeps.com, kids create their own three-dimensional "avatar" – a cartoon character – that takes on roles and jobs in the virtual community. Performing well at a job qualifies the player for additional privileges.

The social networking component allows children to have a network of friends that they can invite to their virtual home, challenge to games, instant message and give gifts to. Friends from the real world can be prioritized and kids can teleport to play with their friends.

All of the multi-player games are jobs that allow avatars to earn money, career roles and titles, and purchase items online. MyMiniPeeps also has bank accounts where kids can track the amount of money they earn and spend. They can even invest money in virtual businesses through a mini stock market, and earn points for doing good deeds on the site.

"We want to encourage kids to be socially responsible inside our (online) community and outside," said Gunther.

The basic site will be free and Masher Media plans to make money by selling monthly subscriptions that give children more privileges, and offering micro transactions where kids can buy special items with real world money.

MyMiniPeeps is not the first site to take kid's virtual worlds and gaming to the next level.

Competitors in the marketplace include Cartoon Network's "FusionFall"; Sony Online Entertainment's "Free Realms"; "Wizard101"; and "JumpStart."

The sites have a model similar to MyMiniPeeps. They offer a basic "free" level of play, have cutting-edge graphics and multi-player games, and make money through paid subscriptions that open-up additional levels on the site.

"Personally I invest in people, and Sherry Gunther is one of the smartest, most creative entrepreneurs I've ever met," said Stephen Block, deal lead with Tech Coast Angels. "This is a highly competitive space and if anybody is going to succeed it's going to be Sherry Gunther."

Gunther said from a technology innovation standpoint, MyMiniPeeps' asset creation and streaming components are fairly complex.

The company is using Unity 3D. The creation of multi-player games requires loading a lot of data. Masher is developing all of its own music, sound effects and voices. And the company is writing its own real-time code that allows each avatar to carry profile information.

Masher Media is currently completing the alpha version of the site and plans on finishing the beta version by August 2010.

Gunther said she has surrounded herself with plenty of talent to boost the company's chances of success. "We have a great team on the creative, technology and marketing fronts," she said.

Chris Headrick, creative/art director, is an Emmy Award nominated artist who spent the past 16 years as a top animation storyboard artist, director, writer, and designer. He has worked for The Walt Disney Company, Warner Bros. Animation, Nickelodeon and more.

Barry Holroyd, chief technology officer, has more than 25 years of systems and product development experience in Web/Internet technologies, networking, databases, storage and distributed object systems. He once worked with Oracle as the lead architect for the object-oriented infrastructure for Oracle's Interactive T.V. project.

Two members of Tech Coast Angels and a number of other entertainment and technology industry veterans are also working closely with the company.

"(MyMiniPeeps) is a revolution in kids' entertainment that's more exciting, immersive and interesting than anything that's come before it," said Block.

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