

Web browser pioneer backs new way to surf Internet (Update 2)

November 7 2010, By MICHAEL LIEDTKE , AP Technology Writer

(AP) -- The Web has changed a lot since Marc Andreessen revolutionized the Internet with the introduction of his Netscape browser in the mid-1990s. That's why he's betting people are ready to try a different Web-surfing technique on a new browser called RockMelt.

The browser, available for the first time Monday, is built on the premise that most online activity today revolves around socializing on Facebook, searching on Google, tweeting on Twitter and monitoring a handful of favorite websites. It tries to minimize the need to roam from one website to the next by corralling all vital information and favorite services in panes and drop-down windows.

"This is a chance for us to build a browser all over again," Andreessen said. "These are all things we would have done (at Netscape) if we had known how people were going to use the Web."

Andreessen didn't develop the RockMelt browser the way he did Netscape, whose early popularity waned as Microsoft Corp. bundled its Internet Explorer browser with the Windows operating system.

RockMelt is the handiwork of Tim Howes and Eric Vishria, who formerly worked with Andreessen. But Andreessen's seal of approval has been stamped on startup.

The biggest chunk of RockMelt's \$10 million in funding has come from the venture capital firm that Andreessen runs with his partner, Ben

Horowitz.

Andreessen also sits on RockMelt's board of directors, and his advice has been called upon frequently.

"When you are trying to reinvent the Web browser, who would you rather run your ideas by besides Marc?" said Howes, RockMelt's chief technology officer (Vishria is CEO).

Facebook's imprint also is all over RockMelt, although the two companies' only business connection so far is Andreessen. He also serves on Facebook's board of directors.

RockMelt only works if you have a Facebook account. That restriction still gives RockMelt plenty of room to grow, given Facebook has more than 500 million users.

After Facebook users log on RockMelt with their Facebook account information, the person's Facebook profile picture is planted in the browser's left hand corner and a list of favorite friends can be displayed in the browser's left hand pane. There's also a built-in tool for posting updates in a pop-up box.

The features extend beyond Facebook and Twitter. RockMelt includes a tool that shows results from Google searches in a drop-down box that can be scrolled through to peruse the recommended websites in the main part of the browser. The browser's right-hand pane is reserved for listing favorite websites, with automatic notifications whenever they get fresh information on them.

RockMelt stores each user's preferences on a remote server, making them available on any computer that has the browser installed on its hard drive.

Although its backers hail the browser as a breakthrough, RockMelt is borrowing some technology and ideas from other sources. Its foundation is built on Chromium, the same open-source coding that spawned Google Inc.'s Chrome browser two years ago. Another browser called Flock has been trying to tap into the online social scene for the past five years.

No browser has come close to surpassing Internet Explorer, despite various challenges through the years. Internet Explorer still holds a roughly 60 percent market share, according to the research firm Net Applications. The Mozilla Foundation's Firefox, which drew upon Netscape, ranks a distant second at 23 percent followed by Chrome at about 9 percent.

RockMelt is starting off with a modest goal: it hopes to attract 1 million users as it extends invitations to people interested in trying the browser. Requests can be made through <http://www.rockmelt.com>.

Andreessen is convinced Internet Explorer's lead remains vulnerable, even after more than a decade of domination and repeated upgrades.

"I don't believe in mature markets," he said. "I think markets are only mature when there is a lack of innovative products."

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