Startup transports Web browsers to underwater world

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It's a living, breathing ocean that you can "dive into," exploring underwater habitats from the Indian Ocean to the Sea of Cortez while encountering thousands of fish - as they swim across your computer screen.

The fish and fauna are created by artists from Los Angeles to Seoul and Mumbai, India, and are programmed to behave as they would in their natural habitat - enabling viewers to tag, follow and even buy their favorite fish.

This is not an online game or an animated movie. Nor is it a social media site. It's an interactive online world that combines elements of all three media to create what its designers proclaim is a new form of entertainment - and a potentially lucrative new business.

Venice, Calif., startup Wemo Media has spent the past two years developing the Web application, named theBlu, which has been in a test phase for several months but officially debuts this week. It is the first of several entertainment projects the company hopes artists will collaborate on that harness the global reach and interactivity of the Web.

Unlike a traditional studio, Wemo essentially functions as a virtual studio in which the animators and computer programmers aren't housed in a traditional bricks-and-mortar building.

"The next Pixar is not going to be in the Bay Area or L.A.," said Wemo

Media founder Neville Spiteri. "It's going to be an online studio that creative artists around the world can walk into every day through their browser, wherever they are."

Although Hollywood in recent years has used the vast reach of the Internet to distribute its content, Spiteri believes that theBlu goes one step further by treating the Web as an artistic medium in its own right.

The unusual project has the support of some big names in the industry, including Andy Jones, animation director on "Avatar"; Louie Psihoyos, director of 2009's Oscar-winning documentary "The Cove"; and Joichi Ito, director of the Massachusetts of Technology Media Lab.

"The largest team I've had was probably on 'Avatar' working with about 100 animators," said Jones, a director on theBlu. "TheBlu is the possibility to work with thousands, tens of thousands of artists around the world."

In the next two to three years, Wemo has ambitious plans to build a $100 million business from theBlu and other upcoming projects.

The company would generate revenue by charging consumers a monthly fee for exploring the ocean and by selling advertising and corporate sponsorships on its website. TheBlu is currently free but Wemo intends to offer subscriptions by early next year at a yet-to-be-determined fee.

The site also will make money by allowing artists to sell their virtual creations to consumers. Wemo would take a cut of the artwork sold, with prices ranging from $1 to $100.

"We can create and curate entertainment content on a scale that has never been done before," Spiteri said.

Spiteri, 40, launched Wemo in January 2009 after working as senior development director at games giant Electronic Arts and as a digital effects supervisor at Digital Domain.

An avid diver who grew up in Malta, Spiteri was drawn to the ocean as a milieu for Wemo's first project, as was his partner and co-founder, Scott Yara. The two men worked together at the California software company Greenplum, which Yara co-founded and which was sold last year for $400 million to information technology firm EMC Corp.

Wemo, housed in a 4,000-square-foot loft office with six employees, invested more than $2 million and 40,000 hours, mainly to research and program the attributes of about 300,000 known species of aquatic life, from various varieties of pilot fish to hammerhead sharks and humpback whales.

The company consulted with marine biologists to research how each of the species should look and behave in the wild and then programmed that information into its proprietary computer system.

Artists who want to participate go to theBlu website and select which fish or fauna they want to create from a panel of cataloged species. They can download specs for things like bone structure and create an accurate 3-D model. Once the work is created, it's submitted to Wemo for approval. Consumers can tag the fish to find out details on the species and learn about the artist who created it.

The site features the work of more than 100 digital artists, including students from the MIT Media Lab, the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts and Carnegie Mellon University. So far, there are nearly 10,000 people who have registered for the site from at least 40 countries.

Beyond the business aspects, Spiteri and his supporters view the platform as an education tool that could be used in schools and museums to teach children about the ocean and its complex ecosystems.

"One of the biggest problems that the oceans face is that people don't see what's going on in the ocean," Psihoyos said. "This project is a way for people to put their heads under the water without getting wet."