

Google hopes to revolutionize video chat with 'Hangout' apps

April 5 2012, By Mike Swift

Christine Egy Rose realized she was on to something powerful. Instead of the awkward monosyllabic two-minute exchange her two-year-old son Jackson typically had over a video chat link with relatives, he spent a full 50 minutes happily working on a shared drawing with his grandmother in Florida, using the video chat's embedded drawing feature that Egy Rose was developing.

Egy Rose 's mother-in-law, feeling so much closer to the little boy in California, was almost in tears by the end of the chat.

"We don't have the Sunday night dining room table anymore - at least a lot of families don't - and the three of us didn't," Egy Rose, the founder and [CEO](#) of the video chat and collaborative play startup Scoot & Doodle, said in an interview with co-founders Patty Chang and Sarah Stone. "We wanted to recreate that for our families."

With last week's launch of the first half-dozen apps for the "Hangouts" video chat feature of Google+, the Internet giant hopes to increase the time people spend on the social network and create a popular platform that will ultimately grow to of hundreds of video apps, or more. Hangouts allows up to 10 people to connect on a video chat.

By adding software apps to Hangouts, independent developers like Scoot & Doodle hope to make video chats more like an in-person, shared social experience, allowing apps to transform video chats, just as they revolutionized cell phones.

"It's really the starting gun," Vic Gundotra, the executive who heads the development of Google+, said of the platform launch. "No one has ever done a multi-user video service for the whole world for free, let alone open it up to developers and see where they take it. It takes a company like Google, at Google's scale, to do something like this, and let's see what happens."

In opening Google+ Hangouts to independent developers like Scoot & Doodle, Google is cribbing a page from Facebook. When CEO Mark Zuckerberg opened Facebook's platform to independent developers in 2007, no one knew it would trigger a revolution in social games that spawned successful companies like Zynga. More recently, Facebook also has offered shared-experience services, such as a feature launched in January that allows friends to listen to the same song at that same time. Facebook has also partnered with Skype to provide video chat.

At more than 100 million users, Google+ is still a fraction of the size of Facebook's 845 million users. But an even bigger issue for Google+ is poor engagement, with recent data from comScore showing users average just 3 minutes a month on Google+, compared to 7 hours a month on Facebook.

The Hangouts feature is "one of the four or five pillars that we have that really drive engagement," Gundotra said. "It fundamentally changes the interaction when you can see somebody's eyes, which is why we said social is much more than just status updates. That's why we invested so much in video technology."

Among the other Hangout apps on Google+ is a virtual deck of cards, allowing a person in San Francisco, for example, to play a game of poker through a video chat with a cousin in Denmark and an aunt in Denver, as well as other apps.

"Google is really hoping to drive engagement with its network, and getting people to stay online and use its services more is absolutely something it wants to do," said Irene Berlinsky, an analyst with IDC who follows video chat. Along with Skype, Google is emerging as "really the two big gorillas" of video chat, she said.

Egy Rose, Chang and Stone don't fit the stock profile of [Silicon Valley](#) startup entrepreneurs - they are not 20-something males, and they are not engineers. Egy Rose and Chang are former NBC television news producers, Egy Rose with "Meet the Press" and Chang with "Dateline." Stone was a designer for clothing companies like Old Navy and Abercrombie & Fitch but had never designed for the Web.

All three, however, are the mothers of young children and what ultimately became Scoot & Doodle (the company got its name from the nicknames for Egy Rose's two kids) started out as an attempt to solve a social problem - the difficulty of staying close to children and adults separated by geography or divorce.

"We knew the problem was enormous," Egy Rose said. "Everyone we talked to was experiencing that."

The three founders worked early on with educators and scientists from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab, San Francisco's Exploratorium, and the Stanford Institute of Design K-12 Lab to gain insights about how to connect children and adults, and they began to focus on shared activities like [drawing](#) and art.

One early idea was to create a kit, including arts and games, to help busy parents or distant grandparents connect with children. But around this time, Egy Rose and Chang, who were partners in a Silicon Valley video consulting business that did corporate videos for large Silicon Valley companies, got advice from a mentor who suggested they focus on the

Internet as the way to bring families together.

But as they made the rounds looking for investors in Silicon Valley to talk about using [video chat](#) to create "a collaborative playspace," it was tough to get traction.

"We knew we had a big problem: We're all women, we're all close to 40, we all have children, and we don't have technical backgrounds," Chang said. As they met with potential investors, "we had people say things like, 'You girls are cute, but it's not going to work.' "

Ultimately, they signed on engineers Brian Ng and Kenji Morrow to create a five person startup that is now based in San Francisco. And, by chance, a mutual acquaintance introduced them to the Google+ team.

While a beta version of the product is also on the Scoot & Doodle website at scootdoodle.com, it's not yet open to full public use. Which means that the [Google](#)+ launch marked the coming-out party for the three founders in front of a potential audience of millions.

The startup is still exploring revenue models, but wants to build audience for its product first.

"We are committed to learning from the people using the product," Egy Rose said. "We will land on the right solution."

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