

The Register-Guard

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MAKING PLAYLISTS CHILD'S PLAY

A Eugene company streamlines online interactions

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The Register-Guard

Published: **Sunday, Dec 4, 2011 05:00AM**

For the past three years, Vizme, a small Eugene company, has been building technology that lets people create their own playlists of videos, pictures, audio — any digital content they want — play it on their computer or smart phone, and share it via Facebook or other social networks.

Such material already can be played and shared, but it's a clumsy and frustrating process, requiring a succession of "clicks" on links, with long pauses in between.

Vizme envisions an easier, faster, more engaging way.

"Imagine a YouTube video posted on Facebook," Vizme CEO Dan Mayhew said. "Now imagine viewing that video when you click on the link plus reading, watching or listening to a mixture of any related content from the Web.

"That is Vizme."

The Vizme engine has been in Beta testing since July and now has several thousand users. Among them are HarperCollins Publishing, which uses it to promote books on the Web, and National Public Radio, which included Vizme-powered visuals in an online report on scientific findings for Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Vizme's challenge now is to continue to enhance the technology, all while trying to get more people and organizations to use it and trying to interest more investors, Mayhew said.

The company has been through one round of financing and is seeking more funding — a challenge in these economic times, Mayhew said, declining to disclose how much the company has raised so far.

"Now that we're starting to get real organizations using it like HarperCollins and NPR — and others are in the pipeline — that will really help our profile," Mayhew said.

People don't pay to use Vizme's technology, but the company is working toward the day when it will make money on premium features, such as "analytics" that would enable a company's marketing department, for example, to see how many people are using a particular playlist, how long they played with it and whether they shared it, said Scott Ernst, Vizme's chief technology officer.

Tim Berry, founder of PaloAlto Software, another Eugene technology firm, said he was impressed when he saw Vizme's technology at last year's Willamette Angel Conference.

"When I first saw it, I thought it was a sensational way to make video and social media come together in a way that was sizzling, sensational, cool," Berry said.

Although Berry ended up not investing in Vizme, he said he's an unabashed fan of Dan Mayhew. He added that he has been following Vizme's progress and "rooting for them."

What Vizme needs now is momentum, Berry said.

"If they can get some wind under their sail, like a glider, then they can get momentum and take off," he said.

"When you look at Web video it's still kind of clumsy," Berry said. "You can maybe use YouTube, but YouTube is that big interface. The idea of having a playlist that works well and that I (as the author) can organize. ... I liked that from Vizme from the beginning. I don't think anyone is doing that well."

Berry said the company's biggest challenge will be that "they either win big, or not at all."

"That's the nature of the area of business that they've chosen," Berry said, adding that he thinks the Vizme team "has as much creativity and reason and smarts to win as anyone I've seen."

Vizme originally was a spinout of animation technology developed at the University of Oregon's computer science department, and the UO is still a shareholder, Mayhew said.

Two of the founders, Scott Ernst and Eric Wills, both received advanced degrees from the University of Oregon. Ernst has a doctorate in physics, and Wills has a doctorate in computer science.

Mayhew previously managed technology firms and alternative energy companies in Boston and Oregon.

It was the UO connection that led to Vizme's collaboration with NPR.

NPR producer Andrew Prince said he initially contacted Kent Stevens, a UO computer science professor, to seek permission to use online some of Stevens' animations that were included with a T. Rex book.

Stevens did him one better; he offered to provide custom animations, Prince said.

"It turns out he's one of the world's leading dinosaur animators — he makes interactive dinosaur exhibits for museums in New York, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles and Tokyo," Prince said. "Kent and his collaborator, Scott Ernst, have the most scientifically up-to-date models of dinosaurs in the world and work closely with dinosaur archaeologists and other researchers."

"Speaking as the producer of the project, I was extraordinarily pleased — both with the end result and with the collaboration on the project," Prince said.

Stevens and Ernst ended up creating an interactive exhibit for NPR illustrating four T. Rex body parts. Ernst also produced five short videos describing the latest understanding of how T. Rex moved and lived.

In one, Ernst had some fun, describing the dinosaur's walk as a strut and showing a computer-animated T. Rex strutting to the Bee Gee's "Stayin' Alive."

That set off a flurry of comments at NPR's website.

"Love the T. Rex "strut" video!" came a tweet from the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture at the University of Washington.

"What a wonderful way to get my eighth-grade students excited about fossils!" Elizabeth Lemerond commented. "They were just about to zone out and those BeeGees perked 'em up all day! Bribe the 2 yr old and 5 yr old at home to brush their teeth if they could watch it one more time! AWESOME!"

It took a little more work for Vizme to get HarperCollins' attention. Figuring that their technology could help book publishers market new releases in a much more polished, engaging way, Vizme created a sample playlist for the thriller, "The Informationist," Taylor Stevens' debut novel from Crown Publishing.

"We tweeted about it," Mayhew said. "Within 30 minutes, the author contacted us."

Taylor tweeted back: "Seriously the coolest thing I have seen regarding THE INFORMATIONIST to date! I *love* this!"

Within two days, HarperCollins social media representatives were following Vizme's Twitter account, Mayhew said.

Vizme since has created playlists for several HarperCollins' novels, including "Room," by Emma Donoghue; "Before I Go to Sleep," by S.J. Watson; and "This

Dark Endeavor” by Kenneth Opiel.

The playlist offers a range of choices, including a video trailer, excerpts from the book, reviews and information about the author.

With so many potential applications of the technology, it’s sometimes difficult to decide what sample playlists to make, Ernst, the chief technology officer said.

Vizme tries to focus on industries and areas that are innovative and looking for ways to share their digital content in more engaging ways, he said.

“Movies have a formula,” Ernst said, referring to the ubiquitous trailers with video scenes and voice over. “Books don’t have a formula yet,” he said.

The “Creative in Oregon” contest, Vizme’s latest collaboration with the Software Association of Oregon and Oregon Film, is a little closer to home.

Vizme will manage and provide the platform and web presence for a contest to unearth some of the most creative work that is produced by Oregonians and can be shared online. It could include music, videos, images, games, websites or Web apps.

Submissions will be accepted April 1 through April 30, and winners will be announced on May 4.

Prizes will be awarded based on popular vote. The project is intended to give exposure to creative arts in Oregon in a challenging economic time. It also gives Vizme an opportunity to show off its technology.

“It’s a way for our platform to get noticed while doing something we really care about,” Mayhew said.

VIZME

Founded: October 2008

Founders: Dan Mayhew, Scott Ernst and Eric Wills

Business: Technology that streamlines the viewing of video, photos, games, text on any computer device and makes it easier to share that information via social networking, such as Facebook

Employees: Three founders and Jen Lowry, who manages Vizme’s help and social networking sites

Annual revenues: Not disclosed

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