



Tuesday, May 09, 2006

## IM-Based Social Networking

Startup imeem thinks it has an insight.

By Wade Roush

With more than 70 million users, MySpace has proven that Internet users are hungry for Internet tools that let them network with friends, share photos and blogs, and advertise their activities. But MySpace is social networking for the masses. A growing number of Web companies are betting that Internet users want more sophisticated social-networking and media-sharing tools.

Last week we profiled one such outfit, Wallop, a Microsoft spinout that's building an immersive new social-networking environment scheduled to debut this summer (see "[New Social Networking Technology Packs a Wallop](#)"). But Palo Alto, CA-based startup [imeem](#) is going in a different direction. It's reconceiving social networking around a familiar platform: instant messaging.

The 21-employee company, backed by venture capital firm Morgenthaler Ventures, makes a downloadable application that complements existing IM systems, letting users build buddy lists, see rich profiles of each buddy, track who's online, and share photos, video files, and streaming audio instantly.

On April 8, Technology Review inquired about imeem's approach with CEO Dalton Caldwell, 26, who has dual Bachelor's degrees in psychology and symbolic systems from Stanford and is a former programmer for the open-source Jabber instant-messaging project.

**Technology Review:** What's the basic philosophy behind imeem, and what makes it different from other social networking services?

**Dalton Caldwell:** The focal point of imeem is instant messaging. We think the buddy list should be the focus of your social universe online, and for social media -- blogging, photo sharing, video sharing, audio sharing. You can tag things and see how the community is tagging things, you can rate things. In other words, the center of the imeem universe is you and your friends, and all the "stuff" around them. The stuff is what makes it interesting.

**TR:** What made the instant-messaging model attractive to you?

**DC:** I'm definitely a member of the IM generation. I'm 26. It was such an important part of my life when I was in high school. And it's continued to be this powerful social phenomenon. There's a similar phenomenon happening now with social networking. But if you think about the usage model of instant messaging -- always on, seeing who's present, dynamic interaction -- it's a much more social operation than just clicking on some social networking website. You could tell that the people who worked on the first generation of social networking services were not members of the IM generation.

**TR:** How does imeem work?

**DC:** Imagine you're chatting with someone you know, and there's a button that says "View Profile" on it, and when you click that, instead of just seeing some tiny little profile like you would in AIM [AOL Instant Messenger], you actually see a full social-networking profile, with unlimited photo sharing, tagging, and so forth, right in the context of chatting with that person. To me, it seems like such a natural and fluid way of doing things.

Then we have the "What's New" mode. Whenever somebody in your network shares photos or makes a comment, you receive a notification. It's sort of like tracking people on your traditional buddy list -- you can guess where they are by seeing their "away" message. We translate that into a person's whole digital life.

**TR:** There is a lot of discussion about Web 2.0 as the new paradigm for Web companies. As you know, the idea is that sophisticated software services can be delivered via the Web, using programming approaches like AJAX [Asynchronous Javascript and XML]. What's your take on that trend, and where does imeem fit into it?

**DC:** When the phrase Web 2.0 first came out it sounded interesting, but it's become sort of a dirty word. When we hang out with people from other companies, we talk about Web 2.0 and crack up a lot. I think AJAX is very interesting, and the user interfaces and tools that some of these companies are coming up with are very interesting, but there are so many layers around it, it's become a meaningless term. And I don't think any of the Javascript stuff is revolutionary. I love it and I use it, but you could have done all this stuff with Javascript back with Netscape 4. People have now blazed that trail and built libraries that you can use to make it easier to build AJAX applications. But it's gotten overblown.

**TR:** But another component of Web 2.0 is the idea of building large sites around user-generated content -- whether it's profiles or blogs or photos or real-estate listings.

**DC:** We're obviously right in the middle of that one. And if you dig down deep to look at what's actually shipping today, I think we're doing a much better job than most of the stuff I read about, in the sense of taking user-generated content and making it easy to share it, tag it, and rate it.

**TR:** I got a preview of Wallop's system last week. They're developing an entirely new interface for their social networking system, whereas you're sticking to a more traditional one. Why?

**DC:** I haven't seen a lot of successful things that used brand new, totally different interfaces. When I was at Stanford, I had this class in 2000 or 2001 where companies would come in and we would help them run a usability test. One company was showing us their voice-over-Internet phone application. It had this onscreen graphical user interface that was very kludgy -- it looked like a phone and you dialed the buttons with your mouse. The company said, "Everybody hates this? Why?" That was the problem given to us. The answer was because it was kludgy and weird and stilted. That's not how people naturally use software. Now compare that to Skype, which is just an IM client. It's the most natural way to do voice-over-Internet that I can think of. They made VoIP into an experience that millions and millions of people understood.

**TR:** One of the things imeem has been up to lately is building imeem sites, or communities, around events such as the [Sundance Film Festival](#). What's the idea there?

**DC:** We were thinking, if we could be topical to whatever is going on right now that's cool, and show people behind-the-scenes content, it would be a great way to illustrate the idea and get mindshare. It's been amazingly successful. The thing we've noticed is people are incredibly impressed with what you can do with imeem. They aren't jaded like everyone in Silicon Valley. When they see what you can do with it, they say "Wow, this is way better than MySpace." That is their frame of reference.

Our tools are very powerful. It's almost like they're too powerful. If you give people this huge beautiful blank canvas, where do they start? These [event sites] have been helping quite a bit. And I think we're going to be able to do bigger and better things as we move from being completely guerilla to doing official partnerships. We've been partnering with magazines like Urb. And we're the [official community](#) for E3 [the Electronic Entertainment Expo, going on this week in Los Angeles].

**TR:** How many users do you have now?

**DC:** We have about 50,000 registered users and have seen a whole lot of growth just recently. We're going to these events, and we've been getting a lot of press. I was in Newsweek recently. In social networking, there are the Yahoos and the MySpaces, and then there is a huge pack of companies that no one has heard of. I think we're officially in the middle now.

With social applications, there is a tipping point. Which is another over-beaten phrase -- but based on our traffic, I think we are at the elbow where all the hard work we put into the technology is going to start paying off really nicely. It's been fun being in tiny startup mode, but I think we're graduating to real-business mode.