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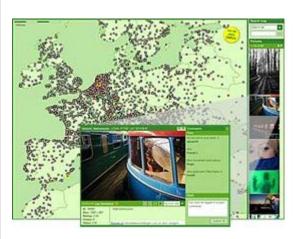
DIGITAL ADVENTURES

Time Waster
The Ground-Level Internet Map

By AARON RUTKOFF
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For all their click-and-drag technical wizardry and high orbit satellite perspective, Google Earth and its ilk can't zoom in close enough to reveal life at ground level.

THE GIMMICK

Woophy, an acronym for World of Photography, allows users to zoom in to eye level and gives a human element to Internet maps. Instead of orbiting satellites, the site employs a volunteer army of amateur shutterbugs and travel enthusiasts to document the far corners of the world. Anyone can register for free and upload their images to Woophy's database.

The Netherlands-based site combines a geographic database from the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency with a simple world map that anchors each photo to its global place of origin. The database contains the name and location of virtually every recognizable population center, identified on the map by latitude and longitude. Every city and village chronicled by a submission to Woophy's photo archive is marked on the map with a small square.

Click on a square and thumbnail-sized images of that location appear in a menu at the right margin of the map. Select an image with another click and a larger version of the snapshot materializes over the map, with more detailed information about the precise location and subject of the photograph. Both the photographer and any registered viewer can leave comments about the image, and users can even assess its quality with a simple rating system.

"We realized right away that, in terms of technical resources, we couldn't compete with Google Earth. We couldn't have satellites," says Joris van Hoytema, half of the Dutch brother duo that started Woophy. "So we figured our unique idea would be photography -- showing people on the other side of the world what your place looks like."

The Idea

Mr. van Hoytema traces Woophy's origins to an overheated venture-capital pitch made at the tail end of the dot-com boom.

In 1998, Mr. van Hoytema and his brother, Hoyte, had an idea he now describes as "great but maybe a bit unrealistic" -- a sprawling Web-based map depicting every building on every street in the world. Unlike Woophy, which stops at visual representation, this service would have functioned as a sort of geographic address book for the Internet age, with a new system of email and domain names based on the street address of real world buildings.
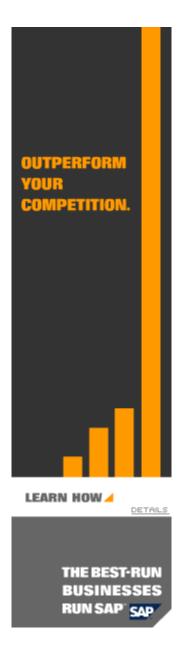
WASTING TIME?

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"You should have an email address that is more like a real address," Mr. van Hoytema says of the original idea. "You can find the address of your neighbor, you can find his name and phone number, but you cannot find his email address. Why is that?"

By 2003, this dot-com dream percolated into a business plan that found an audience with Dutch IT visionary Eckart Wintzen. His response, according to Mr. van Hoytema, was one of regret that the brothers hadn't come to him for funding several years earlier.

With hopes of venture capital dashed, the brothers spent the next two years scaling back their

vision to a more a realistic scope. But the general concept remained: "We wanted to make a connection between real geography -- the geography you know because you walk in it -- and virtual geography on the Internet."

The Tipping Point

For geography obsessives like the van Hoytemas, tracking the Web site's spread across the real world must have been especially satisfying.

Working in the spare time with the help of a professional designer, Marcel Geenevasen, the first beta version of Woophy went live on March 1, 2005. Six weeks later, a Hungarian Web site took note and photos of Hungary suddenly populated the Woophy map. "For a time," Mr. van Hoytema notes, "it was our most densely photographed country."

Next came a slew of submissions from Israeli photographers, followed by unexplained popularity in the Baltic region, South Korea and then New Zealand. "Currently," he explains, "Woophy is very popular in France." By December, a rush of 13,000 unique visitors in the span of a few hours brought down Woophy's overmatched server and forced an upgrade.

Now, after almost a year online, Woophy counts over 5,700 members who have uploaded more than 60,000 photos of some 8,300 village and cities world-wide. Taken together, photos in the Woophy archive are viewed 2.2 million times each month. The site's map has a heavy European tilt, with much of U.S. still open.

The site's spread and international user base have a lot to do with the no-frills map interface. "We wanted to make it visual and associative," Mr. van Hoytema says. "We thought about adding a help file, but the idea was that it wouldn't be necessary."

Woophy's reach across the globe may be restrained by one practical problem: "To fully enjoy our site, you need broadband.

So there is that limit," said Mr. van Hoytema.

Write to Aaron Rutkoff at aaron.rutkoff@wsj.com

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