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SF Bird-Watching Game Debuts From Craig's Backyard

(CBS 5 / BCN) SAN FRANCISCO

Local Internet maven Craig Newmark could change the way we look at things -- again -- as his backyard went live on Monday for the rollout of an Internet bird-watching game developed by computer engineers at two universities.

Created by engineers at the University of California, Berkeley, and Texas A&M University, the game aims to bring together diverging flocks: video game users and bird watchers.

Newmark said the online game allows players to watch birds in his San Francisco backyard in real time. Players earn points by taking bird photos using a remote control video camera, and by correctly classifying the birds.

"My backyard is a small forest. I got lucky and I love nature if it makes itself convenient for me," said Newmark, who said he often watches for birds from his deck overlooking Sutro Forest.

"I put up a bunch of feeders and the birds started coming, and I can identify a couple of dozen."

In 1995 Newmark created Craigslist, a free Web site used to connect people with housing, goods, jobs, services and ideas. The site's popularity is evident in its expansion from its Bay Area origins to its current iteration as bulletin board in 450 cities around the world.

Newmark called his latest project an "experiment in remote collaboration," since many people will be able to control the camera simultaneously, and said he only expects good things from such endeavors.

"There are a number of new technologies emerging that help people work together and as people of good will work together, I think we are going to find strength from the collaboration," he said.

Ken Goldberg, UC Berkeley professor and co-principal investigator of the project, said the program "introduces highly responsive algorithms that automatically compute optimal camera viewpoint to satisfy dozens of simultaneous players, including experts and amateurs."

Users with higher points will have greater control of the camera, but ultimately, the wishes of the majority will rule its movement, according to Goldberg.

Goldberg said the video game would help some members of the public gain access to nature as they use their mouse to click on birds.

"I think we have a craving to reconnect with nature but it has to fit in with our real lives and this is one way to do it," said Newmark.

"We are at the beginning of big historic change no one knows where it's headed."

"This morning I was at my local coffee house with a friend," he said, "there is no substitute for face to face interaction, but the net is genuine, just as the phone is genuine."

"We hope this project increases public awareness about how technology can help natural observation," said Dezhen Song, who is collaborating with Goldberg from Texas A&M University. "This also brings people with a specific knowledge together effectively and efficiently."

Goldberg hopes the game attracts players of all ages from all over the world from both bird watching and gaming communities alike.

"Initially gamers may be better at controlling the interface, and birdwatchers may be better at correctly classifying the birds. We're looking forward to seeing how things turn out," he said. "It's like bird-watching itself. It's kind of competitive."

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A bird feeds in the backyard of Craig Newmark, founder of craigslist.

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