

Startup building new technology for creating apps, games

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Dmitry Shapiro, a former MySpace executive and ex-Googler, is building a new technology in San Diego that he hopes will open the gates of app development to people of all types—not just those who can code.

His latest project is called Koji, an [online platform](#) where users can create games and other apps without having a software background. With the click of a few buttons, people can design apps on the Koji website by duplicating templates and customizing them through a simple toolkit. Users can add sound effects, redesign icons, and swap out text, color palettes, and other features within templates.

The startup is backed by a whole slew of tech billionaires, including the former head of Disney, Michael Eisner; the head of Google News, Richard Gringas; and the founder of Zynga, Mark Pincus. Koji's parent company, GoMeta, closed a \$6 million round in April.

Shapiro's big ambition is to bring app development to the masses, handing the magic of code over to the muggles.

"We can all send emails, we can all create PowerPoint presentations, and we can all do Excel spreadsheets ... but none of us can create software," Shapiro said. "That's crazy."

The San Diego Union-Tribune newsroom dabbled with the platform for a few short minutes (OK, hours), and built a Galaga-style arcade game with pictures of co-workers as enemy targets (all in good fun, of course).

Shapiro hopes that Koji will do for apps what YouTube did for videos, allowing amateur creators to build content for the masses. The idea is ambitious. Do the masses really want to build their own games or apps? Should these things be left to the experts?

WHO WOULD USE THIS?

Shapiro has been asked these question many times, and it brings back memories of another venture.

Back in 2004, Shapiro was the founder and CEO of Veoh, an "Internet television" company that wanted to serve as an online platform for user-generated videos. Sound familiar? The site was an early competitor to YouTube, winning over millions of users with high-quality videos (and allowing racier content than YouTube allowed). But the site was sued out of existence for allegations of copyright infringement (Veoh eventually won the suit, but the costs forced the company into bankruptcy).

Still, in its early days, Shapiro was canvassing Silicon Valley to pitch the idea to investors. This was before the rocket ship success of YouTube, and cable television still reigned supreme. Investors found it hard to believe that users would want to create amateur content—and that others would want to watch it.

"They all said, 'Who would want to watch amateurs broadcasting video?' " Shapiro said. "'There's a reason motion pictures cost millions of dollars to produce. You can't just point the camera at something and make it interesting' ... Today, we can laugh at that."

Almost 5 billion videos are watched on YouTube every day, most of which are made by "amateurs."

Shapiro imagines a future in which content creators and other creative

types are using Koji to build games, apps and other interactive software experiences. Marketing, for example, could be a good early use for the tool. So far, [social media influencers](#) have been the biggest group to adopt Koji, creating themed games that help engage and grow their audience of followers.

CODE HAS TO COME FROM SOMEWHERE

Of course, Koji's library of templates is being populated by engineers who actually can code. Developers around the world have shared their projects on open-sourced platforms and Koji is just another place where engineers choose to share their work. Right now, they're sharing it for fun. In the future, Shapiro plans to roll out a feature that will allow developers to monetize their projects. For example, users might have to pay license fees to use a template. In that sense, Koji is similar to ThemeForest, WordPress or any other template site. Instead of websites users would be shopping for game or app templates.

Koji is just the latest project under Shapiro's umbrella company, GoMeta, which was founded in 2016. The startup made headlines in its early days by sending San Diegans on a scavenger hunt as a way to promote one of its early projects: an augmented reality game. GoMeta has since built out a separate platform called MetaVerse, which allows its users to create augmented reality projects. The platform is primarily used by teachers and educators, Shapiro said.

Koji, however, is the company's latest focus, with all efforts targeted toward growing its user base and template library. For now, the site is largely arcade-style games, but Shapiro expects the variety of templates to diversify with time. Roughly 200 software developers have uploaded templates to the platform, and over 1 million people have played games created on the site.

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