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- [Posts](#)
- [Photos](#)
- [Audio](#)
- [Videos](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Collections](#)

Posts (page 2)

New Jersey Star-Ledger Article

- Dec 17, 2006 at 7:53 PM

The below is the article that ran in the New Jersey Star-Ledger News Paper (Front Page)

Pssst. Hey, buddy. Wanna buy the Brooklyn Bridge? It's a virtual steal
Sunday, December 17, 2006
BY KEVIN COUGHLIN
Star-Ledger Staff



Newark City Hall Photo

Cory Booker gets all the headlines, but Newark has another mayor. His name is Rik Jones, and he lives in West Orange.

Jones is mayor there, too. He attained these high offices in the time-honored way. He bought them.

For less than \$30, Jones, 39, purchased Newark and West Orange at Weblo.com, a new online game where people buy and sell make-believe versions of real places. Buying a city makes you the mayor -- entitling you to kickbacks, er, percentages, of ads, fees and sales within your virtual borders.

"Tell Mr. Booker that I'll sell Newark to him cheap," cracked the ersatz Hizzoner, a corporate tech manager whose pretend portfolio also includes his old hometown of Steubenville, Ohio.

Weblo aims to cash in on the surging popularity of virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft and Second Life, elaborate 3-D fantasy lands where members have created online societies stunning in their complexity. Second Life's nearly 2 million members can attend virtual concerts and lectures, engage in cybertrysts and sell computer-generated property.

Sounds silly to the uninitiated. But, as Walt Disney discovered eons ago, make-believe is serious business. Revenues from U.S. online gaming will triple to more than \$3.5 billion by 2009, predicts market research firm Parks Associates.

And don't bother telling players to get real: Forty-three percent of Internet users who belong to online communities "feel as strongly" about these virtual worlds as they do about their real communities, according to a recent survey by the USC-Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future.

And why not? At least one virtual real estate tycoon already is reported to be a millionaire thanks to Second Life.

Weblo founder Rocky Mirza, a Canadian from Ottawa, hopes to start a cyber-land rush to counter the cooling physical real estate market.

"Imagine playing Monopoly on steroids," said Mirza, 33.

Weblo is pretty low-tech for now. Unlike Second Life, where members cavort as cartoonish figures called avatars, there's nothing flashy. Property holdings appear as simple Web pages. The idea is to entice potential buyers by dressing up these pages with photos, video clips (coming soon) and community forums. It's a bit like marrying the free apartment listings of Craigslist with the popular social networking site MySpace.

PROFITS AND WORLD PEACE

Traffic can translate into income for members. Weblo places ads on member pages, and shares proceeds based on a tiered system. Nonpaying members get a 10 percent cut; a \$30 monthly VIP membership buys 50 percent of the spoils. Governors (who own states) and

mayors also can take a piece of other transactions and membership fees.

As a bonus, Weblovians can take a stab at brokering world peace.

Mirza plans to hold elections among Weblo's 6,000 global members, and then arrange summits between the virtual presidents of the U.S. and North Korea or Iran. "Imagine if a 19- or 20-year-old becomes president of the United States," he said. "They will come up with interesting solutions."

But the real action is in virtual speculation: Buy low, sell high. Weblo set initial prices for states and cities based mostly on actual population. Everything else, from the Brooklyn Bridge to your boss's house, can be registered for a dollar or two.

Launched earlier this month, Weblo sold "California" to a lawyer for \$53,000. New York state fetched \$19,355 -- more than twice New Jersey's price of \$8,829 -- while New York City went for \$410.

Mirza said the pseudo mayor of Washington, D.C., quickly sold his city for a 300 percent profit. Someone else paid \$1 for the Empire State Building and flipped it for \$250, he said.

Members of Weblo -- the name is a play on World Wide Web and a Farsi word for "taking back" -- also can trade familiar dot-com names and celebrity fan club sites. (Mirza wanted to sell actual celebrities, he said, but legal advisers warned against it.)

Death and taxes, alas, are inevitable in cyberspace, too. Weblo sells deeds to virtual property that members can bequeath to their heirs. Profits from virtual sales, meanwhile, are taxable income, said Mirza, whose prior ventures include software company Allainet and UniqueAuction.com.

Weblo, based in Montreal, lists former MySpace.com Chairman Richard Rosenblatt among backers who gave \$2.6 million in seed money.

Mirza said he pursued an Internet career to escape working as hard as his parents, Pakistani immigrants who owned corner grocery stores.

"The Internet was made for lazy people like me," he joked.

TECHNOLOGY AND TOGETHERNESS

Barry Parr, a media analyst for marketing consultant Jupiter Research, called Weblo "an interesting experiment."

Many Americans have turned to virtual worlds for a sense of community eroded by automobiles, suburban sprawl and TV since World War II, he suspects.

"Most people in this country do not know their neighbors, and that's a problem," Parr said. "There's a high degree of alienation."

Technology, meanwhile, is enabling entrepreneurs to create digital universes foreshadowed by sci-fi novels like William Gibson's "Neuromancer" and the "Matrix" movies, Parr said.

At the same time, people are exploring how to use the Web as it evolves from a publishing platform to a communication medium. Parr said immersive online communities may offer new ways to channel one of humankind's oldest impulses: play.

Weblo's challenge is drawing enough users to make virtual properties scarce -- creating supply-and-demand pressures that mirror reality, Parr said. And the site must thwart any attempts at gaming the system. Second Life has been targeted by hackers, and plagued by technical

problems.

Celebrities and real property owners also might take exception to Weblo's business model -- and Weblo members could be held personally liable for trademark infringement, according to the fine print of the site's user agreement, said John Kettle III, a Rutgers University law professor.

"It's just a matter of time in my opinion before claims are raised by building owners and owners of trademarks and celebrities against this use," said Kettle, explaining that intellectual property is about intangibles. "These are some very novel issues."

Back in virtual Newark, "Mayor" Jones insists his motivations are geeky curiosity and cybercivics, not money. Good thing. So far, his Weblo income is 20 cents.

"This intrigues me because I like the idea of being able to build something," said Jones, who glimpses "awesome potential" commuting through Newark to his investment banking job in Manhattan.

"If I can take the real-world Newark as it was when I bought it and somehow figure how to make it grow and improve it, that would be great," Jones said.

Of course, virtual altruism has its limits.

"I'll do what I can for the sake of the city," he said. "But if I have to, I'll cut my losses and sell."

Kevin Coughlin covers technology. He may be reached at kcoughlin@starledger.com or (973) 392-1763.

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Tags:

[new jersey](#), [weblo](#), [star-ledger](#)

I AM THE MAYOR~!

• |Dec 13, 2006 at 12:46 PM





[Mayor](#)

[7 comments](#)

There is a new Phenom going through the web called Weblo. For those who have heard about it is another one of those virtual worlds that you can buy/sell things and generally make a profit. Call it eBay meets mySpace or whatever. The others are about these virtual world that don't exist. Weblo is different, the reason why is because it is virtually THIS world.

When it went live, I didn't know much about it and with the small pittance sitting in my PayPal account I decided to see what this hype was all about and spent my \$35 on the following purchases (click them to go there):

[Newark, NJ](#)

[West Orange, NJ](#)

[Steubenville, OH](#)

What I actually found was that by purchasing these I became the defacto Mayor of each of these virtual cities. O.K. so now what? What is next? I left it alone for about a month until last night when I got an email from the WebLo company asking if I minded if a local NJ newspaper contacted me for an interview! WTF?!? This stuff can't be serious! I bit and said sure.

I got the call today from the Star Ledger Newspaper or basically New Jersey's newspaper of choice. They wanted to ask me some questions about being the Virtual Mayor of Newark. I never really gave it much thought, but apparently it is an interesting topic considering the fact that this past year was a huge mayoral race in Newark where a younger affluent politician, Corey Booker, de-throned the long standing former mayor. The expectations on fresh blood are great. And now I step in and take on the Virtual Newark as the new mayor.

The phone interview was quite interesting and to be honest, I didn't know much about Weblo or how it is set up to make you money even though I am not in it for the \$\$\$. But after browsing their site, Newark Airport is actually posted as up for sale for \$1000 and other key items in this world are really up there in value now. I think Newark Airport when I first looked at it the day this thing went live it was about \$20 or so. I have to do more research on my properties and how they are designed to generate revenue. It must also be said that because someone owns Newark Airport and is generating traffic to the Airport Weblo Site, I have already made \$.20 for doing nothing other than owning Newark.

If I promote the City I generate more revenue for myself. Oh this could get fun. It is even more interesting considering the fact that everything in this world is up for grabs, even people. Michael Jackson, Al Gore, Bush and dare I say it... Osama is also there. Domain names are also up for sale or the rights to them in WebLo land. Want the London Bridge....? For Sale! Want the Statue of Liberty? It has a price. Disney Land? Just look for it.

Back to the interview. So after a few laughs about it all and how it would be nice if Mayor Booker solicited my input on the future of Newark, the reporter decides that it would be cool to have a picture of me in the paper standing in front of Newark's City Hall. In all fun, I will do that this Friday! Guess I am now the Virtual Ambassador for Newark New Jersey, West Orange, NJ and my old home town... Steubenville, OH!

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QotD: My Favorite Holiday Traditions

• | Dec 12, 2006 at 10:27 PM

What are some of your favorite holiday traditions?

Submitted by [sami711](#).

1. Eating too much damn food
2. Falling asleep
3. Gaining too much weight
4. Dealing with sciatica when the dust settles in January from the added weight.

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Tags:

[qotd](#), [holiday traditions](#)

Vox Hunt: Victory!

• | Dec 12, 2006 at 10:14 PM

• [2 comments](#)

Show us a victory.



[Fishing Rik](#)

This victory was had after a very long and exhausting fight with one of the larger species of fish to be found in the Ohio River back in the '70s. I remember as if it was only yesterday as this whale put up one heck of a fight. Of course it could be much larger today as I have always practiced a solid "Catch and release" policy when fishing.

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Tags:

[vox hunt](#), [a victory](#)

A little bit about me.

- [Dec 12, 2006 at 9:57 PM](#)
- [5 comments](#)



[Grandad and Mom](#)

I have decided to take a bit of a look back at Family for a moment. This is a picture of my Grandad and Mom from 1957. I was basically going through my iPhoto and some of the images that I had chosen to scan for posterities sake and ran across this one.

My Grandad was a Policeman you see in the U.K.. My memories of him as a child are very fond ones. To hear my Mom speak, he was tough as nails and if I hear that damn Ox-Tail Soup story and how he threw the tail at her across the dinner table once, I will scream.

What I remember about him and my Gran was that they loved me with no limits. I spent the first 5 years of my life living with them in South Sheilds in the U.K. and I have a very warm feeling in my core that tells me that it was probably one of the best times of my life.



197407 Portage Glacier

These two people saw past my color or my Mother's transgressions against their authority to love me. That is something that I will carry with me until I die. They loved me for me.

You see for our family, I was a black sheep (quite literally). My Mom, you see was a bit of a rebel. She rebelled alright, but that is a whole other topic for therapy I am sure. Needless to say she went against the grain and began dating a married black American Air Force GI in the Shagadelic '60's and the rest they say is history. It was the time where "Little Ricky" was born.

Now, I never knew my real father as he had to return to the U.S. and to his wife and kids.... OUCH! So I was a real life bastard and things haven't changed much since. LOL!!! I know somewhere out there I have 1/2 brothers and sisters though and that intrigues me. As a matter of fact they are probably a few hundred miles from me right now as I believe he was from Virginia.



Mom and Father - 4

Curiosity did overcome me once though as a young adult and I did the Oprah thing and tried to find him. Fortunately being in the Military at the time, I had access to find information on where to send the question about where he might have been located at the time of his retirement (being his son and all). Unfortunately, I was told by the Air Force very formally that he had died and they could not disclose any information pertaining to his next of kin. DUH, that was me, but I had no proof. So that plan got squashed quick, fast and in a hurry.

Back to the party days in Hammersmith that produced me. I have this funny image of that period in my mind almost exactly the same as the Austin Powers movies. And you know what? I have the pictures of white go-go boots and silk ties to prove it. Damn I was sexy!!! This picture by the way was not taken in Hammersmith or the U.K., but in Anchorage, Alaska.



Snow Walking

What the hell?!?! How did he end up there?!?! Another one of my Mom's brilliant plans. Go out and find another U.S. Fly-boy and get hitched. That is exactly what happened and before I knew it we were off for a short stint in California just north of San Fran and the off to Anchorage, Elmendorf Air Force Base to be more specific. It was here that my formative years

took root.

I had a blast in Alaska at this age. After all as a young boy all you want to do is play outside and let me tell you, there is A LOT of outside in Alaska to play in.

We spent 7.5 years in Anchorage and I loved every single moment of it. From playing in the old school on Government Hill, to playing little league in Mt. View. Holiday trips to Seward to go fishing and Mr. Moore my 6th grade teacher who introduced me to Art.

Alaska was also where I saw my first Opera, the Mikado, performed in my first concert, albeit a city elementary



[Rik Class Photo 74](#)

school performance where I played the Cello. Had my first kiss, ahhh Sabrina, where are you today, and tore down the gravel pit on government hill in my K-TELL Plastic Skis. Those were the good old days! And you know what? Even in 1974 with the Fro' a bit jacked and missing one tooth, I was still fine as hell. LOL!

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[family](#)

Vox Hunt: Dear To Me

- [Dec 12, 2006 at 9:22 AM](#)



[Big Sister, Little Brother](#)

[3 comments](#)

I couldn't do myself any justice if I didn't post my first Near and Dear, I just thought it was a bit expected to do so, but I will have to join the blogwagon and say that the things that are the most near and dear to me are my kids. It takes a lot to bring a child into this world and even more to raise them. However the rewards for that work are simple. The witnessing of their growth.

Tyler and Mina are my projects to try and do the parenting thing right. They are a true joy to be with and around and although there have been sleepless nights, panick attacks with bumps and bruises and a general daily routine to follow, it has been a joy to date.

Looking back these are the things I think I have missed out on in my younger days. I often wonder if I would have appreciated it as much as I do now? Would I have been as patient and understanding, let alone nurturing as I am today?



[The Kidz](#)

I suppose these are all questions that will have to go unanswered for now. All I can say is that I am making every effort to do the right thing and be that which I am supposed to be; Father, Friend, Mentor, Guidance counsellor and anything else that they need. The key word in all of this is simply to be responsible and appreciate the time you have with them. They will not be little forever and eventually grow up to become their own people who. All we can do is lay the foundation, attempt to guide them in the right direction then let them go.

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Tags:

[kids](#), [vox hunt](#)

QotD: This Gets On My Last Nerve

• |Dec 11, 2006 at 9:34 PM

What is your pet peeve, the one thing which really drives you mad?

That would have to be things that are not put back in their place or not closed. I can think of Towels and Toothpaste for starters. Then don't even get me started on leaving the empty toilet roll on the spindle and not replacing the back-up. I know, I know sounds harsh but damn. Common domestic courtesy please! lol

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Tags:

[qotd](#), [pet peeve](#)

Vox Hunt: Dear To Me

• |Dec 11, 2006 at 9:30 PM

The Saminator



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Tags:

[vox hunt](#), [hold dear](#), [chocolate labrador](#)

Personal Evaluation

• |Dec 6, 2006 at 11:39 AM



NYSE Statues

I am not sure about the rest of the various industries in the world, however, in the Banking Industry, this is the time of year where everyone gets pretty wound up about a single word... COMP. That stands for Compensation. It is the time of the year where the Banks figure out how much of their profit gets distributed among the employees. Of course Shareholders get first dibs and then the company in general gets its slice for growth and future investment opportunities, yada yada yada.

Then the focus turns towards the people. The way I see it this group is split into two categories. The first being us little people who basically perform support roles in the banking industry, which is to say that we don't make any money directly for the Firm. This includes jobs like IT, Operations, HR, Legal, Compliance etc. The second group is the one that everyone sees in the Movies and on TV. The Money Makers... The Bankers and Traders who actually do indeed make the money. These are the high rollers who are paid based on the deal, or how much money they can bring into the organization. The Million-Dollar men and women with the multi-million dollar homes, cars etc.

I am in the first group of people. The support group. We just had our global conference call from the head of the Firm's Operations on Compensation. In short the message was, in the Media the Firm is doing well, but for us we can expect a Comp in line with "Fair Market Value." Which is to say a couple of things. 1. The Firm is doing well and instead of putting that profit into the people, it is needed for the Shareholders and to re-invest. I am o.k. with that. 2. Don't believe what you hear or read in the media, we are still out to cut costs and streamline the business model to re-invest. I am o.k. with that as well.

There are others that I know personally who generally go into defensive mode and start saying things like "If I don't get what I deserve, I'm outta here." What the hell is that? What I deserve? How do you know what you deserve. If you ask anyone they will tell you they work harder than the next guy. If you approach this time of the year with that mentality you know what? Your ass will be disappointed year-over-year. The worst part is, is that these same assholes complain about Comp and do nothing about it. They stay for another year to complain again.

Here is where I got a bit pissed off. Call it Karma or whatever. After spending 8 years of my life with this company in Asia and then looking to move my career forward by moving back to the HQ in NYC, the message today was that over the next couple of years the focus on promotions and compensation will be more skewed towards Asia. WTF?!?! I guess that is just my luck. Can't fault the company for that, but I really do not see myself moving back out to Asia any time soon. Not unless they send me as an Ex-Pat which means the company picks up the Tab for everything, including Rent and living expenses.



Contemplation

Personally, I feel as if I am somewhat at a cross-roads in my career. It is fall-out from the time I took away from things last week. It has to do with how I feel about where I work and what I am contributing to society. The question is basically, what does my company, and thus I, contribute to society as a whole? I know it is economic in nature and that somewhere in the money trail there is good being done, but for the most part it IS all about the money and I don't care what people say, the Market and Banks are driven by the money and greed. There is something fundamentally wrong with that.

I have started to think about a shift in focus for my technology career. I do want to stay in technology there is no mistake about that, but I am thinking that I want to work in a place that actually contributes something good to society. To that end, I am seriously thinking about exploring Technology Management positions within the Medical industry.

I recently spent some time visiting a family member in the hospital, and noticed all of the various technology devices being carted around. Is this where I can add value? I believe that in some way, it is a more moral line of work than one simply driven by the all-mighty \$\$.

For now though, it is about the \$\$ for me. Next week is Comp day. I will not hold my breath and try to not set my own personal expectations on this day. It is what it is, and what I get is above and beyond my base salary. I will be thankful, turn around and march into the job the next day to figure out what good I am performing in this world. If anyone knows of some good head-hunters in the medial field for technology.... let me know as I have questions. lol!

(p.s., I am not down, just taking a step back and a more general view of my stock in life)

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Tags:

[money](#), [psychology](#), [medical](#), [banking](#)

Back 2 Basics

• | Dec 6, 2006 at 9:57 AM

Everyone should know that one of my creative loves is photography. I have been taking some time to get back to that over the last couple of days and get my 6000+ shots into some form of my favorites from the rest.



[Neon-Smoke](#)

I have begun to post most of these up on [Flickr in my photostream](#) so feel free to jump in there and take a look. Some are creative, and some are just how I view the world. Oh, did I mention I have a visual fetish for neon?

Then of course you will see some of the kids. What I have yet to post are various shots I have taken over the course of the past 4 or 5 years. Things from Mexico, Spain, Vancouver and of course Japan.

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Just a man, his camera and a Mac

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- [December 2006 \(19\)](#)
- [November 2006 \(18\)](#)
- [October 2006 \(5\)](#)
- [September 2006 \(2\)](#)
- [August 2006 \(9\)](#)
- [June 2006 \(10\)](#)
- [April 2005 \(1\)](#)
- [March 2005 \(8\)](#)
- [February 2005 \(1\)](#)
- [December 2004 \(2\)](#)
- [November 2004 \(6\)](#)
- [October 2004 \(9\)](#)
- [September 2004 \(5\)](#)
- [August 2004 \(4\)](#)
- [July 2004 \(5\)](#)
- [May 2004 \(5\)](#)
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