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## Weblo.Com Offers a Virtual Fiefdom for a Price

By Christina Rexrode, St. Petersburg Times, Fla.

Apr. 15--Weblo says it's on the brink of something big. Since its official launch in December, it has gained more than 21,500 members, about a quarter of whom joined this month alone. About 20 employees, mostly 20- and 30-somethings, run the young company from its Montreal headquarters.

Creativity? They've got it. Focus? That's another matter.

Weblo is very much a mishmash of Internet pastimes, and one is inclined to wonder if it could benefit from a narrower focus. In addition to its main appeal as a big, electronic game of Monopoly, it's also trying to take on social networking and pop culture functions. Members can now acquire profile rights for celebrities (not to mention friends, enemies, co-workers, and whoever else) as well as for properties.

Members also can build their own personal profiles, because part of Weblo's strategy is this: People who already use the Internet to blog, post pictures and keep up with friends can be lured to a new networking site by the possibility of simultaneously making money. A word of caution: Traditionally, there hasn't been much room on the World Wide Web for more than one or two social networking sites. (Heard of Bebo? Crushspot? FaceParty? Few have.)

Weblo isn't without precedent. In some ways, it's a distant cousin of popular computer games like the Sims and Sim City, because they let players create and manipulate virtual households and cities. And despite its lack of orcs and elves, Weblo is also reminiscent of World of Warcraft and other Web games that fall in the "Massively Multiplayer Online" genre because it uses a global network of players.

It will be interesting to see where Weblo goes from here: Will it become a footnote or a trendsetter? Sean Morrow, the company's marketing director, said Weblo will seek "a rather large round of investment" within the next year. He declined to elaborate. Rick Schwartz seems bullish on Florida's economy.

After all, he's the virtual governor.

Schwartz, a Boca Raton resident, recently dropped \$18,047 to buy the state -- and the accompanying gubernatorial title -- on the nascent Weblo.com, a parallel e-world where virtual ownership of every real city, state and property is up for sale. So far, there are 21,500 registered users, and almost 7,000 cities have been sold.

"Monopoly on steroids," says the Montreal company.

Except this game is played with real money.

Here's how it works: The first person to register a property, city or state can pay to be its rightful Weblo owner. If you buy a city or state, you're named the virtual mayor or governor. Any place with an address is up for grabs: the Eiffel Tower, your old high school, your neighbor's house.

A property's initial price is determined by an index that considers its real-life population and economy, as well as its potential appeal as a Weblo profile. It's a game for the rich and the poor: Cities sell for as little as \$5, but buying a state will cost thousands.

"You're thinking, '18,000 U.S. dollars, for real?' It's a profile!"u2009" said Sean Morrow, Weblo's director of marketing, referring to the sale of Florida. "But it's a significant return on investment."

Schwartz, who's in his 50s, is also the virtual mayor of St. Petersburg, for which he shelled out \$11.72.

If property owners adhere to Weblo's game plan, they'll "develop" their sites with relevant information. Mike Jameson, a Connecticut resident who has bought properties throughout Florida, posted maps and photos of Disney World to his profiles for Lake Buena Vista and Celebration. (He bought Treasure Island, as well, but hasn't done much for its profile.)

There's a commercial incentive to create a good site: Weblo shares its ad revenue with site owners. The more visitors your site attracts, the more money you'll earn.

You can also make money by reselling your site. The Weblo member who bought Seattle for \$40 resold it for \$2,000, proving that flipping isn't limited to real property.

"Global domination has never been more fun," the company enthuses on its Web site.

Michael Pachter, an analyst at Wedbush Morgan Securities who tracks the video game industry, expressed reservations about the odds of making money off Weblo.

"You can't sell ads without traffic, and if they make some schmo responsible for creating the content of Florida, he may do a terrible job, lowering overall traffic," Pachter wrote in an e-mail to the St. Petersburg Times.

"Unless there is some quality control, consumers will tire quickly of visiting the site, and advertisers will lose interest. Sounds like a pyramid scheme to me."

Still, there's a NASDAQ-esque feeling to Weblo. The latest buys and the sales data can be set to scroll across the top of your computer screen. Jameson, who is 40, says he watches it constantly, as if it were the stock market.

Schwartz -- or should we call him Florida's governor? -- logs on to Weblo far less often. If you visit his sites expecting photos of the beach and the state flag, you'll be disappointed. He says he's waiting for Weblo to catch on before he develops his profiles.

Schwartz estimates that he has spent \$50,000 to \$70,000 on Weblo. But his friends don't question it, he said, given his success buying domain names.

"When you look at the ways you can throw your money away, if it's going to the stock market or going to the casino, you don't have any control over it," he said. "It's strictly a gamble. If it (Weblo) catches on, stranger things have happened."

Weblo's Morrow wouldn't say what percentage of the Web site's profiles are profitable, or whether the company has turned a profit. But Jameson says he thinks he'll make a 36 percent return on his investments (\$5,000 or \$6,000 so far) by the end of the year.

Even without the financial element, Weblo allures.

Like a massive game of Risk, it plays on people's desire for power. "I love to be known as the virtual mayor of Lake Buena Vista,"



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said Jameson, "because, as you know, Disney owns that town."

(Want to buy the main offices of the St. Petersburg Times? Too late. This reporter snapped them up for \$2.38, though she'll entertain offers.)

Like a memory book, Weblo plays on sentimentality. Suzanne Calpas, a stay-at-home mom in Prince George, British Columbia, bought some cities in Turkey that she visited on her honeymoon.

And like any other networking site, it plays on the need for social interaction. "Mostly it's for fun," said Calpas, 39, who bought Pittsburgh for \$300 and Lake City for \$5. "People send you messages, you start to develop friendships."

Jameson, a real estate agent in real life as well as in Weblo Land, thinks he has found one more use for the site: He has registered dozens of cities in his home state of Connecticut, and plans to use those profiles to provide house hunters with information about different areas. "When I do listings for houses, I will say, 'I am the virtual mayor of this town,'" he said.

Weblo, like Jameson, has big Web-based plans for the future. Morrow, the marketing director, said the company is formulating plans for a Weblo presidential election, probably to be held just before the real election next year.

The Canadian company has no similar plans to replicate the British throne. "Not yet," Morrow said. "Good idea."

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